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The Commission Form of City Government

The Old Form of City Government is as Far Behind the Times as the Ox Cart is Behind the Automobile.

Speech delivered by Hon. Lafayette Young in the senate of the United States, April 10, 1911:

Mr. President: If I had anticipated the long and interesting debate which has just taken place on the matter of newspaper circulation and postage, I should not have given notice of an intention to submit remarks today on a subject involving many phases of representative government.

The intelligent observer must have discovered during the past 25 years a constant and a general increase, not in the functions of government, but in the subdivisions and consequent division of authority among those who discharge those functions. I refer to the government of the states as well as to the government of the nation. In every state there are samples of complicated power. For instance, where a county contains a large city there is maintained both a county and a city government.

I believe that government is best which is most simple and direct and thus easily comprehended. The tendency in the business world has been for many years toward concentration, but in our political affairs we may be following the example of the Chinese Empire, where every educated man is supposed to be in the employ of the government.

Some years ago there came to the western country a distinguished railroad manager from Pennsylvania. He thought he could teach the western railroad managers how to run railroads. His road in the east had been hauling hard coal. The cars could be switched and jammed around the sidetracks without much danger of damage.

There have been times when, on account of this phase of political straitness, we have been compelled to advocate the election of candidates who were not fit for the office sought; and a few times we have, for the same reason, even supported unfit candidates. This, of course, not often, as it seldom happens that an absolutely unfit man is nominated for office, but it does sometimes occur.

Realizing that this over strict adherence to party is not justifiable under political conditions as they have obtained for some time past, the Democrat gives notice that in the future it will be conducted on independent Democratic lines as far as county and city affairs are concerned. In making this announcement the Democrat says:

This course will allow us, as occasion requires, to support the best man for the place in county and city campaigns without being liable to the accusation of breaking party faith, and we deem it the proper thing to do, having given it careful and profound consideration.

so afraid that our republic would be converted into a monarchy that they thought it necessary that every municipal government should imitate a republic in its form. Therefore every municipal government has been endowed with legislative authority. It is true it is limited, but notwithstanding that limitation every municipal government has been operated as if its main function were that of making laws. For this purpose every city building has what they call a city hall. In this city hall the legislative body meets, and the gentlemen from the various wards are there. The mayor presides, and all the formalities of a deliberative body are observed.

The gentleman from the Third ward addresses the presiding officer and the gallery, having in mind his intelligent constituents, as he frequently remarks, and also having in mind his own re-election. The alderman has been called a "false-alarm statesman," but he deceives a great many people. He is doubtless at his best when speaking in opposition to the abolition of any office. He regards such a move as one toward curbing the liberties of the people. His admiring constituents and his admiring contractors are prepared to applaud his utterances. In some states cities have been known to have two branches of a legislative body, an upper and a lower house. Yet their authority is so limited that they can neither add to nor subtract from the penalty of any offense against the laws. They can order sewers and sidewalks and designate what months wherein which dogs shall be muzzled. They can also prohibit chickens from running at large. The legislatures of states make the important laws, and practically every function discharged by a city council is executive rather than legislative. The claims are allowed by a committee on claims. The report is generally adopted without reading. The men who believe in committees on claims and who are willing to adopt the report of the same are radically opposed to reducing the number of members of the council, and they are especially opposed to the abolition of ward lines.

It happens in many cities that men who represent wards practically represent contractors. Having members of a city government from subdivisions of any nature is a mistake. Men are elected from wards who never could be elected from the city at large. Bad men are elected from bad wards and good men are elected from good wards. But the good men oftentimes receive as much criticism and as much blame for a bad city government as do those who are really responsible. Thus good men are deterred from becoming members of the city council because the general citizenship has been in the habit of dismissing all city councils as being inefficient, neglectful, if not actually corrupt. People have been deterred from undertaking to reform city government because they regard the task as too large ever to be successfully performed.

