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# THE FAILURE OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

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## THE FAILURE OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT.

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TOWNSEND PRIZE ORATION.

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Twenty-five years ago, four men of obscure origin and of meagre ability, vicious and ignorant, sat in the City Hall of New York, and under the thinnest disguise of legal form, made absolutely their own, for their own uses, the vast financial and political power of a million of people

In theory, our city government is a government by the people, through their official servants acting solely for the common good. And yet in practice the utterly arbitrary and despotic system that the Tweed Ring represented has lived and ruled in our larger cities from that day until 1895 and it is hard to believe that it will not be still supreme when the twentieth century opens.

The chief characteristic of all city life is community of local interests, and to provide for these interests is the object of city government. The modern city is essentially a concentration of power. Its forces, if rightly directed, would make it the highest agent of civilization. And yet we of America have so wretchedly failed of attaining these great possibilities that we must look to our kindred of England and Scotland merely to learn what these possibilities are.

Our experience has been such that the denizen of the average American city would hardly believe a detailed account of what the citizens of Glasgow or Manchester get for their taxes. Their city work is done by the highest experts, honestly, cheaply and well. Their street franchises are leased as private financiers would lease them and yield enormous returns. Their public undertakings are vast, and numberless, and take account of the distant future. In a word their city government is not politics, but business.

Ours on the other hand is a blot on the Nineteenth Century. Its only semblance of success is in the preservation of the public peace. We do not receive a twenty per cent. return for our taxes. Our city service in streets, in sanitation, in education is wasteful, flagrantly inadequate, and bad at that. Public officers are unfit for their duties. Corruption is the ear-mark of a city contract. The commission of crime a matter of bargain with the

police, and provision for a future a thing unknown. It is summed up in that common feeling which regards the agencies of the public as mere private spoils.

During the past thirty years the United States has presented a singularly curious anachronism in the history of government. We have practically reproduced in our city government of to-day the feudal system of the Twelfth Century. This is no metaphor. In the science of politics the feudal noble is accurately represented by the city boss of to-day; his vassals by the "ward heelers," and his serfs by the inhabitants of the city at large. The two systems rest on the same political principle. The distributor of lands has become the distributor of public office, and his "heelers" render him their political services as the vassals of old gave their military support to their lord. With your permission I will endeavor to outline certain peculiar features of our political condition which make this "Boss System" possible and inevitable. First of these is that pet dogma of ours, "manhood suffrage." By what Bryce has called "A sacrifice of common sense to abstract theory," we give to the ignorant and corrupt as much influence on our city affairs as to the most enlightened and patriotic. The balance of political power is thus put up for sale in that particular market where the boss is always the highest bidder.

Second is the fearful complexity of the governmental machinery of our cities, by which the voter is mystified, the issues are confused, and an elaborate arrangement is made for a division and final evasion of all political responsibility.

Third is the corrupt use of the power of the legislature over the city to create special conditions in municipal affairs adapted to the wants of the boss. In the great fights with the Tweed Ring in New York and the Gas Ring in Philadelphia the Legislature proved to be the key of the position.

Fourth is our traditional party feeling which robs the elective franchise of its judicial quality. The boss, who is never really either Republican or Democrat, but merely plain professional, values highly this party sentiment as an enemy of calm judgment.

These are the conditions that make the boss system not only possible, but inevitable. For it must be always remembered that the boss and the heeler are only the products of the forces about them. Remove these conditions and the system itself will die.

What, then, is the fundamental mistake at the bottom of our misgovernment? Manifestly this. We have failed to recognize the inherent difference between the political nature of a city and

that of a State, and we have applied to the city, without regard to their fitness, the principles that have worked so well with the State.

Thus theory demanded that manhood suffrage, as in the Federal system, be also made the basis of city government. Yet the city is primarily a business organization, and the commonest kind of common sense gives to the shareholder in a business concern an influence on its affairs proportioned to the extent of his interest therein. We misapply theory once more in making the forms of our city governments reproductions. Checks and balances may be necessary in Federal politics. Deliberation is there of more importance than swift decision. But the functions of the city relate almost wholly to business, and should follow modern business methods. It is a truism to say that this means the centralization of power in a single hand. How long would a railway survive a management of checks and balances and manhood suffrage? Great Britain has recognized both of these principles. By imposing a very slight tax qualification on voters, the English cities have practically wiped out that mass of venal and ignorant votes, which is here the chief reliance of the boss; while by placing all the powers of the city in the hands of a single elective council, they have attained almost perfect efficiency and direct responsibility. In final contrast to ours, their legislature interferes in city affairs only by general municipal acts. The experience of the city of New York with her legislature of the present year would amply justify this policy.

It is often stated and is widely felt, that in the nature of things the government of cities must always be a failure. The continuance of this idea is in itself enough to destroy all chance of improvement. The foregoing analysis of the causes of our failure has therefore been made as an attempt to show that this idea is not true, but that city government, in the abstract, is perfectly capable of success. Recall the suggested causes of failure. We have first, manhood suffrage; second, the misapplication of the Federal system to the peculiar conditions of city life; third, the excessive interference of the legislature in city affairs; fourth, party feeling. Now not one of these conditions is a necessary or natural incident of city life, as such. The first three, manhood suffrage, complex charters, legislative interference, are all artificial, purely the work of law. The fourth, party feeling is perfectly capable of being confined to national affairs. The English cities stand for us as examples of good government. Yet they do not differ from ours in those fundamental attributes which belong

to the city as a city. In the congestion of population, in race characteristics, in the concentration of economic forces, they are essentially like ours. On the other hand they do differ from ours in being free from those conditions which I have just called artificial and unnecessary. The inference, therefore, is inevitable, that in this difference, and this alone, lies the reason for their success and our failure.

If this be so, our work for the future is to remove these hampering conditions. Since our cities lead our civilization, since an ever increasing proportion of mankind seems destined to pass its days and seek its happiness under the conditions of city life, the interests of the race are vitally involved in this change. How soon, if at all, this great advance shall be made, is a question of public education. The prophecy of the times is clearer than ever before. The citizen is beginning to enquire into the causes of his misgovernment. It is true, the public has been aroused to anger before, but its mere anger, though effectual for the time, is always short-lived. Now it combines wrath with reason, and strikes, not at the thing itself, but at its cause. Show the country what that cause is, that it may squarely attack it, and the old system will go down, and we shall learn at last that incompetence, waste and corruption are not the necessary incidents of city life but that it holds in store tremendous possibilities for the good of mankind.

Remember that historic phrase: "What are you going to do about it?" Thus the challenge of this vile Nineteenth Century despotism was flung in the face of the country, when the famous boss put to the struggling city of New York his mocking query. Sooner or later the people of the United States will answer that question.

*Herbert Knox Smith.*

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