PRINCIPLES AND METHODS
OF
MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION

BY

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To
the memory of
one whose kindly guidance
and generous help in early years,
no tribute of mine can ever repay, —
My Father

PREFACE

THIS volume deals with the actual management of municipal business, especially in the United States. It is intended to supplement the author's book on *The Government of American Cities*, which was published three years ago. Accordingly, it has to do with functions rather than with framework; its aim is to show how various city departments are organized, what work they have to do, and what problems they usually encounter in getting things done.

The subject is a large one, of course; and much has been written about it during the last dozen years. Nearly all of these writings, however, fall into two definite categories: either they are general surveys of the most elementary character, or they are technical treatises which cover in great detail some single branch of municipal work such as street paving, water supply, or waste disposal. Between these two extremes the present volume tries to steer a middle course. It does not attempt to touch upon every phase of city administration, yet the various chapters do include a substantial part of the entire field, and they endeavor to give the reader something more than a mere glimpse of how the problems of a modern city are being handled to-day.

It is to be remembered, however, that methods of municipal administration differ so widely from city to city and are so continually in process of change that generalizations are apt to be faulty or misleading. Yet a certain amount of generalizing there must be if busy citizens are

ever to be shown in a broad way just how the city's affairs are carried on. At any rate this book approaches the subject from the standpoint of one who is interested in municipal administration as a whole, and who believes that in all its varied branches there are underlying questions of policy, principle, and method which will never be settled right until public opinion is educated to the point of understanding them.

Grateful acknowledgment should be made to many kind friends, some of them experts of national reputation in their respective fields of administration, who have read the proof-sheets of the various chapters and have given me the benefit of their advice and criticism. For helpful suggestions given in this way I am indebted to my colleagues, Professors G. C. Whipple, J. S. Pray, and H. W. Holmes; also to Mr. Frederick Law Olmsted of Brookline, Mr. John Nolen of Cambridge, Mr. G. W. Tillson of Brooklyn, Mr. Leonard Metcalf of Boston, Mr. M. N. Baker of New York, Mr. F. H. Wentworth and Mr. G. H. McCaffrey of Boston, Mr. Raymond Fosdick of New York, Professor Clyde L. King of the University of Pennsylvania, Professor C. P. Huse of Boston University, and various others. To my good friend, Professor John A. Fairlie of the University of Illinois, I owe particular gratitude for frank and discriminating criticism, as well as for many suggestions that proved of great value to me. But no responsibility for errors or omissions in this book should be laid at any one's door but my own.

For those who wish to know more about any of the matters here discussed, the footnotes are intended to afford guidance. It has not been deemed necessary to put lists of further references at the end of each chapter because more useful bibliographical apparatus than I could hope to supply in this way is now within easy reach of every one interested.

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As usual, I am considerably indebted to my loyal co-workers, Mr. Joseph Wright, Miss Alice Holden, and Miss A. F. Rowe, for help in collecting material, in preparing the manuscript for the press, and in making the index.

WILLIAM BENNETT MUNRO.

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PRINCIPLES AND METHODS OF MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION

CHAPTER I

THE QUEST FOR EFFICIENCY

AMERICAN cities have made more progress in the direction of clean and efficient government within the last ten years than they were able to make during the preceding fifty. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century there were few of them which could not be likened, as was Dante's beloved Florence of six hundred years ago, to the sick man who could find no rest upon his couch but kept tossing from side to side in a fruitless effort to ease his pains. From one political party they turned to another, from one mayor who had proved capable but dishonest to another who would promptly demonstrate his honest incompetence, from committees to commissioners, from unpaid boards to paid officials, from one makeshift to another, as regularly as the years went by.

Recent municipal progress.

The annals of the past decade tell a different story. Two notable features have marked municipal development during these years, and another is already well in sight upon the horizon. The first of these is the radical simplification of governing machinery; the second is the progress of the efficiency movement, so called, involving the use of new administrative implements and the adoption of improved business methods. Finally, the spread of more accurate popular knowledge concerning the city's affairs promises to

Its notable features.

be at once the culmination of these reforms and the guarantee for their permanence.

