

# SELECTED READINGS IN MUNICIPAL PROBLEMS

WRIGHT



# SELECTED READINGS IN MUNICIPAL PROBLEMS

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## PREFACE

This volume aims to bring together a number of selections on municipal government and administration drawn from sources that are widely scattered and not easily accessible in the average library. As the Contents indicates, the book is divided into two parts. Part I deals with the various general phases of city government, such as the history and growth of cities, the relation of the city to the state, legal problems, city charters, and municipal organization. Part II is devoted to problems of administration.

In the choice of material an attempt has been made to select readings which not only bear directly upon the more important phases of the subject but are authoritative, interesting, and timely as well. In the case of controversial topics an endeavor has been made to present opinions on both sides.

The book is primarily intended for use as supplementary reading in university and college courses. The general arrangement of material follows the plan used in the better-known textbooks on municipal government and administration, but the selections have been drawn from a wider range and deal with a greater variety of topics.

Grateful acknowledgment is here made to Professor A. C. Hanford for his advice and help in the preparation of the volume. My thanks are also due to the many authors who have so willingly consented to the use of their material and to the publishers (mentioned at the beginning of each selection) who have generously permitted the republication of copyrighted material.

JOSEPH WRIGHT

## INTRODUCTION

The city has played an important part in civilized life during the entire period of human history. It was the chief unit of early civilization. The ancient city-state was the standard-bearer of progress among the Phœnicians and the Greeks. It deserves study, if only for the purpose of indicating that most of what we nowadays call "current problems" of municipal government and administration are as old as the days of Pericles. The problems of a modern municipality are different in orientation, but not in essence, from those which Athens and Rome encountered prior to the dawn of the Christian era. The ancient world was a world of cities and towns; its civilization was molded by townsmen; its achievements were the work of those who lived in the cities and towns.

But the collapse of Roman power brought the hegemony of the city-dweller to an end. During the Dark Ages the cities decayed, and in some cases entirely disappeared. With them went all that made for the progress of civilization. The study of municipal life in the early Middle Ages is important for the lesson that it teaches concerning the close relationship between urban life and cultural progress. What we call civilization is in truth a very fragile thing. It could scarcely have occurred to an intelligent Roman of the first Christian century that his mighty empire would be swept away, its armies disbanded, its commerce disappear, its roads and public works crumble into ruins, and its culture fade into oblivion. But that is what happened. The era from the sixth to the ninth century is a blank page in the history of municipal institutions. They were engulfed in medieval darkness.

Eventually there came a recrudescence of city life. With the growth of stronger central governments the towns (or what was left of them) obtained protection and began to revive. Trading cities in the Mediterranean region began to show signs of new prosperity. In the north-western part of Europe, likewise, the free cities made headway. And with this came the renaissance in European culture. The intimate relation between urban growth and cultural progress has at no time

been more impressively demonstrated than in the centuries which immediately preceded the opening of the modern age.

The modern city is the greatest achievement of the human race. Or it is the greatest blot upon our civilization of today. It all depends upon the way in which you look at it. There can be no doubt that most of the inspiration to industrial and commercial progress comes from the cities. They are the mainsprings of national wealth and prosperity. On the other hand, it is in the cities that one encounters the extremes of poverty, degradation, and economic oppression. There is much in the modern city that justifies its claim to be called the vanguard of civilization, but there is much also that warrants Mr. Frederic Harrison's indictment of it.<sup>1</sup>

The city of today may be studied from several points of view. It is a social, a political, a legal, and an economic unit. It is a social unit, and as such interests the student of sociology, because it includes large numbers of people living so densely together that a multitude of social problems are created or accentuated. The sociologist devotes particular attention to the problems of poverty, crime, bad housing, and so on—all of which are primarily the problems of the city. The city is also an area of government, and a very important one. It is endowed by the authorities of the nation or the state with certain delegated powers of local self-government. In some cases its rights of self-determination are extensive, in others they are relatively limited. How much home rule a city ought to have is a question that has had much discussion in the United States, but no more than it deserves. At any rate such local authority as the city obtains by delegation from the higher powers is exercised by various officials whom its own citizens directly or indirectly choose. All this affords an extensive field for study—the city charter, the frame of government, the method of selecting the various officers, their respective powers, and the relation of each official to the others.

