

CHAPTER V

THE AMERICAN CITY—ITS SUCCESS AND ITS FAILURES

THE city is assumed to be our most conspicuous political failure. Municipal office has rarely attracted men of conspicuous ability. There is no permanence of tenure in the higher offices and no provision for the expert. We have had few municipal standards and few conspicuous administrations. There has been little thought of beauty or comfort; little planning for the future. The boss and privileged interests have controlled the party and, through the party, the city itself. In addition, up to very recently the spoils system has prevailed in the appointment of employees whose allegiance has been to the person who appointed them rather than to the city itself. As a consequence there has been much inefficiency and dishonesty. These are some of the more obvious failures of our cities.

The Personal Interpretation of the City.

Three explanations are usually offered for these conditions. They are: first, the indifference of the voter; second, our unyielding partisanship in city elections; and third, the absorption of the people in material pursuits, in trade, commerce, and money-getting. It is a common saying that we get as good government as we deserve.

This may be termed the personal interpretation of American politics. It ascribes our failures to the voters. And accepting this interpretation, reform has been sought in non-partisan movements, in the election of better men to office, in the rejection of one party and the substitution of another. Up to very recently our efforts have been directed toward improving the character of officials, and the rallying cries of reform have been: "Turn the rascals out," "A business men's administration," "Economy," "Efficiency," "Non-partisan government." This has been the motive of reform up to very recent years. We have treated the evil as personal rather than as institutional.

Inadequacy of Personal Interpretation.

None of these movements went to the heart of the problem. Not infrequently reform administrations disappointed their supporters and quite frequently, at the end of a term, they were turned out of office. Through experience, too, we gained a deeper insight into the underlying causes of our failures, while within the past few years magazine writers and criminal proceedings have shown that the trouble is not personal so much as institutional; that our cities are what they are because of obstacles which would make it difficult for any people to be well governed.

Before discussing these institutional conditions let us analyze the American city and ascertain to what extent the current estimate in which it is held is justified.

Some Examples of Efficiency.

And a survey of conditions shows that a number of cities have been honestly administered for years, and the number is rapidly increasing. A number, too, have been animated by big visions of social achievement, notably Cleveland, Toledo, and Los Angeles. To-day the complaint is not of dishonesty so much as of inefficiency and the absence of a programme of city building.

Some city departments, too, are in advance of those of any in the world. Our fire departments have long been efficient. Fire apparatus and the morale and training of men are generally of a high standard. Bad fires are not traceable to the fire department so much as to our building codes.

The free public library is distinctively an American institution. No country in the world has opened up branches and democratized the use of books and reading-rooms for circulation and research purposes as have we. Travelling libraries send books into the schools, clubs, and even to private individuals. Art exhibits are organized as well as story-telling classes for children. Library boards are generally filled with men and women who take pride in their work, the administration is free from politics, and the service rendered is of the most public-spirited kind. Commissions come from Europe to study our libraries, just as commissions from this country go to England and Germany to study departments in which these countries are most advanced. The free public library is one of America's contributions to municipi-

pal administration. It, possibly more than any other municipal function, is suggestive of what the American city can do when free to realize its ideals.

Our Public Schools.

The public schools of America are fairly comparable with those of any country. With us education is on a democratic basis and it has the virtues and faults of its ideals. And viewed from this, the democratic standpoint, our schools are probably as efficient as those of any other country. And there has been great improvement in recent years. Boards of education are commonly filled with men and women interested in the work, as are the higher educational positions. The appropriations for school buildings, for equipment, free school-books, gymnasiums, playgrounds, kindergartens, for the promotion of school hygiene, nurses, and health officers, are more generous and progressive than those of any other country unless it be Germany. Newer school buildings in a number of cities are lavishly provided with conveniences and comforts. They are equipped with roof-gardens, auditoriums, gymnasiums, lunch and dining rooms. There is provision for manual and technical training and the domestic sciences. In the Northern States, at least, public education has, for the most part, been of a relatively high order.

Other Examples of Efficiency.

