

What About City Government

Earl C. Davis

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The treasure of Captain Kidd is one of the legends that carry us back to the early days and primitive conditions in this country. The existence of the treasure is, I suppose, a fact, but where it was hidden, and what has become of it, is so much a matter of legend that little interest is felt in it except by the romancer and the boy to whom tales of adventure and glory always appeal. So far as practical affairs are concerned, it is sufficient today that it once was, but is no more. If it were personal we might speak of it as "the late lamented," and pass on to a discussion of the price of beef and Pittsburgh Stogies. About the same thing might be said of another treasure of early and primitive days. It once was, but it has been lost, and where it has gone very few seem to know, and not many more seem to care. We hear it spoken of occasionally in a conventional sort of a way, and then the conversation turns to the stock market, and the glorious duty of the United States as a world power. This other treasure which has been lost is the ideal of democracy. Just how it went is not quite clear, but that it has gone is very apparent. I am inclined to think that it went much the same way as tradition says a part of Captain Kidd's treasure went. The story goes that one Earl of Bellomont seized Kidd's wealth, a trick and a characteristic deed of the privileged class to which the Earl of Bellomont belonged.² I am inclined to

¹ While this manuscript is undated, it can be dated by the reference made in the text to the need for a new city Charter for Pittsfield; there was a call for a new city Charter in 1910, although I don't believe this was acted on at the time.

² Richard Coote, 1st Earl of Bellomont (1635-1700) an Irish nobleman and colonial administrator. In 1695, he was appointed to serve as governor of the colonies of New York, Massachusetts Bay and New Hampshire, a position he held until his death. He was a financial sponsor of William Kidd as a privateer, but whose efforts were later held to have turned into piracy, and because of this Bellomont had Kidd arrested and returned to England where he was tried, convicted and hanged.

think that the same kind of animal has stolen and concealed the treasure of democracy, which was once the dream and the ideal of men of power and standing in this country. I am enough of a romancer to think it worthwhile to find out something about that treasure of democracy, and to speculate a bit as to how it might be applied in this city in which we live.

There seems to be a growing sentiment that the time has come in the history of this city for a new city charter.³ I have not such a faith in the ritualistic aspect of civic life, as to think that a new city Charter would prove the charmed rabbit-foot that would bring us luck and efficiency in the administration of city affairs. I know perfectly well that a city made up of citizens who were really citizens, would find little trouble in running its affairs satisfactorily with almost any old kind of a charter. I know that the qualities of a gentleman is not determined by the clothes that he wears, and that not even nine tailors can make a gentleman out of a rogue. Yet a man does respond to his environment, and is influenced by it. A man with clean clothes and clean linen walks a little more uprightly and feels a bit more respectable than the man with stripes without the stars. In much the same way I think that a more respectable charter, with a more modern cut, would help a bit in the process of redeeming the civic life of the city.

But from what may such a respectable city as this be redeemed, you may ask. Surely we are not criminal outcasts like some other cities, whose honest residents speak of their city with shame. No, that charge cannot be brought against us. At the worst, I think we are open only to the charges of the most petty knavery. The trouble with us as a democratic city is that we are not democratic. We are seriously afflicted with a sort of hookworm disease, that eats away our civic vitality, and while we loaf over our civic job, let things go to the devil, get hard up for civic cash in the way of able and efficient officials, and sound far-reaching policies for the development of our common life, along comes the alert, self-seeking politician, and in return for a candidate for office, gets a mortgage on our civic rights. We are not much disturbed at the time, but one day we awake to the fact that we are at the mercy of the man who has the mortgage. If we set up [a] strong enough howl he will heed us,

³ There was discussion about the need for a new city charter for Pittsfield in 1910.

and hand out some soft-soap-dope in the way of reform, just enough to put us to sleep again, and then he goes to work for himself and his, while we sleep off the injection. This year, in the republican party, an attempt was made to hand out some of that soft-soap by throwing the flush of a citizen's candidate for mayor. But everyone knows that, in spite of the innocence of the men concerned, the power that worked the Punch and Judy show was the same old boss. All this agitation and unrest in the city affairs today is simply our awakening to the fact that we do not run the city, but have become apathetic tools in the hands of a machine which runs the city for political control. If the thing is stated bluntly, our city is run so that the party in power may retain its control of the votes to be made use of in state and national politics. Unless the machine gets out of gear, our local politicians are simply the keys of a hurdy-gurdy played by an electric connection for our amusement. We dance to the music, pay our coppers to the attending monkey, and go away satisfied.