The city is also a legal entity, a corporation at law, known as a municipal corporation. It has a status in the courts, may sue and be sued, may hold property and make contracts, and may do most other things that a private corporation may do. On the other hand, it differs from the ordinary non-public corporation in some essential respects, notably as respects the scope of its powers and the responsi-

<sup>1</sup> See below, Chapter XLV.

bility which it assumes for the torts of its employees. This is a phase of the subject that has had too little attention from students of municipal government, possibly because it is a very difficult one. Very few citizens, even among those who profess to be learned in the law, have any clear ideas concerning the actual scope of their city's legal powers or the extent of its legal responsibilities.

Finally, the city is a business concern. It is a builder of streets, a purveyor of water, a purchaser of supplies, and an employer of labor. Many of its problems, but not all of them, are problems of an economic character. They are not widely different from the problems which private citizens are facing day by day in the conduct of their own affairs. But the city authorities have no such free hand in solving them. Political considerations thrust themselves forward at every point and dictate a departure from such adherence to business principles in the conduct of the administrative departments. The art of municipal administration, indeed, is the art of securing as much efficiency and economy as is practicable in the face of steady political pressure to the contrary.

We are often told that the city's business ought to be taken out of politics, but such a consummation is scarcely practicable so long as municipal government rests upon a democratic basis. So long as the ultimate authority in city administration continues to be vested with the representatives of the people there will inevitably be a responsiveness to what the citizens demand. And what the citizens demand is not by any means invariably synonymous with what is best or most economical. Much of the waste and inefficiency that characterizes the administration of municipal business is due neither to a lack of competence or of honesty on the part of those who are immediately in charge. It is merely that they are trying to give the people what they think the majority of the people want. They may be mistaken, but the frequency with which they are reelected or reappointed does not indicate that this is the case.

So the fundamental problem of municipal government is that of educating the sovereign authority, which is the electorate. No electorate ever deliberately chose to be misgoverned. But on many occasions an electorate has declared for misgovernment unknowingly. It has made the wrong choice because it did not possess enough knowledge to make the right one. And this is not surprising when one

realizes how little attention we have given to the political education of the people. The government of a city is an exceedingly complicated thing. It takes a considerable amount of study to acquire a fair mastery of it. And even the most elementary knowledge of its workings cannot be had without a larger modicum of thought than the masses of the voters are now bestowing upon the subject. How to disseminate sound political information among the people is the most crucial problem that democratic government is now facing. On the solution of this fundamental problem its ultimate success or failure will depend.

WILLIAM BENNETT MUNRO



# CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION. By William Bennett Munro . . . . .	XV
PART I. PROBLEMS OF GOVERNMENT	
CHAPTER	
I. THE ANCIENT CITY AND ITS PROBLEMS	
1. The City and Early Civilization, by L. S. Rowe . . . . .	3
2. The City in History, by Frederic Harrison . . . . .	6
3. Athens as a Municipality, by T. G. Tucker . . . . .	14
II. THE GREATEST OF ANCIENT CITIES	
1. Ancient Rome, by M. H. Morgan . . . . .	23
2. Sanitary Conditions of Ancient Rome, by Rodolfo Lanciani . . . . .	34
III. URBAN LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES	
1. The Mediæval City, by Frederic Harrison . . . . .	39
2. English Towns in the Fifteenth Century, by Mrs. J. R. Green . . . . .	44
IV. THE COMING OF THE MODERN CITY	
Macaulay's London, by Lord Macaulay . . . . .	59
V. THE AMERICAN MUNICIPALITY	
1. Its Development, by F. J. Goodnow . . . . .	76
2. "Checks and Balances" in City Government, by Horace E. Deming . . . . .	86
VI. CAUSES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF CITY GROWTH	
Causes of City Growth, by F. J. Goodnow and F. G. Bates . . . . .	93
VII. THE CITY AS A SOCIAL FACT	
1. The Menace of Great Cities, by Lord Bryce . . . . .	113
2. The Economic Effects of City Growth, by A. F. Weber . . . . .	118
3. Some Characteristics of the City, by Robert E. Park . . . . .	123
VIII. THE SUPREMACY OF THE STATE OVER THE CITIES	
The Basis of City Government, by Everett Kimball . . . . .	135