The playground, too, is an American idea. It had its birth in this country and here it has developed most rapidly. No other country has utilized it as an educational and social force as have we. Nor has

any other country made as generous provision for parks as have the cities of America. The metropolitan park system of Boston is probably the most extensive of any in the world, while the parks of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cleveland, and a dozen other cities are comparable to those of lesser European capitals. Their building has awakened the enthusiasm of cities and competent experts have generally been employed.

When we consider that the schools, fire, library, and park departments involve approximately one half of the city's expenditure, it is evident that the American city is not all bad. And in some of its activities it is in advance of the world.

Taxation.

Most important of all is the fact that the American city collects its revenues more justly than do any of the cities of Europe. For we collect the bulk of our taxes from real estate and largely from land values. Property is assessed at its capital or selling value, upon which a tax rate is imposed, varying from 1 to 3 per cent., depending upon the ratio of assessed to actual value. Our cities collect their revenues from property rather than from tenants or consumers, as do many of the cities of Europe. And in so far as they tax land values they collect their revenues from the unearned increment of land, which is a social value traceable to the city's growth. That this is the correct basis of municipal taxation is coming to be recognized in other countries, for Germany has recently substituted in principle the American

method of assessing land, while more than five hundred communities in Great Britain have repeatedly petitioned Parliament for the right to levy their local rates and taxes upon land values, as is done in this country.¹

In none of these departments have we attained perfection, it is true. There is not that refinement of honesty and efficiency which obtains in Germany and England. We sadly need the expert in municipal affairs as well as permanence in the administrative staff. There is still too much politics, too great consideration of partisanship in appointments. In this as well as in the character of our employees the city reflects general political conditions as well as the extreme individualism of American life.

New Standards.

The last ten years have seen great improvement in all our cities. The criminal indictments and disclosures, the scrutiny of public affairs, the growth of the reform movement have greatly reduced the evils so common a few years ago. The character of officials is also improving, as is the efficiency and honesty of municipal work. All over the country new standards are being established, while recent charter changes have simplified machinery and made it easier to elect and retain competent men in office.

Bureaus of municipal research have been established in many cities. From 1906 to 1912 the citi-

¹ For a comparison of revenue from real estate and other sources in the leading cities of the world, see chapter XXII, "The City Budget."

zens of New York raised \$500,000 to enable the Bureau of Municipal Research of that city to place the city's business on an efficiency basis. Similar agencies have been organized in Philadelphia, Chicago, Cincinnati, Hoboken, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and elsewhere.

These bureaus have had three main objects:

First, the prevention of waste and the increase in the efficiency of employees.

Second, the study of the best means for doing public work, including studies of the city's health, recreation, police, and other departments.

Third, the promotion of new activities for the city to undertake.

Under the stimulus of these and other investigations, accounting systems have been standardized, methods of preparing the budget have been worked out, while units of cost have been established for various activities. It is claimed that the substitution of these methods in New York City has raised the standard of efficiency from possibly 40 per cent. to 65 per cent., leaving a large margin as yet unperfected. Waste continues in many cities in the supply departments, because of the failure to establish a purchasing bureau, while civil service rules make it possible for many incompetent men to remain in office, due to the difficulty of removal. This still further increases the wastefulness of the city.¹ But the most important advances have come through an

¹ For an exhaustive study of the progress of municipal efficiency, see *The New City Government*, by Henry Bruère.

awakened public sentiment and in cities animated by a democratic ideal like Cleveland, Toledo, Los Angeles, and many other cities of the West. It has come through an insistence on a different kind of city rather than on a mere improvement in the details of administration. Some of these changes will be described in later chapters.

Comparison with Other Countries.

Criticisms of the American city are often based upon a comparison with the cities of Europe, especially those of Germany and England, in which countries municipal administration has reached a high degree of perfection. But several things must be borne in mind in such a comparison. In the first place, the European city is old while the American city is a new thing. Cities like Berlin, Dresden, Munich, Düsseldorf, Cologne are, or were, all capital cities. Other cities were rich trading centres. Frankfort, Nuremberg, Hamburg, Bremen, Brussels, and Antwerp were free towns with a long municipal history. All of these cities were beautiful before the industrial city was born. They had traditions of orderliness and symmetry. There was a background of affection and veneration on the part of the people. The German city, too, has always engaged in many activities. It is a great landowner. It retained possession of its water-fronts. The railways are owned by the state and have not disfigured the city. They are built with regard to its beauty and its needs. Because of these conditions, industries are located on the outskirts. In addition, pop-

ulation is homogeneous. The suffrage is limited. There is a tradition of service to the state and a desire for official position. Municipal office commands the best talent the community offers.

