

CHAPTER LII

AN AMERICAN VIEW OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED STATES¹

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A CITY in the United States is quite a different thing from a city in its technical sense, as the word is used in England. In England a city is usually taken to be a place which is or has been the seat of a bishop.² The head of a city government in England is a mayor, but many boroughs which are not cities are also governed by a mayor. In the United States a city is a place which has received a charter as a city from the legislature of its State. In America there is nothing whatever corresponding to the English borough. Whenever in the United States one enters a place that is presided over by a mayor, he may generally understand that he is in a city; save that here and there incorporated villages have mayors.

Any European student of politics who wishes to understand the problem of government in the United States, whether of city government or any other form of it, must first of all transfer himself, if he can, to a point of view precisely the opposite of that which is natural to him. This is scarcely, if at all, less true of the English than of the continental student. In England as upon the continent, from time immemorial, government has descended from the top down. Until recently, society in Europe has accepted the idea, almost without protest, that there must be governing classes, and that the great

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² In Scotland, where there have been, since the Revolution, no bishops, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and now (1889) Dundee are described as cities. In England Westminster is called a city. It had, however, for a short time, a bishop.

majority of men must be governed. The French Revolution doubtless modified this idea everywhere, and especially in France, but even in France public sentiment on this point is a resultant of a conflict of views. In the United States, however, that idea does not obtain at all, and, what is of scarcely less importance, it never has obtained. No distinction is recognized of governing and governed classes, and the problem of government is, in effect, an effort on the part of society as a whole to learn and apply to itself the art of government. Bearing this in mind, it becomes apparent that the immense tide of immigration into the United States is a continually disturbing factor. The immigrants come from many countries, a very large proportion of them being of the classes which, in their old homes, from time out of mind, have been governed. Arriving in America, they shortly become citizens in a society which undertakes to govern itself. However well-disposed they may be as a rule, they have not had experience in self-government, nor do they always share the ideas which have expressed themselves in the Constitution of the United States. This foreign element settles largely in the cities of the country. It is estimated that the population of New York City contains eighty per cent of people who either are foreign-born, or who are the children of foreign-born parents. Consequently, in a city like New York, the problem of learning and applying the art of government is handed over to a population that begins in point of experience very low down. In many of the cities of the United States, indeed in almost all of them, the population not only is thus largely untrained in the art of self-government, but it is not even homogeneous. So that an American city is confronted not only with the necessity of instructing large and rapidly-growing bodies of people in the art of government, but it is compelled at the same time to assimilate strangely different component parts into an American community. It will be apparent to the student that either one of these functions by itself would be difficult enough. When both are found side by side the problem is increasingly difficult as to each. Together they represent a problem such as confronts no city in the United Kingdom, or in Europe. The American city has had problems to deal with also of a material character, quite different from those which have con-

fronted the cities of the Old World. With the exception of Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, and New York, there is no American city of great consequence whose roots go back into the distant past even of America. American cities as a rule have grown with a rapidity to which the Old World presents few parallels. London, in the extent of its growth, but not in the proportions of it, Berlin since 1870, and Rome in the last few years, are perhaps the only places in Europe which have been compelled to deal with this element of rapid growth in anything like a corresponding degree. All of these cities, London, Berlin, and Rome, are the seats of the national government, and receive from that source more or less help and guidance in their development. In all of them an immense nucleus of wealth existed before this great and rapid growth began. The problem in America has been to make a great city in a few years out of nothing. There has been no nucleus of wealth upon which to found the structure which every succeeding year has enlarged. Recourse has been had of necessity, under these conditions, to the freest use of the public credit. The city of Brooklyn and the city of Chicago, each with a population now (1892) of about a million of people,¹ are but little more than fifty years old. In that period everything has been created out of the fields. The houses in which the people live, the water-works, the paved streets, the sewers, everything which makes up the permanent plant of a city, all have been produced while the city has been growing from year to year at a fabulous rate. Besides these things are to be reckoned the public schools, the public parks, and in the case of Brooklyn, the great bridge connecting it with New York, two-thirds of the cost of which is borne by Brooklyn. Looked at in this light the marvel would seem to be, not so much that the American cities are justly criticizable for many defects, but rather that results so great have been achieved in so short a time. The necessity of doing so much so quickly, has worked to the disadvantage of the American city in two ways. First, it has compelled very lavish expenditure under great pressure for quick results. This is precisely the condition under which the best trained business men make their greatest mistakes, and are in danger of running into extravagance and wasteful-