The principal error in municipal government of the old style has been in connecting politics with it. The average American connects politics with every form of government. But this has been especially true with municipal government. In many cities candidates for the municipal offices are nominated by political parties, which ought never to be the case. It ought not to matter what a man believes in regard to tariff or reciprocity. He may be as badly mistaken as the most radical insurgent, yet he might make a good member of a city government. Clays and Websters are not demanded to look after letting sewer contracts or putting down pavement. Municipal governments need men who know how to transact business in a businesslike way. Municipal governments do not need theorists nor dreamers. Men are wanted who know when contractors are properly doing their work.

In the old form of municipal government, where the responsibilities are so divided, it is impossible to find out who is to blame when anything goes wrong. To have a good government, those who do right should be praised and those who do wrong should be criticized. But the public has formed the habit of criticizing everybody and praising nobody. The public formed this plan because there has been vastly more for the critic than for the eulogist.

The public is scarcely informed as to the never-ending division of authority under the old plan of city government, with boards of public works, cemetery boards, library boards, fire and police boards, boards of review, boards of inspection, boards of public parks, boards having charge of the waterworks, and so forth. No man has yet made a list of the boards having to do with the old form of city government. Some months ago I was in a city in Michigan and having occasion to refer to the telephone directory I discovered four pages of the telephone book made up of those who had telephones for the use of the city. Every man had some authority or else he would not have had a telephone at the expense of the city. Such an array of official dignity and authority could not be found on this continent. If every man in that Michigan town having municipal authority should go to the world's fair on the same particular

day, there would not be men enough left at home in that town to milk the cows, provided they have not reached that age of intelligence where they let the women do the work. This is cited as a sample of the overgrown municipal system prevailing in most cities. This distribution of authority is not the result of one year, but of a century's growth. It has resulted in inefficiency and, in most cases, inaction. The same system has been provoking to the taxpayer, who has never been able to find out or locate the blame when anything has gone wrong. If any man in any modern city undertook to find out who was to blame about any minor happening in his local government, he would be old enough to be a Revolutionary pensioner before he discovered and located the blame.

In one western city it is related that at the time of high water a man whose home was on low ground had his cellar flooded with water. He resorted to the city government for relief. He called on the mayor, who was polite, but could not help him. He made the rounds of all the boards and commissions and finally came back to the board of public works and complained that he could get no relief. Having on a former visit related that the high water had drowned his chickens, a waggish member of the board of public works told him to go back home and go to raising ducks instead of chickens.

In many cases political machines have been formed and have been so strong that their destruction has seemed impossible. The municipal machine has been the "mother" in the municipal vinegar.

The American people have been eager to correct political ills far away, but have been neglecting the ills immediately around them. In the year 1907 we adopted in the city of Des Moines, where I live, a simplified form of city government. It consists of five trustees, or commissioners, elected by the entire city at one election, each for a two year term and without any ward lines. This has been called the Des Moines plan of city government. The idea originated at Galveston, Tex. The people of Galveston, in their distress after their great calamity, had to have a simplified form of city government. Their affairs were too complicated for the old form. It is a strange fact that a few men can do successfully what a large number of men are unable to do. For instance, we often discover that a receiver appointed by the courts can make a business successful, the very business that a large number of stockholders had failed in. The Des Moines plan, while evolved from Galveston, is greatly improved and seems to us quite complete. The five commissioners have power to elect all the other city officers. They select the auditor, clerk, treasurer, city solicitor, police judge, and so forth. The people hold these five men responsible for the city government. They do not go to their subordinates when things go wrong, they go to the commissioners direct, or the commissioner. The idea in the Des Moines plan has been concentration of power and concentration of responsibility. We are building a city building which shall not have a legislative chamber in it. We have abolished party politics. We have, as near as may be, established a business government. The people are backing the commissioners in every good thing. Publicity is a main factor. Notice must be given before any ordinance is passed, but we have but few ordinances. We have cleaner streets, better pavements, and in all respects we have a better governed city. A great move is made forward when partisan politics is abolished. The commissioners are chosen at a nonpartisan primary. The ten receiving the highest number of votes are voted for at the polls. Five of these are elected. One of the number is called mayor. However, he has no more authority than his associates. Each commissioner is the head of a department by mutual agreement. The commissioners give their whole time to work and are on duty during business hours. We have the initiative, referendum, and recall for any of the commissioners, but not for any of their subordinates. None of these features of the charter have been used. I would not favor the recall in an organization so large as a state. I have never observed the workings of the initiative and referendum in a state. I am much opposed to the recall which applied to the judiciary. Such a restriction would embarrass an honest judge and do no particular good with one who did not desire to do right. All candidates for commissioner must publish an account of their campaign expenditures, and there can be no promises made for offices to be distributed.

