

**CITY GOVERNMENT
IN
THE UNITED STATES**

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City Government in the United States by Alfred R. Conkling

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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

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1894



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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.

PREFACE.

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

attention perhaps than any other public question. It is a principle of government that a citizen must perform a certain amount of duty to his State, county, city or town. In certain cities of Europe municipal service is compulsory, and failure to perform it results in an increase of taxation.

I commend Chapter XVIII (on elections) to the careful attention of the reader, for good municipal government must rest upon good election laws strictly enforced. At this moment the unsolved problem of "home rule" is under discussion by the Convention to revise the Constitution of New York, and it seems as if the principle will be recognized. But it goes without saying that a city is not ruled by its charter, and unless better men serve in our city halls, home-rule principles and new charters will be of little avail.

In the preparation of this volume I have received much assistance from the officials of our chief cities as well as from many personal friends. I desire to record my grateful sense of obligation to my friend, Mr. Lewis L. Delafield, of the New York bar. My thanks are also due to the following gentlemen: Hon. J. B. Eastis, U. S. Ambassador to France; Hon. George F. Parker, U. S. Consul at Birmingham; the late Hon. William H. Edwards, U. S. Consul at Berlin; Hon. Allen B. Morse, U. S. Consul at Glasgow; Hon. William K. Ackerman, Comptroller of Chicago; Hon. Ferdinand C. Latrobe, Mayor of Baltimore; Hon. Edwin S. Stuart, Mayor of Philadelphia; Hon. Charles A. Schieren, Mayor of Brooklyn; Hon. Nathan Matthews, Jr.,