Cities in the United States, on the other hand, are a product of the mill, the factory, and the railroad. There are no old centres or historical associations to be protected. We had no traditions of beauty, no standards of workmanship to be followed, and no experience to draw upon. Everything had to be done with little preparation for its doing. All these conditions should be borne in mind in any comparison of the cities of America with those of the continent of Europe.

A New Element in City Government.

In addition the American city is training great masses of people in the art of self-government. And this is one of the ends of government. With us the suffrage is a personal right. It is extended to all men and in some States to all women as well. It is not a property or a tax-paying privilege as it is in Germany and England. Universal suffrage with an untrained foreign-born population still further complicates our problem, although it is not the cause of our failures, as many people assume.

We are building our democracy on men and are developing our cities on a human rather than a property basis. This has been a temporary burden. It has probably delayed efficiency. But it involves self-government and a sense of responsibility on the part of the voters. And the achievement of this in

itself is even more to be desired than efficiency. For once municipal democracy is trained and organized it will realize itself, probably on a higher plane than in any of the cities of Europe.

Wherein Our Cities Fail.

If we analyze the city, department by department, we find that efficiency and honesty are to be found where it is to the interest of business to insist upon efficiency or where no special interests find it profitable to use the administration for special privileges. Business demands efficient fire protection and secures it. The parks, playgrounds, schools, and libraries rarely come in conflict with property or privileged interests, and in consequence they, too, are usually administered by men of honesty and ability. These departments have no privileges to grant or immunities to bestow.

Private Business and the City.

It is where the city deals with business interests that our conspicuous failures are found. It is here, too, that corruption is most prevalent. The council regulates and controls the public service corporation; it grants franchises; it is the business representative of the city. For this reason it is to the interest of business to control the council as well as the departmental chiefs that enforce its orders. The police, too, are often corrupt, and this, in turn, is largely traceable to an antecedent cause in the State laws which seek to regulate the liquor traffic and the excise question, with the strict enforcement of which laws a large part, possibly a majority, of the citizens

are not in sympathy. The health and building departments are also in conflict with interests which resent being regulated. The tenement-house laws in New York, as well as their enforcement, have been bitterly fought by owners. Attempts to make building ordinances more stringent are met by the opposition of the same interests. Dealers in milk, meat, and food supplies oppose pure-food acts or the attempt to regulate weights and measures. In addition, cities rarely have the right to build, repair, or clean their streets by direct labor. The work must be done by contract. This introduces the contractor into politics, who seeks to control the council and the director of public works because they award and supervise his contracts.

It is in these departments that the city has most signally failed. And the cause is to be found in conditions which breed such failure. And these conditions are traceable back to the powerlessness of the city and the many limitations placed upon it by the constitution and laws of the State.

Similar obstacles are to be found in the charter, in the machinery of nomination and election, in the long ballot, the confusion of State and local elections, which make it difficult to secure responsible and responsive servants. Not only is the city badly equipped to perform the powers entrusted to it, but the machinery of politics is adjusted to the ascendancy of the same interests that resent the control of the city. It is probable that any people would have failed had they been compelled to work under such

limitations as have been imposed on our cities—limitations which do not exist in the countries of Europe, where far greater freedom is allowed to the cities and much simpler charters are provided.

The Political Philosophy of America.

Back of these conditions and ultimately explaining them is the political philosophy of America, a philosophy that made no provision for great urban aggregations of people, for a highly complex life, for the control of powerful, impersonal corporations such as have come into being in recent years. From the very beginning we have been fearful of governmental interference of any kind. We accepted the political ideas which developed in England during the first half of the nineteenth century, of the Manchester, or *laissez-faire*, school, of which Adam Smith, Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill were the leading exponents. This philosophy said, in substance:

“The government should interfere with the individual as little as possible. Each man is the best judge of his own interests, and if each person is permitted to pursue his own business in his own way then the community interest, which is merely the aggregate of all individual interests, will be best promoted. Government is likely to be stupid, while government ownership is inefficient and unwarranted. The best possible society, the members of this school said, is a society in which practically all business and industry is left to individual enterprise, unhampered by the State.”¹

¹ For an excellent analysis of this philosophy, see *The New Democracy*, by Walter E. Weyl, chapter IV.

