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AMERICAN CONCEPTIONS OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT¹

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MEETING as we do in Dayton, the largest city yet to conduct its municipal affairs on the city manager basis, it is fitting that we should endeavor to ascertain to what extent this new movement has progressed and succeeded. When the original municipal Program committee of the National Municipal League was considering the question of "a model charter," it had in mind the necessity for placing the affairs of a city in the hands of trained experts; but at that time it did not seem to be within the bounds of possibility that the time would come, at least within a generation, when public sentiment would be so far developed as to justify the recommendation that the council or legislative body should be given the duty of selecting the administrator. So it recommended the plan of a small council elected at large (to eliminate the unquestioned evils arising from the choice of legislators from small arbitrarily chosen districts), with a responsible mayor elected by the people.

Public opinion in municipal affairs, however, since 1900, has developed with great rapidity, and along eminently satisfactory lines, so that, to-day, there are seventy-six communities in the country having the city or commission manager form, of which group Dayton is the most important and most conspicuous example.

The results here have undoubtedly been most satisfactory, judging both from the expression of opinion on the part of citizens and the newspapers, and by the results of the recent primary and municipal elections. Elsewhere the new form has won for itself a large measure of deserved praise; but, at the same time, we hear comments which indicate an erroneous view as to the place which the system is to play in our municipal

¹The annual review of the secretary of the National Municipal League, delivered at the 21st annual meeting, held in Dayton, November 17, 1915.

life. Some speak as if the form itself were responsible for all the improvement that has been accomplished; some as if its introduction would, *ipso facto*, result in a transformation of evil conditions. The city manager plan is a business-like one, and represents the latest and most approved ideas in the matter of municipal administration; but, unless accompanied by an active, organized, vigilant public sentiment, it will accomplish, of itself, but little more than the older forms.

An outgrowth of the widespread and popular commission government movement, the city manager idea represents all that is best in the commission system with the addition of a carefully chosen expert to look after the administration of the city's affairs, instead of three or five promiscuously chosen. Under it there is no longer any doubt as to who was responsible. There is no danger of inefficiency hiding itself behind a long list of elected officers no one of whom has sufficient authority or power to change conditions. If anything goes wrong in Dayton now, you know that the responsibility for it lies primarily at the door of the city manager, and behind him at the door of the council of five.

A characteristic of the older conception of American city government was to place entirely too much dependence upon the law and the form of government. Many still are for substituting statutes and constitutional provisions for the self-governing instinct. The newer conception involves the utilization of the most effective forms of government for the adequate expression of a sound public opinion; and the idea of a city manager has proved a popular one because it embodies just this thought.

There has been widespread comment upon the alleged failure of commission government in Nashville, Tennessee, and of its abandonment in Salem, Massachusetts.

Nashville for many years has been regarded as a community almost hopelessly indifferent to its municipal duties and obligations, and its citizens as hopelessly committed to a narrow, partisan consideration of public questions. A commission government was given to the city a few years ago at the request of the then existing administration, largely as a sop to the rising tide of discontent in the community; but the events of the past year have shown, conclusively, that something more than a change of form was needed in Nashville, namely: a change in the spirit of the people, and in the personnel of the men entrusted with the conduct of affairs. So the unpleasant notoriety which has come upon the city, while a surprise to many, was no surprise to those who knew the community and knew the situation. One might as well charge the murder of Senator Carmack to the old system of government in Nashville as to charge the breakdown of the recent administration to the commission form. The thing to be borne in mind is, that under the new commission law the people quickly detected the wrong-doing and mendacity of the administration and were able with equal quickness to apply the remedy;

and, therefore, the commission emerges from the Nashville experience justified, rather than condemned.

No thoughtful advocate of commission government has ever maintained that its mere existence would prevent corruption or maladministration: they have contended, always, that it must go hand in hand with an aroused and intelligent public sentiment. Nashville has been awakened—whether temporarily, or premanently, remains yet to be seen. Being awakened, it has been easier for the people to remedy the adverse conditions under its present simple, direct, responsible system, than under the preceding one of futile checks and balances.