¹ Chicago has more than 1,000,000, and Brooklyn over 900,000.

ness. No candid American will deny that American cities have suffered largely in this way, not alone from extravagance and wastefulness, but also from dishonesty; but in estimating the extent of the reproach, it is proper to take into consideration these general conditions under which the cities have been compelled to work. The second disadvantage which American cities have laboured under from this state of things has been their inability to provide adequately for their current needs, while discounting the future so freely in order to provide their permanent plant. When the great American cities have paid for the permanent plant which they have been accumulating during the last half century, so that the duty which lies before them is chiefly that of caring adequately for the current life of their population, a vast improvement in all these particulars may reasonably be expected. In other words, time is a necessary element in making a great city, as it is in every other great and enduring work. American cities are judged by their size rather than by the time which has entered into their growth. It cannot be denied that larger results could have been produced with the money expended if it always had been used with complete honesty and good judgment. But to make an intelligent criticism upon the American city, in its failures upon the material side, these elements of difficulty must be taken into consideration.

Another particular in which the American city may be thought to have come short of what might have been hoped for, may be described in general terms as a lack of foresight. It would have been comparatively easy to have preserved in all of them small open parks, and generally to have made them more beautiful, if there had been a greater appreciation of the need for these things and of the growth the cities were to attain to. The western cities probably have erred in this regard less than those upon the Atlantic coast. But while it is greatly to be regretted that this large foresight has not been displayed, it is after all only repeating in America what has taken place in Europe. The improvement of cities seems everywhere to be made by tearing down and replacing at great cost, rather than by a far-sighted provision for the demands and opportunities of the future. These unfortunate results in America have flowed largely from two causes: first, from

inability on the part of the cities to appreciate in advance the phenomenal growth that has come upon them; and second, from the frequent tendency of population to grow in precisely the direction where it was not expected to. A singular illustration of this last factor is to be found in the city of Washington. The Capitol was made to face towards the east, under the impression that population would settle in that direction. As matter of fact the city has grown towards the west, so that the Capitol stands with its back to the city and faces a district that is scarcely built upon at all.

Probably no detail strikes the eye of the foreigner more unfavourably in connection with the average American city than the poor paving of the streets and their lack of cleanliness. The comparison with cities of Europe in these respects is immensely to the disadvantage of the American city. But, in this connection, it is not unfair to call attention to the fact that the era of good paving and clean streets in Europe is scarcely more than thirty years old. Poor as is the condition of the streets in most American cities now, it would be risking very little to say that it would average much higher than ten years ago. There are several contributing causes which are reflected in this situation that represent difficulties from which most European cities are free. In the first place, frost strikes much deeper in America, and is more trying to the pavements in every way. In the next place, the streets are more often disturbed in connection with gas pipes, steam pipes, and telegraph service, than in European cities. But, apart from these incidental difficulties, the fundamental trouble in connection with the streets of American cities is the lack of sufficient appropriations to put them in first-class condition and to keep them so, both as to paving and as to cleaning. The reason for this has been pointed out.

All the troubles, however, which have marked the development of cities in the United States are not due to these causes. Cities in the United States, as forms of government, are of comparatively recent origin. The city of Boston, for example, in the State of Massachusetts, although the settlement was founded more than two hundred and fifty years ago, received its charter as a city so recently as 1822. The city of Brooklyn received its charter from the State of New York in 1835. In

