

Municipal Reform in the United States.

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Municipal betterment, in one form or another is an old story in the United States. I do not take in to account spasmodic local cases of rebellion of the taxpayers against dishonest administration. Honest outbursts of this kind have had an effect, but only temporary, and local. Many years ago it was seen that the root of the evil lay in the system under which a dishonest administration, not only was possible, but was induced and fostered by the loose and unbusiness like methods of the old, and now discredited form of civil government. Organized effort to better the system was made in 1876, when in New York state a commission was appointed, of which W. M. Evarts, was chairman, to devise a plan for the better government of cities in the State. The report of the commission gives, as the chief causes of the evils which were admitted to exist, incompetent and unfaithful governing boards and officers, and the introduction of state and national politics into municipal affairs. Amongst the remedies proposed were:

(1) The vesting of legislative powers of municipalities in two bodies, a board of aldermen elected by ordinary suffrage, and a board of finance elected by voters who had for two years paid a certain tax or rent, this board to have practically exclusive control of taxation and expenditure.

(2) An extension of the general control and appointing power of the mayor.

The state legislature took no action on the report, and the work of the commission had no immediate result. In 1882, however, the city of Brooklyn obtained a new charter, embodying some of the provisions recommended by the state commission. One of the most important and novel features of this charter, the result of treating the city as a business corporation, rather than a political entity, was the clothing the mayor with extensive powers coupled with corresponding obligations. Under this Charter the executive of the city is represented by the mayor and heads of departments, and the legislative by a council of 19 members, the population of the city being then about 750,000. Appointments of executive heads of departments were made by the mayor, absolutely, and without need of confirmation by the council, and the heads of departments appointed their subordinates, so that the principle of defined responsibility ran through the whole schemes. The mayor was responsible for the good government of the city, and the charter equipped him with the power to discharge the trust.

This Brooklyn Charter was found to work so well that it has been taken as a model by many towns and cities in various states.

A NATIONAL MUNICIPAL LEAGUE.

Organized effort towards municipal reform from the bottom, extending over states throughout the Union, resulted in the formation of the National Municipal League, in Philadelphia in 1892.

The objects of this league are thus set out in its constitution:

(1) To multiply the numbers, harmonize the methods and combine the forces of all who realize that it is only by united action and organization that good citizens can secure the adoption of good laws, and the selection of good men of trained ability and proved integrity for all municipal positions, or prevent the success of incompetent or corrupt candidates for public office.

(2) To promote the thorough investigation and discussion of the conditions and details of civic administration, and of the methods for selecting and appointing officials in American cities, and of laws and ordinances relating to such subjects.

(3) To provide for such meetings and conferences, and for the preparation and circulation of such addresses and other literature as may seem likely to advance the cause of good civic government."

In 1897 this organization had affiliated with it 100 municipal clubs or associations representing cities in most of the states of the Union, and so far five meetings have been held at Minneapolis, Cleveland, Baltimore, Louisville and Indianapolis. The proceedings of these meetings have been published by the League under the title of "Proceedings of the National Conference for Good City Government and of the National Municipal League."

The purposes of the league are further shortly stated in the President's address at the meeting in 1896, as follows:

"Of course, when any one observes an evil, especially a political evil, some sort of remedy generally suggests itself, but for the most part these remedies are usually ineffectual, because they are not based on extensive information, or upon the results of discussion and investigation, still less are they based upon the fruits of actual experience. They the fore, usually fail, and it is our conviction that it is not wise to adopt at an early period in our movement, or recommend particular lines of action, nor until we can frame some which shall be fortified with the teachings of experience and by those lessons which we can derive from discussion and investigation."

The earlier proceedings, following the plan thus outlined, consist largely of an academic discussion, in carefully prepared papers and criticisms of them, covering a variety of municipal problems. For instance, in the year 1896, the following papers were read: "A year's work for Municipal Reform," by C. R. Woodruff, a member of the Pennsylvania Legislature, and Secretary of the League. 10 papers giving accounts of the municipal conditions of various cities; 4 papers on Municipal Ownership of Street Railways and Municipal Franchises; 1 on State Boards of Control; 1 on Reform of Municipal Councils; 2 on Single or Double Chambers in Municipal Councils; 1 on Should Municipal Legislators Receive a Salary; 1 on The Necessity for Excluding Politics from Municipal Business; and 1 on A Christian Citizenship League.