Responsibility for right results in the public service should be put on the individual electors and upon the officials they choose. There was a time not long since when party organizations generally dictated and controlled the selection of nominees for every important office, and all that the electors were called upon to do, was to choose between the nominees of the rival parties. The successful one bore the brunt of the responsibilities. Now that party designations have been so generally eliminated from municipal elections (for they are in nearly every commission governed city, and in all the city manager cities), party responsibility has been almost entirely destroyed and the electors, themselves, have had to assume the burden of their own conduct. In other words, the old idea of party government in city affairs and of checks and balances is yielding to the modern conception of the direct, individual responsibility of the elector.

Galveston, properly regarded as the home of the modern commission idea, has suffered another serious disaster during the past year, and its commission has shown its trustworthiness. In the words of a recent editorial: "Disasters come to cities, as they have come to Galveston, through natural causes, and to Nashville because of incompetence as a result not of governmental forms, but of citizenship neglect. Often it takes a disaster of magnitude to arouse the people to the action which will save them. That is what happened at Galveston; and they made the business of the city their business, and they brought to the public service the best available men. These latter did everything that was expected of them, as men always do under the spur of a great popular interest. As a consequence, the city was restored, and prospers, as any city always will when so officered."

It has not needed disaster, however, to bring home to other cities the need for a change; so to-day we have 465 cities operating under the commission form and 76 others have a city manager or have provided for one. There has been no falling off, except in the single case of Salem, which, recently having the opportunity to adopt a new form of government, chose to try another change, rather than patiently work out its salvation, because the people still place their dependence upon the law

rather than upon their own shoulders. No doubt Salem will be cited, by those to whom the wish is father to the thought, as evidence of a breakdown of commission government. It is simply an evidence of the desire of the people to substitute law for the self-governing instinct.

An interesting development of the city manager movement has been the increased demand for experts in municipal administration, and the accompanying demand for the adequate education of those experts; and gradually, there is emerging the idea of a profession of city administration. Judging from the developments of the past fifteen years, one would seem to be justified in prophesying the early establishment of this new profession upon a strong, firm basis of public opinion and public demand.

Of the making of laws there seems to be no end. Former Senator Root, in a recent address, stated that during a period of ten years there had been enacted, by the various lawmaking bodies of the country, upwards of 62,014 laws. One result of this has been to place dependence on law, rather than upon individual action. Another is, it makes a nation of lawbreakers: mostly unconscious, but none the less disastrous in the long run. A nation depending on laws has but a sorry support. We cannot expect good and efficient government to follow from the mere passage of law; and those who are interested in the redemption of American cities and their establishment on a high standard of honesty, integrity and efficiency, must work to found them on public spirit and public institutions. Reform, in the minds of many, lies in the enactment of their fads into law and imposing them upon the whole community. The wise leader, however, seeks first to arouse the people to a sense of the importance of municipal government as a factor in their lives and the lives of the community and of their personal responsibility for it; then to provide proper tools for its expression.

This desire to substitute law for public sentiment and individual responsibility, has been particularly noticeable in the matter of the civil service laws. Often those interested in eliminating political and religious considerations from appointment to office, and of making of the public service a real instrument of public good and efficiency, have felt that the whole problem was solved when satisfactory laws were enacted. We have only to look around us on any side to see that the best laws, in the hands of designing men, may be made to thwart every public sentiment which gave them birth, unless that public sentiment is eternally vigilant and insistent. Civil service reformers must be on their guard constantly to see that the demand for honest and efficient government shows no sign of lessening.

I have always felt a very strong sympathy with the thought of the late Carl Schurz, who declared that he would rather have the laws made by Lucifer and executed by Gabriel, than made by Gabriel and executed by Lucifer. In other words, the first object of all organizations like

this league and the National civil service reform league must be to create sound, solid, substantial sentiment in favor of efficient, democratic government, and then help guide that sentiment, when created, along sound lines.

For years the attention of Americans has been directed to the efficiency of German cities, and we have marvelled at the wonderful achievements of administration there; but the lesson has not been a persuasive one to date, because the situations in Germany and this country are so different. There, efficient government is given rather as a gift from an overlord, than as the outworking of the desires and aspirations of the people themselves. The problem before us, in this country, is to attain efficiency through the direct action of the whole electorate, and that electorate one that is being placed on an ever broader foundation of suffrage.

