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FUNDAMENTAL POLITICAL PRINCIPLES
APPLIET TO MUNICIPAL GOVERMENT**

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APPLIED TO MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT**

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EVANS UNIVERSITY PRIZE ORATIONS

BY

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SOME FUNDAMENTAL POLITICAL PRINCIPLES APPLIED
TO MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT*

By Samuel Peterson, Ph. D., D. C. L., Adjunct Professor of Political
Science, The University of Texas.

"There is no denying that the government of cities is the one conspicuous failure of the United States." These words were written by Prof. James Bryce, the greatest of all students and critics of American political institutions; and although it is difficult—I may say impossible—for an American to really acknowledge failure, I think all are at least agreed that city government in the United States has not been a conspicuous success. At any rate, we never include our cities when we boast to Europeans of our political institutions.

However, whatever may be said as to failure or success, there is evidently something wrong. If there were municipal evils in only a few places here and there, and only at intervals or occasionally, there would be little cause for concern. But when we find these evils from Boston to San Francisco, from Minneapolis to New Orleans, when we find them persisting year after year, when we find them in country towns as well as in manufacturing and commercial centers, when we find them not in some one part, but in all parts of the municipal organization, and adjusting themselves seemingly to every turn and condition, the conclusion is absolutely forced upon us that there is something wrong, and radically wrong.

And yet, at the same time, there is among the people generally the greatest indefiniteness and bewilderment as to what the real, ultimate trouble is. We know the evils well enough—corruption and inefficiency; we know them, not merely in a general way, but we know the details even unto satiety. We know the how and when and where, but as regards the why there are few that have traced the evils beyond individual human ignorance and human greed. Few have traced them back into the social conditions and political organization and told us really why. The question is not why are some men corrupt or inefficient—we know that, but we also know that the great majority of men are not; if they were, we might as well cease our efforts and simply pray the Lord to hurry along the millennium. But the question is, why is it that inefficient or corrupt

*This paper was written with Texas municipalities most prominently in mind.

men are elected to municipal offices, or, if men are elected who have always been efficient and honest in private affairs, why are they so often inefficient and corrupt in municipal office? Certainly a majority of the people do not wish corruption and inefficiency in municipal matters; then, why do they exist?

At the same time let me call attention to a remarkable contrast. In the national system of government we have a Constitution admired by foreigners and revered by our own people—a document declared to be the most perfect work wrought by the minds of men in the realm of politics. So far as the organization of the government is concerned, the Constitution has stood unchanged through all the changes and vicissitudes of a hundred and seventeen years, during which time the population has grown from four to eighty millions, the area has doubled, and the arts and sciences have transformed the conditions of civilized life and activity. Contrast the above attitude with that towards our city charters—our municipal constitutions—all over this country: dissatisfaction, criticism and amendment, not only occasionally and in minor points, but frequently, and often of the most radical character as regards the form of organization, the election of officers, and the distribution of powers.

Considering all this it would seem to be quite time to make a most careful examination of the subject of city government, with a view to a determination of the fundamental principles lying at its base, and of their practical application. During the past ten years great progress has been made in this direction, so that a statement and discussion of principles is now possible such as would have been impossible a few years ago.

In speaking of principles it is of course implied that there is a *science* of municipal government—that there are positive forces at work operating under universal natural laws, such that, if the government is not organized in harmony with these laws, there will be a tendency towards unsatisfactory or bad results. Now, I suppose if one should suggest to the average citizen that there is such a thing as a science of municipal government, that there are fundamental principles, like the law of gravitation in physics, which must be obeyed in order to secure good results, he would probably look perplexed or smile with incredulity. He would probably admit a belief in fundamental principles applying to National and even State government—general rules regarding the organization of the government and the conduct of its affairs, such as the separation of

the executive, legislative, and judicial functions, and the character of the bodies to which each should be entrusted. But that municipal government is within the range of scientific treatment—that such principles are applicable to it—would probably be strange doctrine to the average citizen. To his mind good ordinary common-sense furnishes all the theory necessary in city affairs. And it is well known that although a man may be prepared to admit that some one else is more learned, more able, and even more honest, better looking and smarter than himself, he will never admit that there breathes a soul with any more common-sense.

Notice that fundamental principles have been worked out and applied in National and State government, but not in municipal government. It would seem at least plausible that there should be some connection of cause and effect between these facts and the general satisfaction with the former governments, and the general dissatisfaction with the latter. It would also seem at least plausible that municipal governments should be planned and organized along the lines of basic political principles, worked out by study and experience as in the case of National and State governments.