If I am not greatly mistaken, I speak the feelings of many people when I say that I am sick of that sort of a thing. In the first place, I am sick to death of the old tunes they grind out, "Money Makes the Mare Go," "Sweet Rosie Prosperity," "Trade Follows the Flag," and "Protection, Protection Forever" are nearly old enough to go to the rubbish heap from whence they came. In the second place, I am sick of the men who play the old machine, and the men who play the part of monkey, and collect the coin. If a man is going to be a lucky, let him wear the uniform of a lucky, so that we may know him. But what is more to the point, I am sick of having the machine made for me, and having the player chosen for me, and the monkey also, and then have some suave sleek person come around to tell me what a glorious thing it is to live in a democratic community. This, after all, is the dread hook-worm disease from which we are suffering, and from which we must be cured. This is what makes it necessary to speak of the redemption of such a respectable, well-groomed city as Pittsfield. The habitual loafer and the voluntary unemployed are as much need of redemption as the criminal and the outcast. So far as civic affairs are concerned most of us belong to the voluntary unemployed, and we form our bread-line just as they do in the Bowery, and take our alms from the distributors of political charity. Thereby we think we become the more respectable in that we keep our hands clean from the dirt of politics.

The modern city is one of the developments of the industrial and economic development of the last hundred years. The organization of industry along lines that are familiar to all, has made necessary the concentration of the population into compact groups. The development of municipal administration has grown out of this congestion of a considerable number of people into a comparatively small area. This situation has given rise to certain needs and necessities that are common to the residents of such a city. In order to satisfy those needs the people thus grouped have had to organize politically. The whole situation has given rise to problems and developments of a novel character. The difficulty of the general proposition thus laid before them has been almost all that they could handle. During the process of development they have gained considerable experience, and some little wisdom. Failures and partial failures have been strong disciplinary teachers. Of late years there seems to have been growing a strong feeling in favor of profiting by these failures, and making an attempt to clear up the bad messes that obtain in many cities.

In the great mass of literature that has been written on this general subject, there seems to have been a strong tendency on the part of many to come to the conclusion that, so far as municipal government is concerned, democracy has been a failure. In this state this conviction has taken shape in the practical usurpation by the state of all municipal functions. I am not especially familiar with the details of this sort of thing, but when you stop to enumerate the many and often absurd affairs of city government which are practically regulated by the state and the city, and its officials act merely as clerical executioners, I often wonder why we do not go the full length, and have the state appoint our officers and manage our affairs. It is true that a certain amount of this is necessary, but I am of the opinion that it has been carried to far in this state. Men, who believe in this sort of a thing, will tell you that it has been necessary on account of the fact that municipal democracy has been such a dismal failure. But if you take the trouble to read the history of corruption in cities you will find, I think, that the failures have not been due to the ease with which democracy has been debauched, but due to the fact that commercial and industrial interests, representing in many cases the more substantial elements in the communities, have deliberately betrayed the duty of citizenship and corrupted the civic life for their own special good. It is often said that the best men

of the community have kept out of politics that they might not soil their hands in them. That may be true of some, but it is also true that in many cases the so-called best men in the community have been the very persons who have been behind the scenes debauching and corrupting the civic life for their own interests. The history of the granting of franchises for public utilities is sufficient to establish the substantial truth of that proposition. In most cities, there has been no democracy at all, but simply a vicious control of city affairs by a small group of vested interests, for those vested interests and at the expense of the community. We have not had democratic government. We have had a boss government, subservient to the industrial interests of the city. The trouble has been too much interest in city politics by many of the best citizens. To what extent these general propositions apply here I do not know. But it has been apparent that we have had a boss, and have danced to the tune played by the old machine. Now I should like to see that old treasure, of which our ancestors thought so much, the principles of democracy, tried out, just to see how it would work. It seems to me that, now that we are agitating the proposition for a new city charter, it might be well to have some of these principles embodied therein. I believe in a thorough-going democratic form of government, not a makeshift, or a disguised plutocracy, or theocracy, but a plain straight-forward democracy. I have the utmost confidence in the intelligent judgement of the average voter.

There are three general principles that I would like to see embodied as the fundamental principles of a charter. The first one of these is the recognition of the people as the source and the aim of all municipal administration. When you get back to the last analysis of the situation, the source of all power and authority is in the citizenship at large. That is the starting point. We have a certain number of people here, who, within the limits defined by the state, are attempting to determine the policy, and administer the affairs of the city. Theoretically all voice and will rests in the body of voters.

But it is a manifest impossibility for the voters as a whole to meet and carry on such a mass of business as we have to deal with in conducting the affairs of the city. The question is to provide for proxy administration without giving up the rights of direct assembly. Heretofore, in our representative form, we have delegated all those powers to men without any reservations.

There are four institutions that have been embodied of late in city charters, which are very valuable and are thoroughly democratic, the popular initiative, referendum, recall, and popular veto.