As part and parcel of the development of the democratic conception of municipal government, the people must be educated. In a recent letter, a well-known Daytonian said that as a result of the activities of the bureau of municipal research, and of the co-operation accorded them by the progressive citizens of Dayton, the city hall and its doings had been transferred from the back pages of the newspapers to the front pages. This is a pregnant statement, and shows what is essentially needed.

One of the significant developments of the administration in Philadelphia now closing, has been the effectiveness with which the department of public works has made known its activities and achievements. The latest report of the director was introduced by the following pregnant paragraph:

"Dear reader: Please forget that this is a public document. Read it rather as a study in home-making as the result of one year of effort to make of Philadelphia the best place in the world in which to live. This report of the director of public works to the mayor of the city is really a story of the stewardship of 4,000 city employes working for the other 1,600,000 citizens."

In his letter transmitting this report the director said:

"With the increasing size of our undertakings and their growing complexity, the difficulty of visualizing the purposes and processes of government, federal, state and municipal, is greatly increasing. I feel very strongly that unless you can make people understand what you are doing, the waste is prohibitive; and, on the contrary, that if the people can be made to understand your plans and the method by which you hope to accomplish them, and these plans are right, the means will be forthcoming.

"The last three or four years the engineers connected with this department have become a unit in their attitude towards this question. We all started in with the disposition to feel that advertising as such was almost unprofessional. We have now come around to the point where we are

struggling to devise new and more comprehensive methods by which we might expose the operations of this department to the public view as completely as possible. Because only in this way do we feel that the great ends of municipal administration, with more particular reference to the engineering, can be accomplished."

Democracy demands publicity; and he who solves the problem of making plain the difficulties of municipal administration and making clear the transactions of the ordinary daily work of great city departments, will have made a contribution of great value.

Under the present administration in New York City, which has made many new records, as has the present administration in Philadelphia, much important work is being done for the welfare of the city employes. In the first place, a lunch-room in the municipal building has been provided for the women employes of the city. It is self-supporting, and run under the supervision of a committee of women organized and selected by the women themselves. This is the first attempt, I believe, of any city to supply a convenience that is now only supplied by great corporations.

An employers' conference committee has been organized. This committee is representative of both the classified and unclassified service, and consists of representatives chosen directly by the employes and a representative chosen by the heads of departments. It is hoped that a great deal will be accomplished by this conference committee to bring about a better relation and understanding between the administration and its employes.

The semi-monthly payment of salaries has been established in a number of the departments where the consensus shows that the majority were in favor of making the change. Those changes have been advocated by the various civil service papers, particularly for the police and fire departments, on the plea that it will save a great many city employes from applying to loan-sharks and loan agencies for funds to carry them through the month.

The comptroller has also established a system of having on each payday an amount of cash ready in the paymaster's office, sufficient to pay off a large majority of the checks. This has been found a great convenience by the employes who formerly had to change their checks at different stores and brought men to saloons, when it invariably happened that a certain expenditure had to be made in order to get the desired accommodation. The department of health has instituted a system of periodical physical examination of employes. I might proceed with the inventory, all to the end, however, of showing that the city administration cares—cares for the people who are working with it in the public behalf.

Moreover, we see that the city governments throughout the country are coming to care for the people, in a way that was unthought of and

unheard of a generation ago. It is to be found in the extension of facilities for wholesome outdoor recreation; of educational facilities for those whose schooldays are necessarily limited; for the upbuilding of the individual in health and strength and power.

For instance, municipalities are considering its relation to its food-supply. The report of the National Municipal League's committee on this subject abounds with instances of what is being done along these lines. The mayor of Cleveland, in a recent article, showed how the police were intimately related to the social problems, and how they could be utilized in the solution of those problems, and in highly important preventive work. The administration of the present police commissioner in New York has been characterized not only by increased efficiency along administrative lines, but by the utilization of the police in finding employment and in saving men, women and children from dangerous and degrading surroundings.