other words, the transition from village and town government into government by cities, has simply followed the transition of small places into large communities. This suggests another distinction between the cities of the United States and those of Great Britain. The great cities of England and of Europe, with few exceptions, have their roots in the distant past. Many of their privileges and chartered rights were wrested from the Crown in feudal times. Some of these privileges have been retained, and contribute to the income, the pride, and the influence of the municipality. The charter of an American city represents no element of prestige or inspiration. It is only the legal instrument which gives the community authority to act as a corporation, and which defines the duties of its officers. The motive for passing from town government to city government in general has been the same everywhere—to acquire a certain readiness of action, and to make more available the credit of the community in order to provide adequately for its own growth. The town meeting, in which every citizen takes part, serves its purpose admirably in communities up to a certain size, or for the conducting of public work on not too large a scale. But the necessity for efficiency in providing for the needs of growth has compelled rapidly-growing communities, in all the States, to seek the powers of a corporation as administered through a city government. Growing thus out of the town, it happened very naturally that the first conception of the city on the part of Americans was that which had applied to the town and the village as local subdivisions of the commonwealth. Charters were framed as though cities were little states. Americans are only now learning, after many years of bitter experience, that they are not so much little states as large corporations. Many of the mistakes which have marked the progress of American cities up to this point have sprung from that defective conception. The aim deliberately was, to make a city government where no officer by himself should have power enough to do much harm. The natural result of this was to create a situation where no officer had power to do much good. Meanwhile bad men united for corrupt purposes, and the whole organization of the city government aided such in throwing responsibility from one to another. Many recent city charters in the United States pro-

ceed upon the more accurate theory that cities, in their organic capacity, are chiefly large corporations. The better results flowing from this theory are easily made clear. Americans are sufficiently adept in the administration of large business enterprises to understand that, in any such undertaking, some one man must be given the power of direction and the choice of his chief assistants; they understand that power and responsibility must go together from the top to the bottom of every successful business organization. Consequently, when it began to be realized that a city was a business corporation rather than an integral part of the State, the unwillingness to organize the city upon the line of concentrated power in connection with concentrated responsibility began to disappear. The charter of the city of Brooklyn is probably as advanced a type as can be found of the results of this mode of thinking. In Brooklyn the executive side of the city government is represented by the mayor and the various heads of departments. The legislative side consists of a common council of nineteen members, twelve of whom are elected from three districts each having four aldermen, the remaining seven being elected as aldermen at large by the whole city. The people elect three city officers besides the board of aldermen; the mayor, who is the real, as well as the nominal, head of the city; the comptroller, who is practically the book-keeper of the city; and the auditor, whose audit is necessary for the payment of every bill against the city whether large or small. The mayor appoints absolutely, without confirmation by the common council, all the executive heads of departments. He appoints, for example, the police commissioner, the fire commissioner, the health commissioner, the commissioner of city works, the corporation counsel or counsellor at law, the city treasurer, the tax collector, and in general all the officials who are charged with executive duties. These officials in turn appoint their own subordinates, so that the principle of defined responsibility permeates the city government from top to bottom. The mayor also appoints the board of assessors, the board of education, and the board of elections. The executive officers appointed by the mayor are appointed for a term of two years, that is to say for a term similar to his own. The mayor is elected at the general election in November; he takes

office on the first of January following, and for one month the great departments of the city are carried on for him by the appointees of his predecessor. On the first of February it becomes his duty to appoint his own heads of departments, and inasmuch as they serve for the same term as himself, each incoming mayor thus has the opportunity to make an administration in all its parts in sympathy with himself. Each one of these great executive departments is under the charge of a single head, the charter of the city conforming absolutely to the theory that where executive work is to be done it should be committed to the charge of one man. Where boards of officials exist in Brooklyn, it is because the work committed to them is discretionary more than it is executive in character. These boards, also, are appointed by the mayor without confirmation by the board of aldermen, but they are appointed for terms not coterminous with his own; so that, in most cases, no mayor would appoint the whole of any such board unless he were to be twice elected by the people. In other words, with quite unimportant exceptions, the charter of Brooklyn, a city with 900,000 inhabitants, makes the mayor entirely responsible for the conduct of the city government on its executive side, and, in holding him to this responsibility, equips him fearlessly with the necessary power to discharge his trust. This charter went into effect on the first of January 1882. It has been found to have precisely the merits and the defects which one might expect of such an instrument. A strong executive can accomplish satisfactory results; a weak one can disappoint every hope. The community, however, is so well satisfied that the charter is a vast improvement on any system which it has tried before, that no voice is raised against it. It has had one notable and especially satisfactory effect. It can be made clear to the simplest citizen that the entire character of the city government for two years depends upon the man chosen for the office of mayor. As a consequence more people have voted in Brooklyn on the subject of the mayoralty than have voted there as to who should be Governor of the State. This is a great and a direct gain for good city government, because it creates and keeps alert a strong public sentiment, and tends to increase the interest of all citizens in the affairs of their city. In the absence of a his-