1. The simplified charter.

Beginning with the Galveston experiment of 1900, our faith in municipal checks and balances has been steadily breaking down. The remarkable spread of the commission system is a proof of our shattered trust in an ancient formula. City charters have been everywhere simplified; the framework of city government has been adapted to the work which a municipality has to do. The machinery of local administration has been made intelligible, and that is the necessary first step in any movement which aims to establish a scheme of government genuinely based upon the advice and consent of the governed. No administration can ever be truly responsible to the voter until its structure and powers are made intelligible to him. The commission movement must be credited, let it be added, with far more than its direct and obvious results. To say that it has resulted in the adoption of a particular type of charter by two or three hundred cities is not to tell the whole tale. The salutary reaction of the commission propaganda upon the charter revisions of as many other cities is something which is none the less important although not so generally recognized. The whole thing is one of the most inspiring developments of our own generation, — this manifestation of the self-reliant way in which a democracy can do its own surgery when the cankers become acute.

2. The administrative reforms.

Important as all this pruning of charters has been, however, the results in the way of permanently improved administration would be disappointing were it not for the accompanying changes in the actual tools and methods of city business. This whole group of administrative alterations in mechanism, methods, and personnel, in official procedure, in budget-making and accounting, we have compendiously designated by some such phrase as "putting things upon an efficiency basis," or "giving the city a business administration." Our first genuine progress

in this direction, which began about 1905, was actuated chiefly by a desire to make the city a more effective agency of social betterment. The endeavor then made to get certain departments in the government of New York City upon a footing where they would measure up to the standards of private business concerns was not prompted by a desire to reduce expenditures or to decrease the city's tax rate. It was inspired by a feeling that public authority would prove the best coördinating force in any scheme of community welfare, and indeed the only one able to secure adequate results. It was the result of a conviction that, so long as the various city departments were allowed to pursue wasteful and inefficient methods in conducting their business, the community would continue to be deprived of what European countries have found to be the best means of getting a programme of social welfare into operation.[1] Official leadership, when it can be made efficient, is everywhere the best of all. In a word, the efficiency movement as applied to the American city had as its starting-point the idea of making the city administration a logical, effective, and customary instrument for accomplishing many things that civic organizations, groups of social workers, philanthropists, and other private agencies were trying to bring about by their well-meaning but altogether inadequate efforts.

What are the essentials of an efficient city administration?

The careful study of city administration will direct attention to several things that must be secured before any community can rest satisfied with the work of its public officials. No one of these essentials can be set down as inevitably more important than the others: they are interlocking factors. No one of them will of itself insure satisfactory municipal administration; but all of them combined, and all working in harmony, will do so if anything can.

The first essential of efficient administration is intelligent

[1] Henry Bruère, "Efficiency in City Government," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, xli. 3–22 (May, 1912).

I. An intelligent citizenship.

citizenship. In most discussions of municipal reform this is put last in the list, as if it were merely a by-product of charter overhauling or of changes in the methods of municipal book-keeping. That is getting at things from the wrong angle altogether. We may tinker our city charters and shorten our ballots till the crack of doom without making a real democracy out of an illiterate populace. Men cannot register their minds at the polls unless they have minds to register, and the voter who makes up his mind without information is no source of strength or wisdom to any government. If the people are right, their charters and administrative methods cannot be far wrong. On the other hand, if the masses of the electorate remain unguided, a prey of prejudice or inertia, the best of charters will not avail. It is all well enough to rally the people round the Golden Rule or the Ten Commandments if nothing more than the victory of reform at a single election is planned; but for persistent and firmly grounded success it is necessary that a citizen shall know more than a few platitudes about public affairs. It is not by wrathful attacks on the sordidness or the partisanship or the unworthy ideals of an existing city government that sound notions of administrative policy can ever be nurtured in the hearts and minds of the voters. It is rather by positive action, by efforts to develop their interest in those common and neutral matters, those humdrum data of routine civic life, — assessment methods, paving blocks, fire-service platoons, garbage incineration, and a long list of other such things, — which the average citizen would like to know something about and would learn if he only had a fair opportunity.

How fundamental it is.

We are often told that laws are not worth much unless public opinion is behind them, and this doctrine we have proved sound in practice. Why, then, should we be so prone to forget that a city charter is nothing more or less than a law, subject to the limitations of laws in general, and no more able to work regeneration than any other law is unless it

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has the vigorous sympathy of those among whom it is applied? The propulsive power in municipal reform, as in all other fields of civic improvement, must come from below. Without such impulse no improvement is likely to be more than transitory. The institutions of a democracy should generate their own motor power. We have heard much in late years of "an awakened public conscience" which has revolutionized the public affairs of this city or that; but these sudden awakenings have not, as a rule, brought us much more than a short spell of government by indignation. When popular wrath has subsided the relapse has come quite as suddenly as the awakening.

