

**THE PROBLEM OF MUNICIPAL
GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED STATES.
AN ADDRESS GIVEN BEFORE
THE HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL
SCIENCE ASSOCIATION OF CORNELL
UNIVERSITY, MARCH 16, 1887**

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The problem of municipal government in the United States. An address given before the Historical and political science association of Cornell university, March 16, 1887 by Seth Low

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THE PROBLEM OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT IN THE UNITED STATES.

Municipal Government, from its nature, is a problem everywhere. All the tendencies of the times are sending the population of the fields into the cities, not alone in this country, but in all civilized lands. Everywhere this aggregation of population besets the authorities of cities with problems of one kind or another. The question of an economical and healthful disposition of garbage, which solves itself so readily in the country, or in small villages, in the great city becomes a problem difficult in proportion to the size of the city. The difficulties of it continue to increase with the city's growth; and what is true of that is true of the simplest matters of daily life. To procure water for a household is an easy thing, but to supply a large city with water, always is a most costly thing, and oftentimes is attended with the greatest difficulty. The questions that arise in connection with it are questions that never would be thought of until the multiplication table brings them into prominent view. Not long ago the Governor of one of our States told me of a novel point that had been raised against a city's water supply. The outlying towns, whose factories depended upon water power, while willing to admit that the city was entitled to water for drinking purposes, questioned the right to draw water from its natural channels for manufacturing purposes within the city. The problem of supplying a city with water is great enough, but the problem of meeting a city's waste of water, except by meters, never has been solved. Such questions as these, while legitimately a part of the problem of city government, are in no way peculiar to Municipal Government in the United States. The problem which we are asked to

consider to-night is distinctively a political one. We are asked to consider the peculiar difficulties attaching to the effort to secure good city government under popular institutions. In a general way, we are apt to believe that if these institutions have broken down anywhere, they have broken down in cities. For myself, I am not willing to admit that they have broken down completely even there; but it certainly is true that the failures in city government in the United States have been grave enough to justify a most careful search for the cause of these failures and for the remedy. Before committing ourselves to this enquiry it will be well, if possible, to obtain a just idea of the extent to which failure is fairly chargeable to our institutions.

It is not just to compare any of our cities, even the greatest of them, with the great cities of Europe. London, Paris and Berlin, for example, with which New York most often is compared, are the seats of National Government. They were cities when New York was an island inhabited only by savages. Many of their most splendid monuments and most useful works have been executed, in whole or in part, by the general government of the nation of which each is the capital. Berlin since 1870, it is true, has grown almost as rapidly as New York, but its growth has been the incoming of a homogeneous people. The city has not been the receptacle of a tide of emigration flowing from all parts of the world, bringing into the city a host speaking different languages, trained in foreign ideas, and not a homogeneous but a most heterogeneous multitude. Even London, vast as it is and cosmopolitan as it is, presents nothing like the confusion of tongues and variety of peoples which are to be heard and seen in New York. Paris, even more than London, is populated by a single people only. It is true that none of our other cities are perplexed with this especial problem to the same extent as New York, but all of them are compelled to face it in a degree sufficiently great to mark it as one of the peculiar elements of the problem of City Government in this country. It is not unfair to claim that it is a difficulty attaching to city govern-

ment here, which attaches to it in no city of Europe. This same influx of population has given rise to another peculiar difficulty in Municipal Government here. Cities, instead of being the growth of centuries, as they have been in Europe, with us are the growth of of decades. The City of Brooklyn and the City of Chicago have just turned their fifty years of municipal life. In these fifty years each has grown from a small settlement to be a city of 700,000 people or more. No city in Great Britain, except its vast metropolis, notwithstanding the centuries which have entered into their lives, is so large as either Brooklyn or Chicago. A growth so rapid as this means that everything which makes the city has to be created, as it were, out of nothing.