These principles fell in with the habits and instincts of a pioneer people, and, acting upon them, our fathers adopted State constitutions which limited in great detail the powers of the legislature, while the legislature, in turn, enacted laws which limited the powers of the city. These constitutions and laws were adopted when we were a rural people. They fitted into primitive conditions very well. But when the city appeared, with machine industry, new forms of transportation, huge aggregations of capital, undreamed of by the makers of the constitutions, a conscious city programme was impossible. For the city was powerless to control its own life or its own development. It was helpless under the legal bonds which enslaved it.

The Ascendancy of Private Rights.

As a consequence of its weakness, business interests became more powerful than the city. They usurped its powers and activities. That which had been a legitimate liberty in the country became license in the large town, a license which the city could not control. Municipal charters gave the city little power to engage in business undertakings. It could not regulate property. And by reason of their powerlessness and self-distrust, the cities gave away valuable franchises for water, gas, street-railway, and electric-lighting services. They permitted real-estate owners to lay out their property as they desired. Great tenements sprang up with inadequate air and light. The railways appropriated valuable water-fronts. Factories were built without any lim-

itations on their height and with inadequate provision for safety. The city had little power to regulate these interests. Its ability to protect the health and lives of the community was also inadequate. And when the city did acquire the needed authority the evils were frequently beyond repair.

Even to-day the community enjoys far less power than does the private corporation, much less power than does the individual. It is still, for the most part, helpless before the large municipal problems which confront it. Costly as has been the waste and dishonesty of our cities, it does not compare with the loss involved as a consequence of these institutional limitations.

Institutional Causes of Our Failures.

This negative, individualistic philosophy lies back of the constitutions and laws of the nation, the States, and the cities. It has moulded our thought and created a public opinion that sanctioned the ascendancy of private rights and the subordination of public rights. As it affected the city it found expression in legal limitations of various kinds of which the following are the most serious:

1. Lack of municipal freedom or home rule in the conduct of local affairs.
2. Unworkable city charters with many checks and balances and limitations on the power of officials.
3. Private ownership of the public service corporations which use the streets.
4. The ascendancy of private property in the planning and building of the city.

5. The regulation of the excise and saloon problem by State laws rather than by city ordinances.

It is to these conditions that the personal, ethical, and political conditions, which are generally assumed to be responsible for our failures, are for the most part traceable. Democracy has not been given a chance. It has been compelled to work against too many obstacles. That co-operation referred to in an earlier chapter,¹ which is of the very essence of the city, has been so far inhibited that it has not been permitted to develop. We have endeavored to build the city on individual lines and have failed. It could not have been otherwise.

The extent to which our cities have suffered from these legal and institutional limitations will be described in the following chapters.

Summary.

The American city does not wholly justify the bad repute in which it is held. Many municipal functions, such as education, fire protection, public libraries, and recreation, are administered as efficiently as in any cities in the world. And the improvement in all departments in recent years has been phenomenal. Graft and corruption are being rapidly eliminated, while new standards of efficiency are being established. This has been brought about by an awakened public sense, which has manifested itself in improved charters, the election of better men to office, and the more complete control of private interests.

The failure of our cities is not traceable to the

¹ See Chapter I.

people so much as to institutional evils, which have made good government difficult if not impossible. Constitutions and laws have reflected the individualistic philosophy which we inherited from England, which made it impossible for the cities to cope with the problems which modern industry created. We elevated the rights of private property above the rights of the State, and in so doing left the community powerless before the powerful private interests which have come into existence in recent years. This philosophy, in turn, was reflected in the lack of home rule, in unworkable city charters, and in the ascendancy of private property, while the attempt on the part of the State to regulate by law the excise and saloon evil added a problem which still further complicated the situation.

The evils of the American city are largely traceable to these conditions—conditions which do not inhere in the people so much as in the political environment in which they have been compelled to act.