

**CITY GOVERNMENT IN THE  
UNITED STATES; WITH A  
CHAPTER ON THE GREATER  
NEW YORK CHARTER OF 1897**

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City government in the United States; With a Chapter on the Greater New York Charter of 1897  
by Alfred R. Conkling

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# CITY GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

WITH A CHAPTER ON THE  
GREATER NEW YORK CHARTER OF 1897

BY

ALFRED R. CONKLING

FORMERLY ALDERMAN OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
AND MEMBER OF ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK

"Municipal Government is Business, not Politics"

*Motto of People's Municipal League of New York, 1890*

"The City for the People"

*Motto of the Citizens' Union of New York, 1897*

THIRD EDITION, REVISED

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D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

1897

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1897

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TO THE  
FOUNDERS OF THE CITY CLUB OF NEW YORK,  
WHOSE ZEALOUS DEVOTION TO THE CAUSE OF GOOD GOVERNMENT  
IS HEARTILY APPRECIATED BY ALL PUBLIC-SPIRITED CITIZENS,  
THESE PAGES ARE SINCERELY INSCRIBED.

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*Original Collection*

## PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION.

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IN preparing a third edition, I have added a chapter on the charter for the Greater New York as enacted in 1897. The practical working of this charter will, I think, be watched with intense interest by municipal reformers throughout the United States.

The idea of nonpartisan or businesslike municipal government is becoming popular, and in some cities public sentiment for good government has been so strong that citizens, irrespective of party ties, have united to defeat the corrupt political rings that had long plundered these municipalities. Recent examples are Baltimore, New Orleans, and Galveston.

The progress of municipal reform is shown by the large number of associations that have been organized to promote it. In January, 1894, the first national conference for good city government was held in Philadelphia. Four months later the National Municipal League was organized in the city of New York. In December, 1894, the second national conference for good city government was held at Minneapolis. The first annual meeting of the National Municipal League and the third



national conference took place at Cleveland in May, 1895. The next annual meeting was held at Baltimore in May, 1896; and the third annual meeting took place in May, 1897, at Louisville. The proceedings of the National Municipal League are published in book form, and these volumes are in great demand. Within three years there has been an enormous increase in the number of associations to promote good city government, and now about two hundred such clubs are in existence.

Popular interest in city reform is also shown in the constantly increasing literature of the subject and the general discussion of it in all the leading newspapers of the country.

A national convention of mayors, councilmen, and other city officials was held at Columbus, Ohio, from September 28 to October 1, 1897, and papers were read by representatives of cities in all parts of the United States.

It is obvious that the continuous discussion of all phases of the municipal problem can not fail to improve the government of our cities.

A. R. C.

NEW YORK, *October 1, 1897.*

## P R E F A C E .

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I PROPOSE to write a primer, as it were, of the science of city government. I wish to set citizens to thinking. Let them work out their own municipal destiny in the light of common sense and modern science.

There is, so far as I know, not one popular book in the English language on municipal government. Maurice Block's *Paris: Organisation Municipale* is a very entertaining book, written in a dialogue form, which enables any French child to understand the government of the beautiful French capital. English and American writers have discussed in book form every phase of political science except popular municipal government. This omission does not wholly account for the faults of city government in the United States; but, if intelligent men had studied in text-books the science of city government as they learn the principles of political economy in high schools and colleges, it is not too much to say that our cities would be better ruled.

It is said that "comparisons are odious," but every well-informed person must admit that in comparing American cities with those of the Old World we suffer by the comparison. Take, for example, the oldest large

cities in the United States—New York, Philadelphia and Brooklyn. No intelligent observer can deny that their governments are vastly inferior to those of London, Birmingham and Glasgow in Great Britain; or to Paris, Berlin and Vienna on the Continent.

Americans should be eager to learn from the cities and towns of older countries whenever they have anything to teach. In all branches of civic administration the local authorities of Berlin have been willing to learn from other cities in Europe, and to adopt whatever improvements they can apply to their own government. In many respects I think the American people may learn much from them, and I hope we shall soon follow their example.

There is in many cities such a suspicion attached to the ordinary city hall politicians that the better class of citizens do not wish to associate with them; and it will not be denied that most of the members of our City Councils are vastly inferior to those of the national Congress or even of the State Legislatures. It is the duty of good Americans to set about at once to obliterate the stigma that is attached to the word alderman. The agitation concerning the municipal problem is comparatively recent. The founders of this Government took no account of the cities. Now, as I explain in Chapter I, a third of our population reside in cities, and the four largest municipalities contain nearly one tenth of the population of the United States. The municipal problem is becoming a subject of absorbing interest, and is now receiving in the large cities more