One feature is prominent in almost all the papers and discussions that is, the practical way in which all the subjects are approached. An out-of-joint condition of things in municipal matters is generally accepted as a fact, and the best practical remedy is sought. The members of the League do not appear to be faddists or hobby-riders; the best is aimed at in all things; existing conditions in politics, the civil service, etc., are not ignored, but are treated as factors in the problem that must be reckoned with.

At the conference in 1897, with a view to giving a practical shape to the work of previous years, a committee of 10 was appointed to report a municipal programme, and the report of this committee is found in the proceedings of 1898. The work of the League, and of the municipal reform movement of the past 20 years, may be said to be summed up in this report, and in the model city charter, which forms part of it. The whole volume of the proceedings of 1898, the report, charter, papers read by members of the committee explaining certain portions of the committee's work, and discussions throughout, form a most interesting and instructive contribution to the problem of City Government.

In the earlier years there had been much discussion on the question of Home Rule for Cities, i. e. giving each city power, within certain limits of framing its own charter and form of government, and the position and power of the mayor as head of the city, and there are throughout two clearly defined sets of opinions, one that good government is not so much a question of method or morals, and that, given the right men in control, the form of charter is of little consequence; and the other that, as it is almost impossible always to elect a good council, a plan should be devised to meet the contingency of an occasionally incompetent or downright bad council. The plan of centralizing power in the executive is recommended in the New York State Commission's report, and

is a feature of the city of Brooklyn Charter, of 1882, and the secretary of the national league, in moving the appointment of the committee of ten, treating the same subject, said:—"We can all agree there should be centralization of power in the hands of the executive, who should be clothed with adequate responsibility. This has been the drift of the charters for 3 or 4 years."

CITY GOVERNMENT BY COMMISSION.

By the way of digression it is interesting to note that the plan of "city government" by commission has been successfully tried at Hamilton Ohio. I give two short extracts from the proceedings of 1898, showing municipal condition there.

Hon. J. J. McMackin, Hamilton, Ohio, in an address says: "I will give you a little history of the city of Hamilton. Hamilton is situated on the river in a very beautiful valley, and has a population of twenty five thousand. It is a manufacturing city. Under the old system we had the same trouble in our city government that you are having all over. We had a council and a board of waterworks trustees, a board of gas trustees, a board for the library, a board of health, a street commission, and I don't know how many others. We discovered one thing, and that is, that those officers who were elected at large, such as the officers of the gas and waterworks, were always of a higher grade and a better class of men than those elected by wards and districts. Four years ago we started in on a new charter, and we worked until last year, when we got it through the legislature. How long will it stand? I suppose the ward heelers and other interested parties who are against it will have it repealed at the next legislature. The Bill was introduced in 1894, but it failed to pass because we had incorporated in that, the board of education, and the people were touchy about that. Last winter we eliminated that part, and now the city government stands this way; we have wiped out every board except the board of education. We have five men, the first serving for one year, the next two, the next three, the next four, and the next five, and after that each man will be elected to serve for five years. Each man is a director of a department, each member is paid a salary of fifteen hundred dollars. He gives a bond for twenty-five thousand dollars, and is held strictly accountable for the honest and efficient working of his department.

Since the board has been in existence we received bids for asphalt pavement. Under the council the bids ranged from \$2.45 to \$2.65. When the board came in, and we received our bids, the highest was \$1.88 and the lowest was \$1.74, which one of the bidders said was a great compliment to the board. We wanted to purchase a street sweeper, and an agent came to the board and told us he would sell it for \$600. He was told that he must understand that if he sold his sweeper to the city, that he would get every cent of the money called for in his order, that he did not have to treat a member to a cigar or a glass of beer. He said that under those circumstances we could have the sweeper for \$400. I asked him why he dropped to \$400. He looked at me and said, "It is no use my telling you, but we make up our minds when we go into a municipality to pay a council for their influence. We don't bribe them, we pay them a commission, and it runs from \$150, to \$200." We advertised for a sweeper, and this man's bid was \$475. We reminded him of his promise, and said we would give him \$350. He accepted that, and were sorry we offered him so much. The city owns its own waterworks, gas plant, and its own electric lights and sewers.

The city of Hamilton made the fight for every municipality in the United States on the question of a municipalities right to build and operate gas works, although there may be another company within the corporate limits. We fought that question in every court in the State, and up to the Supreme Court of the United States, and won in every Court. The old company's contract was \$2 per cubic thousand to citizens, with a penalty of twenty-