

## A RESUME OF THE BATTLE FOR MUNICIPAL REFORM, 1875-1900\*

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### ABSTRACT

Charles A. Dana of the *Sun* used to ridicule feeble reform efforts, dubbing them "the infantile blubber of the goo-goos", but as one pieces together the scattered details of the battle for municipal reform from 1875-1900, one is prompted to conclude that the blubber, futile as it often seemed, was doubtless a normal and inevitable precursor of what finally became, in the new century, a studied pronouncement of decent standards in municipal government. Amateur experiments are common forerunners of scientific advances. The amateur reformers of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, though handicapped by their own shortsightedness, deserve credit for the first general housecleaning in city affairs. Their grim struggle for elementary decency in city government opened the door for the later and more mature approach to municipal administration.

These amateurs are not to be blamed for their inefficiency, but rather excused. The problem was new; few people understood its depth. What the cities needed was no one specific cure but a whole readjustment of civic and political standards to the new conditions of life. With the industrialization that followed the Civil War there had come a rapid growth in city population, an extravagant program of public improvements, and a spirit of materialism in a citizenry preoccupied with the exploitation of a continent. The old framework of city government was not strong enough to carry the new burden and became increasingly helpless as excessive state interference grew more and more intolerable. Into the gap left by an indifferent electorate and a weak charter that failed to fix responsibility stepped the political boss and his machine, ready to fill their pockets as donors of appointments and allies of Big Business.

In the face of such conditions as these began the agitation for reform. A machine, once in power, was difficult to dislodge. Politicians could devise tricks for winning votes faster than the public conscience could counteract them. Citizens were usually aroused to fight because of the obvious need for better administration. First they struggled to break the power of machine politics by exposing corrupt officials and instituting election and civil service reforms. Then they sought to lower the cost of administration by debt limitation and budgeting. Later they endeavored to achieve civic betterment through law enforcement, sanitary improvements, and educational advancement.

As functions multiplied and the inadequacy of the old council form of government came into glaring evidence, the new charters tended to increase the power and responsibility of the mayor. The rise of a better type of executive was one of the greatest accomplishments of the period. The fight against state interference, however, was only partially achieved. In the West came considerable progress in this field, but in 1900 only four states had granted complete home rule to their cities.

The strength of boss rule and the grip of organized wealth made early reform efforts look hopelessly weak and ineffectual. Reform groups, quick

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to strike at isolated evils but slow to recognize the fundamental causes of city failure, relied upon fitful and spasmodic rebellion rather than upon steady pressure. It was characteristic of early local reformers to spend much of their energy in stirring up excitement, calling great mass meetings, bemoaning political abuses, hailing a new era of good government, and then wondering which way to turn. When the first enthusiasm subsided, there was nothing left. They failed to see that real reforms move slowly, by constant, steady effort. There was, moreover, a regrettable lack of co-ordination and co-operation in the whole movement. The same problem, the same resistance, the same mistakes occurred again and again, but no one seemed to profit by the lessons.

Not until 1890 did the reform movement become a positive force in the adjustment of the municipal problem. Then, out of the mass of scattered experiences, there emerged material for analysis; local government became a laboratory of political and social experimentation. The importance of the founding of the National Municipal League in 1894 lies in the fact that it signified the rising strength of public opinion and the recognition of a new reform method. It is significant that in the same year the University of Pennsylvania created the first American lectureship in municipal government. Public school "Civics" began to shift its emphasis from national to local issues.

The studied analysis of the evils of city government was a new approach. It was the most enduring achievement of the reform era. The first feverish housecleaning had left the cities by no means immaculate, but at least clean enough for men to begin to think about efficiency, education, and beautification. Thus, while the battle for municipal reform from 1875 to 1900 could claim few decisive victories, it gave rise to a moral awakening of the masses, a new civic consciousness, and a science of municipal government. The "blubber of the goo-goo" evolved into the clearer voice of a new century.