In regard to the recall as applied to the judiciary, I would like to ask what would become of the former decisions of such a discredited judge? Mr. Heyburn: Mr. President, I wish to ask the Senator from Iowa a question. The Presiding Officer: Does the Senator from Iowa yield to the Senator from Idaho? Mr. Young: Yes. Mr. Heyburn: Do you have municipal judges who could be recalled? Mr. Young: No sir. These five men who compose the board of commis-

sioners are selected by the people, and they select the judge. The recall applies only to those who are elected. Mr. Heyburn: You elect judges in your municipality? Mr. Young: No sir; not in the city. Every official, every judge, attorney, auditor, treasurer are appointed by the commission. Mr. Heyburn: And they can be recalled? Mr. Young: No sir. Mr. Heyburn: You could recall the power that created them, but you could not recall the creature created? Mr. Young: Certainly, we could recall the commission. At the conclusion of my remarks I shall insert the Des Moines charter, under which our municipality operates. Mr. President, I am a mechanic. In years gone by the upper part of every building used for manufacturing was filled with shafting and belting. These were for the distribution of power. The engineer and fireman worked longer hours than anybody else to take care of this belting and shafting. It took 40 per cent of all the fuel to run the idle shafting and belting without turning a single machine. All the shafting had to run or none of it. Now every modern factory runs its machines with separately connected power, and when one machine only is running expenses are cut down accordingly. Why should not the improvements in the political world be kept abreast with the improvements in the mechanical world? The useless offices represent the pulleys and shafting of the political machines. Forty per cent of the public money is spent in maintaining this useless expense. Why not reduce it? This is the purpose of the Des Moines plan.

There is not a great railway enterprise in America that could operate for one year if it were conducted with as little system and with as many independent heads as characterize the average city government of the old plan, with ward aldermen and all the old machinery. It is pleasant to know that American people are giving some attention to reforms in municipal governments. It is satisfying to know that nearly 100 American cities have adopted the commission form of government. This form of government puts the control closely into the hands of the people. Some men who have considered this subject have suggested that the commissioners ought not to be elected or retired at the same time. But, upon second thought, this will be found to be a virtue. When the people of a given city are all awakened at one time, they can make a revolution at one election. Revolutions in municipal affairs in many cities have never been attempted because of their seeming impossibility. Hunters in the west years ago delighted to have preairie chickens sit in a row on the top of a rail fence so that the hunter could kill a number of them with one shot. This commission form of government, with two-year terms, figuratively speaking, puts the five commissioners on the top rail of the municipal fence to be swept off at one ballot by the voter. When people find that it is possible to produce a change in the entire city government at one election, they will take hope and attempt to act. Great men are not required to manage the affairs of a city. They need not be familiar with Greek and Roman history. They may not be able to name many of the constellations but they ought to be able to take care of small details. They ought to keep a city clean. They ought to see that sidewalks and pavements are in repair. These things we have accomplished in Des Moines. We have not attempted to reduce taxation because that is hard to do in a growing city. But we do say we have the best government we have had in 50 years. Des Moines has been under the commission system about three years, and there has not been a voice raised in favor of going back to the old system. There is no complaint that the city government has been taken out of the hands of the people. I think the old form of city government is as far behind the times as the ox cart is behind the automobile.