The popular initiative would seem to be the most natural thing in the world to embody in a city charter when a town becomes incorporated into a city. It was a fundamental right of the voter of the town to propose from the floor of the assembly any measure that appealed to him. He could get a hearing. As now arranged, the only method that a group of citizens has for such a popular initiative is by button-holing the councilman or alderman, and if perchance the voter or voters have sufficient influence, the matter is brought to the attention of the august body. The right of popular initiative should be reserved as a fundamental right of the body politic by providing that any measure may be brought to the attention of the city, either in its legislative body for action, or for a referendum vote by the city at large, through the medium of a petition. A petition signed by a certain number of citizens endorsing a given measure shall guarantee the consideration of that measure by the representative body. For the purpose of bringing such measures before the legislative body the percentage of signatures required might well be as small as 5%. But upon a signature list of a larger percentage, say 30% or more, the measure might go directly to the voters as an item for referendum vote. In that case, the legislative body would have only advisory and didactic action.

In addition to the right of popular initiative, the referendum should have its place, making it obligatory that certain measures, whatever may be their origin, should be submitted to popular vote. All granting of franchises, and measures involving a change in the policy of the city, should be thus submitted. Any measure, whatever its origin, must be submitted upon the petition appeal of a percentage of the voters. This is not a provision growing out of distrust of the legislators, but a measure which gives the voters of the city at large the right to register their opinions, and give their sanction. It also serves as the wholesome restraint against the unguarded legislation on the part of legislative bodies. An indirect benefit of this action would serve, as it has served in the place where it has been tried, to stimulate interest in city affairs, and arouse discussion and agitation. All the discussion

and agitation that can be brought to bear upon civic questions is just so much work done towards developing an enlightened citizenship. Of course the danger of this provision is the danger of all provisions, the abuse of it. But it seems rational to suppose that such a measure would never become so common as to impair its efficiency.

The third provision which has to do with this system of direct legislation, is the power of popular veto. Certain classes of legislation shall become effective only after thirty days has elapsed subsequent to the signature by the executive. In the meantime the citizens at large have the power to register their veto through petition, which action should either render the decision void, or place it before the voters for popular approval.

So much for popular legislation. Now the representative system has great advantages that are absolutely essential to the proper administration of civic affairs. Almost all of the business is routine. It involves not so much the will of the city as a whole as it involves careful judgement, and good sense. Provide for legislation of this charter a single legislative body, not very large, say seven or nine men, elected at large. Supposing we have nine men. Elect three each year to serve for three years as legislators. Limit their executive duties as much as possible. Their function shall be to say what shall be done and what shall not be done, the problem of execution and administration being left to the administrative department. Give them legislative duties, and legislative authority. Plus the power of investigation and inquiry.

Any person thus elected shall serve [a] full term, subject to the limitations of the recall upon a petition of the majority of voters voting at the time of his election. This is simply another provision in favor of democracy, and while it would rarely be used, it is a good safeguard.

So much for direct legislation and representative legislation. Now comes the question of administration. Here more than anywhere else, has the municipal government of cities fallen. There seems to have been a disposition widely spread to think that in the matter of administration, democracy means that we must choose the greenhorn and the untrained to do our work for us. The early national government, fearing the possibility

of the executive developing into a king, so hemmed him in by the system of checks and balances, and so limited his tenure of office, and his authority, that there certainly has not, thus far, been any real danger of any president's attempt to declare himself king. That is a wise provision in the nation at large. But it seems to me that it is rather absurd for small cities to follow along that line. I believe that in a city of this size, the proper method of administration is to elect an executive, with large powers and responsibilities, and large authority. Give him a long term of office, give him the power to choose experts for the heads of his departments, permitting him to go outside of the city if he wishes, pay him enough salary so that he gives his whole time to his job, and then let him go to work. He has power and is responsible. Hold him to a strict accountability. Have him, as well as the elected legislators, limited by the recall. Safeguard him by the power of appeal to the people.

It seems that a charter involving such principles as I have indicated would be an approach towards democracy, and I am of the opinion that the principles of democracy are worth trying. I realize that what I have said is but little more than a skeleton, and that the bones do not fit with exactness such as the espery might require. There is one thing that I want to say in closing. It is this. A new waistcoat like this is not the whole thing. The matter of a good satisfactory city government rests upon an enlightened and thinking citizenship. Apart from the city affairs directly, I think that the plan which has developed in Rochester, known as the Rochester Social Center System, is one of the best movements that has been started in this country. The public schools are made into centers for recreation, pleasure, and education. Baths, gymnasiums, lecture courses and various arrangements which bring people together, and enable them to become acquainted, and to discuss public questions, are provided in this way. The expense is comparatively small, and it makes the school buildings serve not only as educational centers for children, but for adults as well. A system like that would serve to develop an educated citizenship, and that is what we are after, unless I am completely fooled.