I referred a moment ago, to the wonderful growth of Berlin since 1870. It is, I think, the only city in Europe presenting anything like a parallel growth to that of our American cities. But Berlin in 1870 had been a city for hundreds of years. The Great Elector, and Frederick the Great, and his successors, had made it the pride of their reigns to beautify and ennoble Berlin. As a result, there was a nucleus in the city of great wealth, giving it at once the credit and the ability necessary to provide for the needs forced upon it by this unusual growth. But Brooklyn and Chicago had no such nucleus of wealth upon which to build their fortunes. They sprang, as it were, out of the very soil; and the same few years which have seen so large a population gather under one City Government, have seen each city supply itself with all the comforts and conveniences of life in these modern times. When one goes to Europe, the first matter to attract one's attention and to make him mourn the condition of things at home, are the streets. The uniformly good pavements, and the uniformly clean streets abroad, are the admiration and the envy of the dwellers in nearly all American cities. It often is charged against our cities that they fail conspicuously in these palpable respects. But it is forgotten that the era of good pavements and consequently of clean streets, in most of the European cities is less than thirty

years old. In Berlin, I believe, it dates from a period more recent than 1870. I would not exculpate our city officials from any fault justly chargeable to them in regard to the paving and cleaning of our streets; but in forming an estimate of what the true measure is of the break down in our political institutions in the government of cities, it is fair to bear in mind that if we do not yet equal European cities in these most desirable respects, the reason is to be found, in part, in the heavy obligations for permanent plant, forced upon our cities by their rapid growth. Time is an element in making a city as well as in the accomplishment of any other great purpose, and we must not charge to our institutions, failures that really spring from the shortness of time in which they have been at work. Indeed, I think it fairly may be claimed for our institutions, as exemplified in City Governments in the United States, that they have shown themselves equal in many ways to grapple with very great and very difficult problems. It is curious, I think, to travel along the border between the United States and Canada, and to note how, wherever one finds a house on the Canadian side, one finds a hamlet on this; where Canada boasts a village, on our side, one finds a town; where Canada grows into a town, upon the American side is a city. Partly no doubt, mostly perhaps, this is simply the vigorous life of the nation expressing itself, even at its boundaries. But I fancy also, this claim can be made, that our popular institutions lend themselves readily to the growth of cities, because the ability to provide the necessary comforts and conveniences of city life is within easy reach of the population. As a rule, it is not necessary, for instance, to convince a distant authority of the need for a sewer before it can be constructed; nor, can the objection of a few, who possibly hold the purse-strings, long decline to yield to the demands of the many.

In other words, our institutions, even in cities, lend themselves with wonderfully little friction to growth and development, and to the assimilation of new and strange populations. Our cities, as a whole, have a more abundant supply of wa-

ter than European cities, and they are much more enterprising in furnishing themselves with what abroad, might be called the luxuries of city life, but which here are so common as almost to be regarded as necessities. Especially is this true of every convenience involving the use of electricity. There are more telephone wires, for example, in New York and Brooklyn than in the whole United Kingdom. The problem of placing these wires under ground, therefore, to take another illustration of the difficulties of city government, is vastly greater than in any city abroad, because the multiplication of wires is so constant and at so rapid a rate, that as fast as some are placed beneath the surface, those which have been strung during the process seem as numerous as before the underground movement began. I speak of these things because it is important for us to define accurately wherein our failure does lie, in order that we may consider wisely what may be the remedy.

It is manifest that we must not assume that everything of which we justly complain in our cities is due to the failure of American institutions, expressing themselves in city life. While I have been thus careful to concede everything that may be urged in mitigation of conclusions unfavorable to our city governments, the fault with which they are justly chargeable is grave enough.

The struggle in city government in the United States, is not so much to secure the doing of a necessary thing, as it is to procure the doing of it economically, efficiently and honestly. It may be a hard word, but the struggle in city government at present, so far as I know, in every city, is to secure simple honesty on the part of its officials, as a whole, as towards the people. I do not mean that all city officials are personally dishonest, nor even that the majority of them are. It would be impossible to deny, in the presence of the recent developments in New York City, that a percentage of dishonest men do obtain positions of trust and influence in city governments. How large that percentage may be, it is idle to speculate. The difficulty is much more deeply rooted