

THE MACHINE IN POLITICS

IS GOOD CITY GOVERNMENT POSSIBLE UNDER IT?

THE FORMATION OF A MUNICIPAL PARTY RECOMMENDED TO THE COMMON- WEALTH CLUB.

The Commonwealth Club dined at Morello's last night, and listened to some observations by several gentlemen on a topic which is uppermost in the thoughts of citizens of New-York just now. It was, "Is Good Municipal Government Possible under a Political Machine?" Mr. Charles W. Dayton led the discussion, which was participated in by a number of well-known citizens.

Mr. Dayton said he was a believer in the idea that some progress was made every day toward better things, and that if fearless work was only done the political "boss," the "heeler," the "sinecurist," the "divvy," the "briber," and the "hoodler" would soon disappear. As an abstract proposition, therefore, the question of the evening should be answered in the affirmative; but, as a practical question, right-thinking men must be granted several premises before giving an affirmative reply.

The "new Tammany," Mr. Dayton declared, had, much sooner than was expected, turned out to be the same old Tammany. He quoted from the speech of the late James T. Brady, made against Tammany Hall Sept. 27, 1853, and said that were he here now he could not more aptly and powerfully describe Tammany Hall.

The speaker called attention to Chapter 115 of the Laws of 1805, entitled "An act to incorporate the Society of Tammany or Columbian Order in the city of New-York," whereby it appeared that said society or order was for the "purpose of affording relief to the indigent and distressed members of the said society, their widows and orphans, and others who may be found proper objects of their charity," and whereby it also appeared that said society was "capable in law to purchase, take, receive, hold, and enjoy any real estate in fee simple and any goods, chattels, or personal estate, for the purpose of enabling it the better to carry into effect the benevolent purpose of affording relief to the indigent and distressed, provided the clear yearly value of such real and personal estates shall not exceed the sum of \$5,000."

Whether that statute had been amended Mr. Dayton had not inquired. But Tammany, viewed from the inside, must be an eleemosynary institution of the most gratifying character, and viewed from the outside it was certain that its members had not hesitated to avail themselves of the power conferred by the statute, to take and enjoy considerable personal estate.

The Republican "machine" in this city, Mr. Dayton said, had been run as a tender to any other "machine" that would bargain with it for a President, a Governor, and an occasional local office. It usually "dealt" with Tammany, as election returns in Presidential years and as the pay rolls of the city would show.

"Just now," said Mr. Dayton, "it is dealing with Tammany in another and more satisfactory way."

An organized party, he said, should divorce forever the business of the city from the politics of the State and the Nation; should secure an amendment to the Constitution of the State providing for the local self-government of cities; should stop the enormous and debasing assessment of candidates for public office; should reform the election system, so that bribery at the polls will be impossible by reason of an exclusive official and secret ballot.

How was this to be accomplished? He knew of no other way than by hard work. Three sincere, intelligent men in each election district—about three thousand in all—who would devote a few hours a year to politics among their neighbors, and a few hours more for committee work and conventions, could succeed against any "machines" or combination of "machines."

The plan of organization of the County Democracy he thought admirable. It was still open through its published calls for election district primaries; or, if preferred, a municipal party could be organized on a similar plan.

"Should this be attempted," said he, "I am aware that the Democratic machine and the Republican machine will cry out, respectively, 'Don't jeopardize tariff reform,' 'Don't jeopardize protection to American labor,' by forsaking your so-called regular party organization. Turn a deaf ear to this sophistry, for you know, or ought to know, that it means nothing else than the appeal, 'Help us to the local offices.' Many years must elapse before an opportunity so favorable as the present will be afforded for a union of citizens, irrespective of State and national issues, in the righteous and needed cause of municipal reform."

President of the Reform Club E. P. Wheeler followed. His inclination was not to deal too harshly with political machines. He had no doubt that we were all imperfect; all political machines had tendencies that might be improved. But political machines had been looked at too exclusively from the critical point. Nothing better had been provided. He was sure that all men who tried to realize their dreams of reform had found it necessary to unite with other men. The moment they began to do that they were obliged to make concessions. The problem to consider was how to make the machines give better government. It was certainly a very difficult problem, and Mr. Wheeler did not believe it was to be solved by the abuse of any one political machine. He was sure that no political organization had a monopoly of virtue.

"We should," he said, "be ever ready to split tickets; we should be ready to recognize a good thing, no matter how it is labeled. The great mistake, the whole evil in our system, is the idea that it is lawful to use the machinery of government for the advancement of private interests. That is the root of all our woes, and until we make up our minds that that is the evil we shall never be better off."

Aqueduct Commissioner Francis M. Scott's view was that good government was a matter dependent wholly upon the selection of men and not upon political organizations. Political machines were established for the promulgation of political ideas. The government of a city was not a question of ideas, but purely a question of men. The success or failure of municipal government depended solely on the kind of men selected by a party. When a Municipal Government was committed to the care of the machine, either the machine must fail or the City Government must fail. He was not optimistic, and he was inclined to believe that there would be no immediate escape from the domination of the ring. But the remedy rested in the inevitable revolutions against maladministration. There would be good administrations and bad administrations. If the public could be kept so alert that when the bad administrations came a remedy would quickly follow the disease, then the minimum of bad government would be attained.

Ex-Excise Commissioner W. S. Andrews said it was entirely possible to do away with the political machine, and he believed it would be done away with very shortly.

"The present legislative investigation into the city's affairs reminded Simon Sterne of a story. The Duke of Rutland, walking through his grounds one day, noticed his head gamekeeper rubbing the hair of a dog the wrong way.

"Why do you do that, John?" he asked.

"The fleas, Sir," answered John.

"Does it drive the fleas away?"

"No, Sir," said John, "but it disturbs them a very great deal."

Mr. Sterne thought, however, that the city was gradually emerging from dishonest reigns. The investigation had disclosed an unhappy state of affairs, but nothing so bad as the Tweed thieveries. The people were becoming more watchful. That was so because they were not so prosperous as they were some years ago and therefore they were more inclined to look after the matter of taxes. What was necessary, he said, was something closely akin to an exclusive home government. The acts of our worst Board of Aldermen were not worse than those of the average State Legislature. Further benefit could be had, he asserted, from some plan of minority representation in the Board of Aldermen.

President W. J. Coombs presided, and Carl Schurz, O. B. Potter, Henry A. Oakley, Lewis L. DeLafield, Oliver Sumner Teall, Louis Windmuller, and George B. Colby were among those present.

As the next dinner of the club the topic for discussion will be "The Relation of the Press to the Public."