Why it is essential.

Our direct appeal should be to the heads, not to the consciences, of citizens. The civic conscience will not go to sleep if the eyes of the people are kept open. Neither in this country nor elsewhere will people steadily endure misgovernment if they know it. But it may be taken as axiomatic that they will not know it if left to inform themselves about it. They will set out for the polls as if they knew; they will let self-confidence take the place of knowledge. It has been abundantly proved by our experience that the voter who has his own business to mind will not mind the city's affairs also. He will leave that job to those who are paid to do it; and, under the conditions that exist in many American cities, these may mind the city's business very poorly without the voter's being much the wiser. Even such judgment as he may form is likely to be at best superficial, the result of a vicarious personal contact with this or that department of the city's service as he meets it. One citizen will judge the efficiency of city administration by the regularity with which the garbage vans come to his back door, another by the rapidity with which some relative has gained promotion in the police department, while a third will base his opinions upon nothing more tangible than newspaper gossip. This haphazard method of forming electoral judgment is of course unfair to men in public office,

who too often find that a policy which can be justified by every rule of sound business appears to draw ill-tempered criticism from many quarters.

Are administrative matters too technical?

The situation, however, is not unnatural. Municipal reformers have been dinning into our ears the doctrine that municipal administration in all its branches is so highly technical a matter that we should intrust it always to experts and leave them alone. What does the citizen know about street paving, sewage disposal, or fire prevention? What can he expect to know about these technical matters? Let him accordingly refrain from asserting his own opinions, which arise from ignorance, and let him take on faith the opinions of those who are qualified by education or experience to render them. Even men of broad information in many other fields, successful business and professional men, are inclined to talk as if a professed confidence in the expert quite justified a complacent ignorance as respects both principles and methods of public administration.

Too much stress laid upon experts.

Now, there are several serious objections to this attitude. In the first place, it assumes that the employment of experts in city administration obviates the need of educating the electorate to a proper comprehension of its administrative affairs. In a democracy this is a short-sighted and dangerous doctrine. Its inevitable result is to widen the gap between the electorate and the office-holder, whereas all sound responsible government rests upon the close linking of public opinion with public policy. The kinship of democracy is with intelligence and straight thinking, not with ignorance and mental lethargy. The citizen can no more throw all his civic responsibilities upon experts than the churchman can shift his quest for salvation upon the clergy. Whatever one may hear to the contrary, it is in fact far from being true that municipal administration has any more technical intricacies than religion; the greater part of what we call the city's problems are well within the grasp of the ordinary man if he will only seek to understand them.

Technical questions, it is true, arise daily in nearly every municipal department, but the things upon which efficiency depends can be mastered with very little trouble by the voter if they are properly set before him.

How may the electorate be educated?

By what means, then, may the average voter be brought to a more intelligent understanding of how the city's business is and should be done? By more publicity, is the answer one usually obtains to such a question. But genuine civic publicity involves two things — the compilation of facts and the getting of them into the minds of the voters. The first of these two undertakings — getting the facts of city administration into a form which the average layman can grasp — presents no difficulty when city departments have been properly organized with modern systems of record-keeping and accounting. Few American cities, it is true, have yet reached this stage. In the great majority of them the annual reports of city departments represent, in large part, a gross waste of time and printing. No one reads them; no one would understand them if he did. One may often look in vain through the folios of a water department's report, for example, to find out where the supply comes from or what it costs. I have studied a street superintendent's report a hundred pages long in a fruitless effort to learn what his city was paying per square yard for the pavements that it was putting down. The reorganization of administrative departments and the reform of municipal accounting, if it means anything, must surely bring to an end this profitless parroting of miscellaneous information which informs nobody. Municipal reports should be concise, explicit, and easy to interpret; and they should be issued promptly.

1. By better municipal reporting.

2. By the presentation of every-day civic facts.

To bring the facts home to the voter in such way as to make him use them as a basis for forming an independent opinion is, however, an undertaking of even greater difficulty. No distribution of municipal reports in their regular form will achieve this end. Publicity pamphlets which try to give voters the entire story on the eve of an election will not do it.

Nor yet will a stumping campaign in the days which precede the polling. Education in this, as in all other fields, must be a matter of persistent drilling; it must take the voter from simple facts to the more complex; it must deal with him patiently. It should adopt not one method but many. Not that the channels of civic education are now altogether too few; but they are seldom coördinated and they are rarely worked to their full capacity.

