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Democracy in Action

[By Francis Marshall Elliott]

EDITOR'S NOTE:—Western farmers are intensely interested in Direct Legislation as a method of purifying our public life. Many of our readers have asked how it would work out if in force in the western provinces. We are glad to publish this article showing how the people of the City of Los Angeles, California, have cleaned up their city through Direct Legislation. The Initiative, Referendum and Recall would work fully as well in the provinces, and would cause all the representatives of the people to do their duty as they should, and not be turned aside by corporation or other interests. We commend this article to our readers.

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TO THE student of political economy seeking a verification of DeTocqueville's axiom, that "the cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy," Los Angeles, California, offers an interesting confirmatory illustration.

Here we find an important American commonwealth, absorbed in the complex activities of every-day commercial affairs, laying aside the multifarious individual interests of its daily industrial life and uniting in one tremendous uplift, in an effort to provide ways and means for translating the political power of its citizenship into concrete examples of civic righteousness and efficiency.

For thirty years this city, which stands today in the vanguard of American municipal progress, had known the very depths of civic degradation. She had witnessed the debauching of her common council, the open pollution of her courts of justice, the bribery of her chosen public officials and all her attempts at reform through existing institutions had proved abortive.

The control of political parties by the corporations operating public utilities or natural monopolies was open, unquestioned and notorious. To depict the situation which confronted the citizenship of Los Angeles ten years ago, would be to paint a pen picture of the situation which obtains in various other American municipalities at this hour. It is familiar to every American citizen in all its nauseating details, and its paralyzing influence is known to every reformer of whatever political faith or creed.

People vs. Corruption

At the juncture in the civic history of Los Angeles when the case of the people versus corruption appeared, the most hopeless and most appalling, when the struggle against the encroachments of Class against Mass seemed lost to the people, there appeared in the political horizon a star of hope. In pursuance of the never ending struggle of the people against the encroachments of their economic masters there was formed a Charter Commission of Freeholders whose duty it was to formulate a new city charter.

Despite all efforts to the contrary, this charter commission, which submitted the result of its deliberations to the referendum vote of the people of the city in 1898, was almost wholly dominated by conservative and in some instances reactionary influences. Only two of its members, Hon. Gaylord Wilshire and Dr. John R. Haynes, belong to the radicals. These men deserve the credit of introducing to the attention of their fellow members on the Charter Commission the practical and truly democratic way out of the wilderness of corruption and inefficiency, by way of the Initiative, Referendum and Recall.

Although the reformers urged their measure upon their associates, with all the persuasive power at their command, they talked to deaf ears and they appealed to unresponsive hearts. To some of

their associates, Messrs. Wilshire and Haynes appeared as harmless cranks and were treated as such. To others they appeared as dangerous anarchists standing sponsor for revolutionary innovations, and were denounced as such. Their Americanism was seriously questioned and their patriotism impugned. In the end the reactionaries had their way, and the new city charter was duly submitted, sans Initiative, sans Referendum, sans Recall, sans every feature that would offer the least possible hope of escape of the people from the corporate masters of the city.

The new charter was hailed by the representatives of vested interests as a safe, sane and satisfactory document, and with all the power at their command the people were urged to ratify the work of the Charter Commission at the polls.

The new commission listened with some attention to the voice of the reformers; it was urged upon their attention that a charter along the lines of the defeated one would be "love's labor lost," and so, after due deliberation, a charter was evolved containing sections providing for the Initiative, Referendum and Recall. It was provided that in submitting the new charter for adoption, it should be voted upon by sections, and not as a whole, and herein lay the hope of the reactionaries. They realized that to ignore the Reformers would be fatal to the charter, but they hoped to concentrate all their forces against the, to them, objectionable sections and defeat them at the polls.

But alas and alack, "the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft aglee," and so it proved in this instance. The battle was short, sharp and decisive, and when

The first use of the Initiative was when it was invoked by the anti-saloon league in an effort to close the saloons of the city in 1904. The vote resulted in the defeat of the anti-saloon people 1 1/2 to 1.

The People's Voice

It was again used in the general elections of 1905, when four conflicting propositions were submitted to the people by different interests to limit the erection of slaughter houses within the city limits. The people with wonderful sagacity, voted upon these four propositions, carried the most desirable one by a large majority and defeated the other three.

The Initiative was again invoked upon two propositions in the general elections of 1909. The city desired a public utilities commission, which should preside over the destinies of all public and quasi-public utility corporate interests in the city. Naturally the corporate interests of the city sought to leave their imprint upon the law creating this powerful commission. Through their influence the city council submitted an ordinance creating a commission of very limited powers and circumscribed duties. This ordinance met with the Mayor's veto and the council threatened to pass the measure over the Mayor's veto. Forthwith the people had drawn a satisfactory law which was submitted and carried by a popular vote of almost 2 to 1.

Not so fortunate was the law initiated against all forms of public gambling and voted upon at the general election of 1909. This was primarily directed against dice shaking at public cigar and refreshment stands and was sought to be passed in the city council but the gambling influence in the city exercised enough political influence to defeat its passage there. Thereupon the friends of the measure carried the matter to the polls. It was generally urged by all the best influences of the city, including the church federation, various civic bodies and the press. The adoption of the law appeared a foregone conclusion until the vote was counted when it was found that it had been defeated by more than 4,000 majority. Here was presented the peculiar paradox of an unusually intelligent and conscience guided community voting by an overwhelming majority to legalize public gambling. But the explanation for this seeming paradox was very simple and it was a salutary lesson for the friends of Direct Legislation. The proposition that would have carried the ordinance read: "For the ordinance against keeping, or permitting to be kept, places for playing games and prohibiting the playing or betting at such games." The alternative was: "Against the ordinance against keeping, or permitting to be kept, places for playing certain games and prohibiting the playing or betting at such games." It is supposed that a large number of voters, noticing that the first proposition was "for the ordinance" believed that to be the ordinance legaliz-

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"Among the apple trees" near Brandon, Man.

The reformers were not idle; with unerring accuracy they pointed out the reactionary features of the new charter, and they enlisted the active opposition of the Socialists, the trade unionists and all the more progressive elements of the city, with the result that the new charter was overwhelmingly defeated.

It is safe to say that the result of the first charter election was the rudest shock ever received by the safe and sane reactionaries in the western metropolis; but it is not destined to be the last rude shock delivered to their sensitive souls by a now thoroughly aroused and clamorous public conscience.

"Love's Labor Lost"

In due course of time another charter commission was chosen and this too was as certainly reactionary as its predecessor, but its members gained wisdom from the fate of the work of the old commission.

It was over the reformers emerged from the conflict victorious at every point. Instead of defeating the sections of the new charter providing for the "un-American" anarchistic innovation of the Initiative, Referendum and Recall as the reactionaries had so fondly hoped, they were astounded to discover that these sections had carried by far the heaviest majorities of any sections of the new fundamental law of the city. In fact the reformers themselves were surprised at the result, which was more decisive than even the bravest of them dared hope; the popular vote stood 6 to 1 and 5 to 1 in favor of the fundamental democratic innovations. The elections by which these provisions for fundamental democracy became a part of the organic law of the city was held in 1902. It is now in order to see what use the people have made of their newly forged weapons of offense and defense.