## CHAPTER

PAGE

## IX. THE FORMS OF CITY GOVERNMENT

- Principles of Charter Making, by William Anderson . . . . 151

## X. THE LAW OF MUNICIPAL CORPORATIONS

- Power to create Municipal Corporations, by R. W. Cooley . . . 170

## XI. THE LAW OF MUNICIPAL LIABILITY

1. The Liability of a Municipal Corporation in Tort for the Acts of its Agents, in the Exercise of a Governmental Function, *Virginia Law Review* . . . . . 189
2. Cases Cited . . . . . 195
  - McDade v. City of Chester* . . . . . 195
  - Buttrick v. City of Lowell* . . . . . 199
  - Hayes v. City of Oshkosh* (Macy, 337) . . . . . 201
  - Wheeler v. City of Cincinnati* (Macy, 375) . . . . . 203
  - Fowler v. City of Cleveland* . . . . . 204
  - Barton v. City of Syracuse* . . . . . 212
  - Eastman v. Town of Meredith* (Macy, 353) . . . . . 215
  - Parks v. City of Des Moines* . . . . . 216

## XII. THE MUNICIPAL ELECTORATE

1. Suffrage Qualifications, by P. O. Ray . . . . . 218
2. Woman Suffrage, by A. N. Holcombe . . . . . 225
3. The New York Literacy Test, by F. G. Crawford . . . . . 229

## XIII. THE DIRECT PRIMARY IN CITIES

1. The Merits of the Direct Primary, by G. W. Norris . . . . . 231
2. The Non-Partisan Primary, by R. E. Cushman . . . . . 243

## XIV. PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

1. Proportional Representation Explained, by the Proportional Representation League . . . . . 249
2. The Objections to Proportional Representation, by H. L. McBain . . 257

## XV. MUNICIPAL PARTIES AND NON-PARTISANSHIP

1. An Argument in Favor of Non-Partisanship in Municipal Elections, by Brand Whitlock . . . . . 269
2. An Argument Against Non-Partisanship in Municipal Elections, by Charles A. Beard . . . . . 279
3. The Non-Partisan Movement in a Typical City, by Wendell F. Johnson . . . . . 284

## XVI. MUNICIPAL POLITICS

1. The Boss, by Robert C. Brooks . . . . . 289
2. Bossism in American Cities, by Samuel P. Orth . . . . . 297

# CONTENTS

ix

## CHAPTER

## PAGE

### XVII. PUBLIC OPINION AND DIRECT LEGISLATION IN CITIES

1. Public Opinion as a Factor in Government, by Lord Bryce . . . 310
2. Direct Legislation in American Cities, by E. L. Shoup . . . 324

### XVIII. THE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

- Its Proper Place in City Government, by E. Dana Durand . . . 331

### XIX. THE AMERICAN MAYORALTY

- The Personality of the Mayor, by R. M. Story . . . . . 351

### XX. THE COMMISSION PLAN

1. Essential Features of Commission Government, by Ford H. MacGregor . . . . . 366
2. A Criticism of the Commission Plan, by Charles M. Fassett . . . 372
3. Commission Government and the Police Department, by Raymond B. Fosdick . . . . . 377

### XXI. THE CITY MANAGER PLAN

1. What the City Manager Plan has Accomplished, by Lindsay Rogers . . . . . 386
2. Who will Supply the Political Leadership? by James W. Routh . . . . . 402

### XXII. THE METROPOLIS

- The Political Unification of Metropolitan Communities, by Chester C. Maxey . . . . . 408