The facts have not been made known.

The most serious indictment against the American municipal system is not its toleration of awkward charters or incompetent officials, not its use of blanket ballots or party designations, not its faulty accounting or evasion of civil-service rules, but its failure to interest and instruct the people in public affairs. Whoever is bent upon steady improvement in civic administration must begin by recognizing the normal impulses and shortcomings of the ordinary voter. He must not expect the electorate to get by some royal road even that modest amount of knowledge which is a necessary basis of constructive citizenship. Agencies of citizen inquiry and information must be provided and used to their fullest extent. If we spent half as much on the instruction of the voter as we waste every year through inadequate fire-prevention measures, there would soon be an end to the political supremacy of the wrong sort of men. The vultures of city politics are not a bit afraid of the commission charter, the initiative, referendum, and recall, the direct primary, the preferential ballot, or any other mechanical reform, so long as reformers keep hugging the delusion that they can reconstruct a government without taking the electorate into their reckoning.

The agencies of citizen information.

All these things, however, are to some extent agencies of instruction. If they do not always inform the voter they at least make easier the task of informing him. The charter campaigns and the frequent local referenda of recent years have undoubtedly made concrete for millions of men and women their own real interest in public matters. But none of these statutory reforms cut deeply enough into the prob-

lem of educating the citizen. There are other forces which can be brought to the task. Everything that makes or popularizes thought is an available agency of citizen education. First of all is the newspaper, already the source from which most people get the data on which to base their opinions. It is not the only source, however; and although it is the most important one it cannot always lead public opinion in the wake of editorial opinion, — far from it. The average voter is not greatly influenced by the views expressed on the editorial page; but the things that are given to him in the news columns *as facts* about city administration do have a large influence in moulding his opinions. It is also quite true that much of what appears in the news columns of city journals about the conduct of municipal business is altogether untrustworthy as a basis of judgment. This inexactness, however, is usually not the fault of the newspapers; it happens chiefly because the real unvarnished facts are hard to obtain. The newspaper cannot get them because city officials often do not have them to give. Reports by the folio and statistical statements by the ream are regularly handed out by various city departments, but most of them prove nothing and contain no gleams of enlightenment; hence the news columns are forced to present as actuality a great deal that is guesswork or gossip. When city reports are made concise and intelligible, when official statements are boiled down to reasonable compass and issued authoritatively, then the newspapers may fairly be depended upon to bring the real facts to the public eye. They can be made the most potent force in developing an efficient citizenship, but the city's accounting authorities must first do their part.

1. The newspaper.

Then there are the civic and commercial organizations, the labor unions, and the host of similar agencies of public discussion. Chambers of commerce, boards of trade, taxpayers' leagues, local-improvement associations, church organizations, clubs and groups of all kinds, exist in every

2. Civic and commercial bodies.

important city; and in one or another of these bodies a considerable percentage of the whole electorate is enrolled. Such clubs may profitably make the discussion of municipal policy a regular part of their activity; indeed, many of them do so and have promoted the cause of constructive citizenship thereby. It is highly desirable that this work should continue and be developed. Men will sometimes urge that a trade association or a city club should "keep out of politics" and "avoid political entanglements," that it should confine itself to things "within its own sphere." But the proper conduct of the city's business is not in any sense a political question; it is a matter that directly affects every industrial, commercial, and betterment interest in the community. The board of trade that professes to discern no relation between local prosperity on the one hand and sound methods of revenue-raising, budget-making, borrowing, and public accounting on the other, is probably too torpid as an organization to be of much service in any direction. Civic indifference is the food upon which misgovernment always thrives. If a live interest in civic affairs brings an organization "into politics," then civic and commercial bodies ought to be in politics all the time. The work of these associations, if vigorously pursued, would soon take municipal business out of politics.

3. Centres of investigation and research: their two types.

But in addition to these unofficial organizations the voters of every city ought to have some regular and authoritative disburser of municipal information, — a working institution whose sole duty is to gather facts and present them in cogent form to city officials and citizens alike. One type of such agency is an official board supported by appropriations from the city treasury, like the Boston Finance Commission.[1]

[1] This commission was established by the Boston charter amendments of 1909 (*Massachusetts Acts and Resolves*, 1909, ch. 486, § 17). It consists of five members, each appointed by the governor of the commonwealth for a five-year term and one retiring annually. The chairman receives a salary of $5000 a year; the other members are unpaid. The commission is authorized "to investigate any and all matters relating to appropria-

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