

SUGGESTIONS ON GOVERNMENT

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Suggestions on government by Samuel E. Moffett

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SAMUEL E. MOFFETT

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ON GOVERNMENT**

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BY
SAMUEL E. MOFFETT

NEW AND REVISED EDITION

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION.

Except for the final chapter and the correction of a few verbal slips the following pages remain as they were written in 1894. I have left them purposely without alteration, notwithstanding the temptation to avail myself of the easy wisdom that follows the event, in order that the truth of the principles they set forth may be subjected to the test of experience, each reader making the application for himself, with the developments of the past three years for his guide.

S. E. M.

NEW YORK, August, 1897.

SUGGESTIONS ON GOVERNMENT.

CHAPTER I.

THE SOURCE OF POWER.

The American citizen is fond of calling himself a sovereign. As a rule, however, his only act of sovereignty is that of deciding which of two bosses shall rule over him. When the two bosses are privately in partnership, as they often are, the principle of independent self-government, as we practice it, is carried to its logical limit.

The first requisite to a thorough reform in American politics is the restoration of close contact between the individual citizen and the agents whom he selects to conduct his public affairs. Everything depends upon that. We often talk about the advantages of managing the Government on business principles, but no attempt has yet been made in this country to carry out the idea to its natural conclusion. Municipal reformers have imagined that they were returning to business principles when they advocated the concentration of executive power in a mayor elected for two years, and of legislative power in a council elected for the same period, and subject to the mayor's veto. To comprehend the

business-like nature of this arrangement it is sufficient to imagine it transferred to the affairs of a private establishment. We may suppose the owner of a great dry-goods house saying to his manager: "You are to have the absolute control of the business for two years, except when a new policy is to be adopted, and then you will have the assistance of a dozen clerks. I shall keep my eye on you, and if I see you wasting my money or tangling up my affairs, I shall beg you to stop. You are under no obligation to pay any attention to my wishes, but, if you persist in wrecking the business, I may get a new manager when your two years are up, if you have left anything to manage."

The first principle of business is that the proprietor shall have, not merely the right of reviewing the actions of his employes at fixed intervals, but absolute control of them all the time. This should also be recognized as the first principle of sensible politics.

But how is the individual voter, who is the political proprietor, to exercise his right of regular control over his servants? He must do it through a legal organization, and the best form of organization for the purpose is the popular assembly. The ancient Teutonic *folkmoet* is still the basis upon which a thoroughly trustworthy government must rest. All students of our institutions unite in commending the admirable workings of the New England town meeting, but they do not seem to realize the fact that the principle of the town meeting is not bounded by the needs of a rural community, but is one of universal

application. This truth has been more nearly recognized by Mr. Albert Stickney than by any other writer with whom I am familiar, and I wish at the outset to acknowledge my obligations to his works for ideas on this subject, which have been of infinite service to me, and of which I have not hesitated to make free use. But even Mr. Stickney, in his luminous exposition of the value of the public meeting as the primary organ of sovereignty, falls short of appreciating its full possibilities. He limits the work of the local assembly to local matters, and contemplates an irrevocable delegation of the power of the people to representative bodies; and he confides a more implicit trust in these bodies than there is any reason to believe they deserve, or would deserve, even under an ideal method of election. The people in their primary assemblies should not only be the ultimate source of power, but its permanent depository. They should be able to check and guide the proceedings of their executive and legislative servants at every stage.

The world has never yet had an opportunity to see what a scientifically organized system of government, regulated by public meeting, can accomplish, and yet it has witnessed some amazingly successful results, even with the imperfect methods hitherto in vogue. The Athenian Assembly was too vast for anything like real deliberation; the New England town meeting tries to do a year's business in one day, and the Swiss Landesgemeinde combines both of these disadvantages. Excellent work on democratic lines is done by village communities in