The interest of the city in better housing is growing, not so rapidly as the more zealous of us would wish, but, nevertheless, it *is* growing. Infant life protection is another topic which is coming in for definite, and effective work at the hands of city officials. Health exhibitions are increasing in number; and so the list might be continued. All to show that a new conception of municipal life is taking hold of the American people—the conception of the utilization of the great powers of government to overcome the evil effects of environment and heredity and adverse conditions generally. Not through the law as such, but through the law as representing the consensus of public opinion.

As a part of this developing conception, we find the idea of co-operation is getting a stronger hold upon the people. The newly organized women's city club of Cincinnati has declared its purpose to be: "To bring together women interested in promoting the welfare of the city; to co-ordinate and render more effective the organized social and civic activities in which they are engaged; to extend the knowledge of public affairs; to aid in improving civic conditions; and to assist in arousing an increased sense of social responsibility for the safeguarding of the home, the maintenance of good government, and the ennobling of that larger home of all—the city."

This idea of co-operation is gaining a foothold not only among the citizens, but among the officials as I have more than once pointed out, and to-day important work in the realm of municipal government is being done by the city managers association state leagues of officials, like the mayors conference of New York, and the leagues of cities in California, Iowa, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, to mention only a few of a very considerable number of such bodies.

These organizations believe in consultation. As John Mitchel said on one occasion, "I believe it is better to talk for a week than to strike

for a year." It is an essential to effective work and to real advance. When we find the officials of a community coming together for consultation and advice; and the citizens getting together for the same purpose; and then the citizens and the officials coming together for joint conference, then a new element of great promise has been introduced.

The old conception of municipal reform was that every non-officeholder was the enemy of every officeholder. So-called reform meetings were characterized by the vituperation of those who were in office; and the slogan of campaigns was, "Turn the rascals out!"—the rascals always being those opposed to us who were in office.

This cry is seldom heard now. The newer idea represented by the bureau of municipal research is to take information of wrongdoing directly to those responsible and who can change them, with the hope that the remedy will be applied quickly and directly, and with the minimum of publicity. If those responsible are unwilling to accept such co-operation, then the bright sunlight of publicity must be turned on the situation, in order that it may be cleansed and purified. The remarkable success attending the work of the bureaus of municipal research of the various communities of this country, has been due largely to the prosecution of this policy.

The new conception involves the belief that "My fellow-citizen is my neighbor"; that we must think communally. Alexander Hamilton, in one of his speeches, said: "Let us think continentally." Now, we have come to do that to a marked degree; but we must also think communally. We must think of the community interests and the community life; and these various organizations, these various efforts at co-operation, these various conferences to which I have referred, all tend to make the people think communally and to promote a sound community life.

In these reviews I have often spoken of the vital relation existing between the business organizations and the welfare of the community. No small part of the success of the city manager form in Dayton has been due to the initiative and unstinted co-operation of the business organization known as the Greater Dayton association; but we need something more than business organizations: we need community organizations, in which men come together not as business men, not as laboring men, not as clergymen, not as lawyers, but as citizens of the community; nor must the women be left out; and those organizations to-day which are dealing most successfully with civic problems, are those which are emphasizing this phase. Business must have a human basis; the community must have a human basis; humanity is the biggest idea which we can possibly grasp, and it is at the basis of the greatest conception of municipal life.

There was a time when these annual reviews dealt with the ebb and flow of the political campaigns. They formed a chronicle of successes

in one list of cities and of reverses in another. To-day less attention is given to the political campaigns, because they are only incidentally interesting; but surface manifestations. The league is interested in constructive policies; it is interested in the big movements; it is interested in developing an adequate conception of municipal life and municipal responsibility. The campaigns of the past year have been interesting, in some cases most dramatic; but the important thing that stands out from all of them is the growth of the movement for the elimination of party designations and, in most places, of party considerations in municipal elections; even though there may be serious recessions here and there.

There are some events, like the overwhelming defeat of the proposed New York constitution, which seem to call for comment. That instrument was a very interesting document; along certain lines it represented a very great advance; but its framers made the mistake of introducing too many reforms at one time in a given instrument, without preparedness. In other words, a constitution must embody the public sentiment of the community at the time of its adoption. "Nor can one hope to substitute a philosopher's stone of a constitution," to use the words of the late Governor Russell, "for the self-governing instinct of the community." Many believe in the initiative and the referendum because they represent an every day way of incorporating in the fundamental law the agreements of the community upon a given issue.