## PART II. PROBLEMS OF ADMINISTRATION

### XXIII. THE CITY'S ADMINISTRATIVE MACHINERY

1. Putting Cities on an Efficiency Basis, by Henry Bruère . . . 433
2. Some Essentials of Sound Municipal Administration, by William B. Munro . . . . . 439

### XXIV. MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS AND EMPLOYEES

1. The Need for Experts in City Government, by A. Lawrence Lowell . . . . . 454
2. The Control of the Expert, by Charles A. Beard . . . . . 459
3. Training Municipal Employees, by J. J. Reilly . . . . . 465

### XXV. GETTING MUNICIPAL WORK DONE

1. Recruiting City Employees, by Governmental Research Conference of the United States and Canada . . . . . 474

## MUNICIPAL PROBLEMS

CHAPTER	PAGE
2. Employment Management in Public and Private Enterprise, by Special Committee on Civil Service of the National Municipal League . . . . .	482
3. Efficiency Records, by E. O. Griefenhagen . . . . .	490
4. The New York Efficiency Rating System, by Thomas C. Murray . . . . .	498
XXVI. CITY PLANNING PROBLEMS	
A General View, by Thomas Adams . . . . .	500
XXVII. THE MUNICIPAL HIGHWAYS	
1. The Street Plan, by C. M. Robinson . . . . .	527
2. The Organization of the Street Department, by F. S. Besson . . . . .	534
3. Paving Costs in American Cities, by Nelson P. Lewis . . . . .	541
XXVIII. PARK AND PLAYGROUND PLANNING AND ADMINISTRATION	
An Outline of the Major Problems, by Henry V. Hubbard . . . . .	550
XXIX. WATER SUPPLY PROBLEMS	
1. Sources of Water Supply, by George A. Johnson . . . . .	573
2. Modern Methods of Water Purification, by M. F. Sanborn . . . . .	580
3. Water Supply and Fire Protection, by H. M. Blomquist . . . . .	587
XXX. WASTE DISPOSAL	
1. The Collection and Disposal of Municipal Wastes, by H. R. Crohurst . . . . .	593
2. The Sewage Disposal Problem, by George C. Whipple . . . . .	611
XXXI. MUNICIPAL POLICE ADMINISTRATION	
1. Organization of the Force, by Raymond B. Fosdick . . . . .	620
2. Training Schools for Police, by E. D. Graper . . . . .	634
3. The Control of Traffic, by E. D. Graper . . . . .	638
4. Policewomen, by Mina C. Van Winkle . . . . .	642
XXXII. POLICE COURT PROBLEMS	
1. Police Courts and the Law, by Roscoe Pound . . . . .	645
2. Small Claims Courts, by Reginald H. Smith . . . . .	651
3. The Selection of Judges for City Courts, by American Judicature Society . . . . .	658
4. Court Organization for Large Cities, by American Judicature Society . . . . .	660



# CONTENTS

xi

## CHAPTER

## PAGE

### XXXIII. CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN CITIES

1. Criminal Justice in American Cities, by Roscoe Pound . . . . . 663
2. The Treatment of Criminals, by H. E. Barnes . . . . . 670
3. Juvenile Probation, by Katherine F. Lenroot . . . . . 674

### XXXIV. FIRE PREVENTION AND FIRE FIGHTING

1. The Problem in America, by E. U. Crosby, H. A. Fiske,  
and H. W. Forster . . . . . 681
2. Fire Losses and Fire Hazards, by Franklin H. Wentworth . . . . . 695
3. The Chief Causes of Fire, by Jacob H. Hilkené . . . . . 704

### XXXV. MUNICIPAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

1. Vital Statistics, by George C. Whipple . . . . . 709
2. Health Surveys, by Murray P. Horwood . . . . . 715
3. The Pure Milk Problem, by Ella Groenewold . . . . . 722
4. Milk Regulations, by Charles E. North . . . . . 727