However, this alone is not sufficient. No matter how perfect the organization, how true to principle, if the people themselves are ignorant of the proper operation of the government the results will usually be unsatisfactory. The people must know what sort of government they ought to have, both in scientific organization and in practical working. If a man knows nothing whatever about art it is very doubtful if he ever gets hold of anything artistic without assistance; if he does not know a masterpiece from a chromo he is more likely to get hold of the latter than the former. If a man who had never seen a deer, or a picture or description of one, should set out to hunt one, he would be more likely to return with a jack-rabbit than with a deer. If men do not know what sort of government they ought to have, is it reasonable to expect them to secure it? The Russian government is no worse today than it was seventy-five or a hundred years ago, and yet now there are clamorings and dissatisfaction where then was peace and quiet. Why? Simply because since then the people of Russia have learned from other nations something of what a government ought to be—that a government, if it is nothing else, should at least be constitutional and have a representative body—and they are clamoring for these reforms.

Now, in regard to municipal governments, there is in this country no tried, settled and approved body of opinion as to what these governments

ought to be and how they ought to be run. There is the greatest confusion of executive and legislative functions in both the form of the government and in its practical operation. (This applies also to the judicial function so far as it is exercised under city charters, the mayor being often *ex officio* a magistrate; however, the judicial functions entrusted to municipal governments are rather insignificant, and may be neglected in this discussion.) There is also an indefiniteness as to what is proper and what improper on the part of officials—what the people have a right to expect and demand in the performance of official duties. For example, a corporation applies to the council for a franchise; there are among the people no definite ideas as to what should be its character and terms, and consequently the members of the council in making the grant are free to carry out their own personal desires, or yield to temptation. If the people only knew what should be the form of the government, and what they are entitled to in the performance of its functions, there would be no more complaint with municipal than there is with State and National governments.

In this country we denote our ideal of government by the term "democratic." By this we mean government by the people; and government by the people connotes government for the people. It is by the principle of democracy that we undertake to test the perfection of government, as regards both form and substance. Now, government by the people, if it means anything at all, must mean that the will of the people is carried into effect. And this is absolutely impossible if the people have no will to be carried into effect; something cannot be made out of nothing. Just so far as the people know what they want can their wills be carried into effect; just so far and no farther is democracy a possibility. In other words, democracy is absolutely impossible except in so far as there is intelligence among the people, a knowledge of what they ought to have in the way of government.

With this in mind let us contrast with our National and State governments those of Colombia and Venezuela, where they have democracy chiefly in name and stratocracy in fact, where they have corruption and inefficiency in spite of patriotism and other virtues. The chief condition which gives rise to misgovernment is clearly the ignorance of the people, who do not know what they ought to have in the way of government.

And notice the striking parallel in governmental affairs between these South American republics and our cities, in which we have bossism instead of democracy, and corruption and inefficiency instead of official

integrity and efficiency. Bossism is the absolute antithesis of democracy. It means carrying out the will, not of the people, but of the boss. It flourishes in popular ignorance, and disappears with increasing popular intelligence as naturally as night gives way before the sun. The people do not yet understand satisfactorily the principles and proper operation of municipal government; they do not yet know what they ought to expect as regards its form and character. If they only had clear and positive ideas as to what ought to be done and how it ought to be done, there would be comparatively little difficulty in having their wills carried into effect—in having democracy—in municipal government.

I wish to insist upon this point that democracy or democratic government is not a simple matter of wanting a thing, and—presto! you have it. Some men seem to think that a people can have democracy, and just as much or as little as they see fit, by merely willing it. If this were true it would stand alone in the realm of human endeavor as the making of something out of nothing. Men cannot get science, or art, or even religion, by merely wishing for it, and certainly not democracy. It requires time and effort, and it comes as a gradual growth.

The present condition of affairs in American cities is not a matter of chance; it is the product of historical causes. Remember that the antecedents of democracy in National and State government go far back into the colonial period; not only did the colonists learn democracy by experience in the colonial legislatures, but at the same time they were so situated as to learn invaluable lessons from the struggles of parliament against royal prerogative. Then look at our cities, and consider that they have come into existence, such as they are in nature today, within a century. The city of today, looking at it not only as an aggregation of houses and human beings, but furthermore as an organism with functions and activities, is quite a different institution from the city of a hundred years ago. In 1790 only 3 1-2 per cent of the entire population of the United States lived in cities of 8,000 and over; in 1900 the percentage was 33, and today one-half of the people dwell within corporate limits and are concerned with municipal government. But still more important is the increase in municipal activities, indicated by the fact that while a city of 100,000 in 1810 spent one dollar annually per capita, a city of the same population will now spend from ten to twenty dollars, and larger cities more. Consider also the introduction of street railways, gas-works, electric light and power plants, and telephones, as well as the extraordinary development of water-works, sewerage, paving, parks, public schools and libraries, and police, fire