

**MUNICIPAL SOCIALISM:
THE CONSERVATIVE
VICTORY IN CLEVELAND**

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Municipal Socialism: The Conservative Victory in Cleveland by H. T. Newcomb

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H. T. NEWCOMB

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MUNICIPAL SOCIALISM:

The Conservative Victory in Cleveland*

By H. T. NEWCOMB

Of the Bar of the District of Columbia

THE PERSONAL ELEMENT

The story of the recent defeat of the project to erect a public electric lighting and power plant in the city of Cleveland and to inaugurate competition between the city and those of its tax-paying citizens who are interested in the electric lighting business now established there, will not be understood unless it is illuminated by the details of its personal and political relations. The contest was charged with the personal element from the beginning, for it commenced when Mr. Tom L. Johnson resumed his political

*The writer of this paper desires to explain that he was not an impartial observer of the events it chronicles. He was glad to accept an invitation to participate in the active opposition to the proposed public electric plant not only because he regards political ownership as vicious in principle, but also because it appeared that in the case of Cleveland there were particular objections which ought to lead even the advocates of that principle to oppose Mayor Johnson's project.

residence in Cleveland, a city which he had represented in the Federal Congress before he abandoned it for New York, and having invested his millions of capital so as to allow ample time for other than financial and industrial activities, announced that he would devote the balance of his life to an effort to secure the application of the Henry George system of taxation. It became political when, very soon after this announcement, the local leaders of the Democratic party of Cleveland made Mr. Johnson their candidate for mayor and permitted him to control the platform and the policies of that organization. From his nomination for the mayoralty, early in 1901, to his defeat for the governorship in November, 1903, Mr. Johnson was the dominant force in the Democracy of Cleveland; he drove from its councils the conservative leaders under whom it had functioned as a vigilant and virile minority organization and he made it the party of extreme radicalism. As an immediate consequence of his course, many Democrats of the old school were driven into acting with the Republicans, but this loss was, for a time, more than offset by the large number of Republicans who were allured to the temporary support of the program which contained so many specious promises. This particularly accounts for Mr. Johnson's second election as mayor, for although during his first candidacy he received considerable support which was based upon a superficial acquaintance with his career as a business man, this support had been withdrawn before his second election and his majority at the polls in April, 1903.

represents the preponderance, at that time, of the radical voters of Cleveland over the practically unanimous body of its stable citizenship and its substantial business men.

MAYOR JOHNSON'S WANING POPULARITY

The votes received by the various candidates for the mayoralty of Cleveland at the election of April 1, 1901, aggregated 66,568, of which Mr. Johnson received 35,817 or 53.81 per cent. Two years later the vote was 68,571 and Mayor Johnson received 36,060 or 52.59 per cent of the aggregate. Six months later the referendum on municipal ownership evoked the suffrages of 54,625 citizens of Cleveland of whom but 24,193 or 44.29 per cent voted on the side advocated by the Mayor. At the same election utilized for the submission of the lighting project Mayor Johnson was the Democratic candidate for governor of Ohio and his vote in Cuyahoga county, in which Cleveland is located, fell some 8,500 below that of the successful Republican candidate.

THE QUESTION SUBMITTED

The precise question submitted to the voters of Cleveland on November 3, 1903, was whether they would authorize a bond issue of \$400,000 for the purpose of constructing an electric lighting plant. It was commonly understood that this would no more than provide for an experimental plant which, however, would be utilized to supply light for both public and private use in a certain limited section of the

city. There was good ground for believing that the plant proposed by the Mayor could not be built for the sum named, but that point will be discussed hereafter. The referendum on this project was secured by its opponents after its advocates had exhausted the means at their command, both legal and political, for committing the city to it without a direct expression of the will of the people. Before a referendum could be forced, the opponents of municipal socialism had to show the illegality of an ordinance authorizing a bond issue to build an electric lighting and power plant, which had been adopted by a unanimous vote of the City Council; and to arouse enough opposition in the same legislative body to secure the defeat of a second ordinance, in which the word "power" did not appear, which was pressed by every device which the chief magistrate of a city can use to overwhelm opposition to his policies. Then, when forced to permit a referendum, the plan of the supporters of the city administration was to hold it under a law which would have rendered a full vote impossible. An injunction preventing the execution of this design was the final means by which a complete expression of the will of the city was made possible.

The verdict recorded on November 3 was against municipal socialism by a vote of 30,432 in the negative to 24,193 in the affirmative. As the approval of two-thirds of those voting upon the proposition would have been necessary in order to permit the bond issue, it is evident that the margin by which the conservative citizenship of Cleveland won this

substantial victory was not the majority of 6,239 over the advocates of a public lighting plant, but rather the difference of 12,224 votes between those cast in favor of the measure and the number necessary for its enactment. Thus while the opponents of municipal socialism cast 55.71 per cent of the total vote polled, they were successful by a margin amounting to 22.38 per cent of that total. It is interesting to compare this result with the popular vote of 15,282 to 1,245 by which, ten years earlier, the neighboring city of Detroit authorized the erection of a municipal electric lighting plant. In Chicago, in 1902, 139,999 voters approved the principle of public ownership "of the gas and electric lighting plants, said plants to furnish light, heat and power for public and private use," and only 21,364 declared themselves in opposition. While the Cleveland contest was in progress, the citizens of San Francisco voted on a proposal to acquire a street railway and to issue \$710,000 in 3½ per cent bonds therefor, the proposition being defeated because favored by less than two-thirds of the voters, although it received 14,351 affirmative votes to 10,790 in the negative. On the face of these returns it appears that in Cleveland but forty-four in each one hundred legal voters are in favor of municipal socialism, while in Detroit it is favored by ninety-two in each one hundred, in Chicago by eighty-seven in each one hundred, and in San Francisco by fifty-seven in each one hundred. Of course, these figures do not tell the entire story. It is altogether likely that the latent spirit of conservatism was just as extensive in Detroit, Chicago and

San Francisco prior to these more or less complete expressions of popular ideals and purposes as in Cleveland, and that the chief difference is really in the degree in which the dormant opposition to radical departures from the governmental practices which have the approval of American experience was aroused and made effective. Whether this conclusion is correct or not, there can be no doubt that the importance of the municipal ownership referendum appeared much greater to the citizens of Cleveland than to those of the other cities named. This is shown by the following table in which the aggregate number of votes cast and those on each side are compared with the number of possible voters:

RESULTS IN CLEVELAND AND OTHER CITIES COMPARED

City	Date of referendum	Number of males over 21 years old	Aggregate vote cast		Per cent of males over 21 voting	
			Number	Per cent of males over 21	For municipal ownership	Against municipal ownership
Cleveland	1903, Nov. 3	*111,522	54,625	48.98	21.69	27.29
San Francisco.	1903, Oct. 8	*128,985	25,141	19.49	11.13	8.36
Chicago	1902, Apr. 1	*511,048	161,363	31.57	27.39	4.18
Detroit	1893, Apr. 3	† 55,476	16,527	29.79	27.55	2.24

* Census of 1900

† Census of 1890