### XXXVI. THE HOUSING PROBLEM IN CITIES

1. Housing as a Phase of City Planning, by James Ford . . . . . 732
2. The Housing Survey, by Lawrence Veiller . . . . . 740
3. Fundamental Aspects of the Housing Problem, by Carol  
Aronovici . . . . . 742
4. The Enforcement of Housing Laws, by James F. McCrudden . . . . . 753

### XXXVII. POOR RELIEF: POLICY AND PROBLEMS

1. Municipal Charities in the United States, by F. J. Good-  
now and F. G. Bates . . . . . 757
2. A Program for a Department of Charities, by Mrs. M. K.  
Simkhovitch . . . . . 761
3. Outdoor versus Indoor Relief, by J. L. Gillin . . . . . 769
4. Public and Private Agencies, by J. L. Gillin . . . . . 775

### XXXVIII. PUBLIC EDUCATION IN CITIES

1. Some School Problems of Today, by H. B. Davis . . . . . 780
2. Recent Progress in City School Administration, by W. S.  
Deffenbaugh . . . . . 790
3. The Appointment of Teachers, by F. W. Ballou . . . . . 796
4. Some Axioms of School Administration, by Bruce M. Watson . . . . . 800

## XXXIX. MUNICIPAL STREET LIGHTING

1. The Epochs in Street Lighting Practice, by W. D'A. Ryan . . . . . 805
2. A Survey of the Street Lighting Problem, by Stephen C. Rogers . . . . . 806
3. Street Lighting and its Relation to Public Safety, by E. A. Anderson . . . . . 816
4. Requirements of an Adequate Lighting System, by Minneapolis Civic and Commerce Association . . . . . 821

## XL. STREET RAILWAYS

1. The Street Railway Problem . . . . . 824
  - (a) Possible Solutions, by Delos F. Wilcox . . . . . 824
  - (b) Definition and Argument for the "Service at Cost" Plan, by the Federal Electric Railway Commission . . . . . 825
  - (c) Criticism of the Plan, by Delos F. Wilcox . . . . . 827
2. The Zone Fare System . . . . . 832
  - (a) Arguments against the Modified Zone System, by American Electric Railway Association . . . . . 832
  - (b) Arguments for a Modified Zone System, by Dugald C. Jackson and David J. McGrath . . . . . 833
3. The Jitneys and Street Railways . . . . . 838
  - (a) Criticisms, by American Electric Railway Association . . . . . 838
  - (b) The Place of the Motor Bus, by Walter Jackson . . . . . 840

## XLI. PUBLIC UTILITY REGULATION

1. The Scope of Utility Legislation, by Leo Sharfman . . . . . 845
2. Municipal versus State Regulation, by Milo R. Maltbie . . . . . 852
3. The Essentials of a Franchise Policy, by Clinton R. Woodruff . . . . . 858

## XLII. MUNICIPAL OWNERSHIP

1. General Principles, by F. W. Taussig . . . . . 861
2. Conclusions of the National Civic Federation's Commission on Public Ownership and Operation, by the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention Commission . . . . . 872
3. Municipal Ownership versus Regulation of Street Railways, by Federal Electric Railway Commission . . . . . 874
4. Management of Municipally Owned Plants, by Nathan Matthews . . . . . 875

## XLIII. THE CITY'S INCOME

1. Adam Smith's Canons of Taxation, by Adam Smith . . . . . 882
2. A Model System of Municipal Revenues, by L. H. Gulick . . . . . 884
3. The Assessment of Real Estate, by Lawson Purdy . . . . . 889

# CONTENTS

xiii

## CHAPTER

PAGE

### XLIV. THE CITY'S EXPENDITURES

1. The Municipal Budget, by the League of Minnesota Municipalities . . . . . 904
2. Municipal Borrowing, by H. W. Dodds . . . . . 922
3. Comparative Costs of City Government, by William Parr Capes . 927

### XLV. THE CITY OF TODAY AND TOMORROW

1. The City as it Is and as it Might Be, by Frederic Harrison . 934
2. Urban Life and Modern Civilization, by Eugene McQuillin . 943

INDEX . . . . . 951

SELECTED READINGS IN  
MUNICIPAL PROBLEMS