Keokuk and Hamilton Water Power. Quincy Whig: The Whig gives a page this morning to the Keokuk and Hamilton water power project, that is now well under way. The people in this section of the country should take particular interest in this movement, because it means an opening of a new era, when it comes to the cost of electricity for commercial purposes.

There is no question as to the feasibility of the project, because the best men in the world, financially, are behind it. The work is going on so rapidly that it will not be long until the Whig will have to give another page of its Sunday edition, so that the people may see for themselves what is being done. When we stop to think that 200,000 horse power has been going to waste at Keokuk ever since that town was on the map, and that it is only in recent years that the men with money to invest have become interested, then we can see that the time has come for all of us to sit up and take notice of what our neighbors are doing. The water power development is not at Keokuk alone, but at Hamilton as well. Hamilton is directly across the river from Keokuk on the Illinois side, and her enterprising citizens have already awakened to the fact that Opportunity is knocking at her door. And opportunity is knocking at the door of every business man in Quincy, too. With the development of the water power we will get an interurban into Quincy, because

the cost of the horse power will be less by one-half than we could possibly expect it to be today. And Quincy will be benefited in other ways, too, rest assured of that. Quincy is going to go ahead within the next few years, in fact, she is moving along right now in the right direction. This is going to be the year that we do things, and while we are doing these things for the immediate present, we will look ahead a year or two and get ready to do greater things when the water power development up river is completed.

Muscatine's Disgrace. Cedar Rapids Republican: Muscatine finally reached a climax in its labor troubles. The importation of special policemen to protect the factories in operating with non-union workers precipitated the crisis Friday night. The sheriff was compelled to appeal to the governor for state help and the governor ordered four companies of the state guard to the scene of the troubles. Poor Muscatine has been all demoralized by these troubles. Three thousand workers have been in protracted idleness and there have been disturbances in business and social circles. Muscatine has been sorely beset and one sometimes feels like blaming the city collectively. Such strikes ought to be avoided nowadays, just as nations ought to avoid wars. They belong to an uncivilized period of American industrial life. Nowadays there ought to be a way for employers and employees to get along without such wastefulness. Both sides have already lost enough to make up many differences. There is not only the time lost, but the prestige lost. It will take Muscatine many years to recover from such an unpleasantness. It cripples the town in every way. It destroys confidence in a community as a seat for industries. Factories looking for new locations will hardly think well of Muscatine. Laboring elements are debauched by such protracted disturbances. Arbitration is the modern way of settling differences. It means the finding of some middle ground upon which all can meet. There must always be such a ground, and men will seek for it diligently and sincerely. It can not be found if both sides are merely sparring for advantages.

Uv Cors. In the annual catalogue of the Iowa State Teachers' college the word office is spelled o-f-f-i-s. When an institution for the training of teachers lends itself to that sort of thing, what can be expected of the children in the

little white school house on the prairie?—Keokuk Gate City. Their korjal, harty and unannointed approbation, of course.—Burlington Hawk-Eye. Vinton Times, Dem.: Let all hope that those who know how will pray that the Democrats in congress will not make damphoons of themselves. A Democratic fool always looks a whole lot bigger than any other kind of a fool. Maybe it's because we expect so much more of him.

The Sound Sleep of Good Health. Can not be over estimated and any ailment that prevents it is a menace to health. J. L. Southers, Eau Claire, Wis., says: "I have been unable to sleep soundly nights, because of pains across my back and soreness of my kidneys. My appetite was very poor and my general condition was much run down. I have been taking Foley Kidney Pills but a short time and now sleep as sound as a rock, my general condition is greatly improved, and I know that Foley Kidney Pills have cured me." Wilkinson & Co.

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