This consideration naturally brings us to civic education; and here we are in a field where the developments have been many, interesting and encouraging: "Civics for young Americans" and "civics for new Americans" are among the slogans of the new movement. There was a time when the people did think continentally first, and nearly always: now they are thinking continentally, and locally as well; and they are beginning to see that it is the simple duty that prepares for the larger one. If one cannot lay claim to good habits in small matters, how can one expect them in larger things? And so we find such movements as that originated by the National Municipal League, now carried on by the bureau of education at Washington, meeting with popular acceptance. The "Americanization work," as it is happily called, of the national immigration committee, is another phase of the same movement.

So far, this review has dealt mainly with conceptions dealing with governmental reform, public sentiment and education. There is another movement, however, which calls for attention in any consideration of conceptions of American municipal government; and that is, the movement popularly known as city planning, a phrase much more often used than defined. There was a time when it was practically a scheme for the city beautiful; but now it has a much richer and a much more comprehensive meaning. Its development has been in accordance with the growth of the movement to place our cities upon a more substantial,

a more respectable, a more useful basis. Henry R. Aldridge, the secretary of the English national housing and town planning council, and a veteran in the cause of city planning, declares in his new book ("A Case for Town Planning") that "the phrase should come to clearheaded administrators as an appeal for the substitution of order in the place of chaos in city growth. To those members of municipal committees responsible for the guardianship of the health of the population, the appeal would be that of the wisdom of prevention as compared with the wastefulness of cure. To those responsible for the wise administration of municipal revenues, the appeal is strong and direct. They have witnessed for many years the waste of the taxpayers' money on school-house schemes, on road-widening schemes and on many other schemes which never would have been necessary at all if town-planning care and foresight had been exercised. To them the case for town-planning on the financial side is overwhelming: they realize that the sick man is a burden to the community, while the healthy man is an asset: the one has to be carried, the other carries his own burdens and helps to carry the burdens of others."

Here we have another phase of the new conception of municipal life; that is, the obligation resting upon the community to develop healthy men, women and children—healthy physically, healthy morally and healthy spiritually; and the amount of thought and time and attention given to promoting these ends during the past decade is one of the big, encouraging factors in American history.

Naturally, the people of this country are still very much concerned about the great European war. A year ago, although the war had made but little difference with the functioning of the city, there was a strong feeling of fear on the part of a very considerable number of publicists and workers that the foundations of our municipal life would be overthrown. The year has been a sobering one, bringing to us anew our duties and responsibilities, and, above all, the fundamental necessity for building our cities upon a firmer basis than ever before. While there have been some interferences on account of the war, especially with financial arrangements, due to the timidity of money, those difficulties are disappearing. In passing, it is interesting to note, the war has had, on the whole, a rather salutary effect upon financial undertakings: in fact, cities, like individuals, have been made more thoughtful on such matters, and there have been fewer rash undertakings, and rather more thought has been given than previously; and a number of cities, notably New York, have been compelled, by the pressure of the situation, to reorganize their whole financial system upon a more substantial, businesslike and scientific basis; so that in some aspects of the situation the war has been decidedly beneficial—beneficial in that it has compelled us to take account of our stock, to see where we stand, and whither we are

tending, and to reorganize many of our methods. Over and above that, it has caused a spiritual awakening which is sure to have a widespread effect. Public life is sure to be purer and, finally—because of the stress and storm of this period, will be strengthened and developed.

In closing, may I say that the old conception of our municipal life and government involved imposed good government—a gift from the gods, from the overlords, or from the state legislature; the new conception involves the adoption and working out of comprehensive plans by the people themselves. “The test of good citizenship,” to quote from Dr. James’ recently issued “Handbook of Civic Improvement,” “lies in the existence of an intelligent, *continuing* interest in questions of good city government.” The hope of American cities lies in the existence of a strong, continuing, vigilant, democratic sentiment, manifesting itself in public life and in the aspirations of the American people to achieve the highest good for the greatest number through definite community effort.