

## AMERICANISM IN MUNICIPAL POLITICS \*

I AM going to begin by borrowing an expression from the member of your club who, as far as I know, first suggested my coming here, the Reverend Mr. Slicer: "The solution of the municipal problem lies in the application to it of the common virtues." It is perfectly simple—common honesty, common sense, and that reasonable amount of courage, of willingness to accept responsibility and to stand punishment from a not always appreciative press, which ought to be a quality of every American citizen. It is very simple if you meet it in that way. Now, what do I mean by that? What virtues do I mean? I will go over a few of them with you.

In the first place, the virtue of Americanism all through; and that has several sides to it. Here is one side, the ruling out of all differences of creed among honest citizens when they strive for good government. The surest way in which you can make a movement to better our politics fail is to have that movement troubled with proscription for religious reasons. The two evils, I am almost inclined to say the two worst evils, of which I know in municipal politics, and in some other politics as well, are, on the one hand, to discriminate against a faithful and efficient public servant because of his creed, and on the other, to pardon and

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support an unfaithful and inefficient public servant because of his creed.

Let me give you a concrete instance of that now, and I shall refer to it again under the second heading of my speech. Just at present we in New York, the board of police commissioners, have been engaged in a rough-and-tumble, which has finally come out successful—an effort to enforce certain laws that were on the statute-book and that we intended to have enforced. The greatest assistance that we have received, the invaluable assistance that we have received, was especially from one member of the judiciary, from Judge Goff. I am a Republican, born here, a Protestant. Judge Goff is a Democrat, a Catholic, born in Ireland. We are both Americans, straight out. We both acted merely as Americans. We stood shoulder to shoulder as decent men should stand, when the fight is waged for decency. Can you imagine anything at the same time more absurd and more criminal than that we American citizens should carry into the kind of contest which we have waged differences of creed? Can you imagine a surer way to compass the defeat of a movement for good than by allowing it to be complicated by any question of creed? A little later I will have to recur to this because it is one of the questions that come up in one form or another in every struggle for good municipal government in which we now engage.

Second, in solving the municipal problem I have grown more and more to believe that normally we should not take into account questions of national politics. Let me take a concrete case from our own department, the Police Department in New York—or anywhere—in Buffalo. Take you gentlemen. If one of your houses is entered to-night by a burglar, what do

you care whether that burglar believes in a loose or a strict construction of the Constitution? And if a policeman runs him down, what particular interest have you as to whether he is a high-tariff or a low-tariff policeman? Does it not seem a little absurd to have to ask that question? Yet think of the fact that practically that type of question has been precisely the one that we have all been expected to ask in municipal politics.

There are four police commissioners in the city of New York; two of us Democrats, two Republicans. We have had a tolerably lively four months there, and I want to say—I certainly do not take any credit to myself for going into politics, because I thoroughly enjoy it—I've had a splendid time—think I had a much nicer time than my antagonists. There are four of us there. There has not come up in all the four months' time in which we have grappled problem after problem of the most serious kind one can grapple with—there has not come up a problem which by any conceivable stretching could be classed as having the faintest connection with any problem of national politics, not one. The problem we have had to face has been enforcement of the law. That is not a question at issue nationally. The problem of getting honest elections, the problem of seeing that the police didn't take bribes and commit blackmail—that is not a party issue. Senator Hill thinks it is, but it isn't. On every issue that has come up we can proceed by an inversion of the reasoning of a once noted politician who, six or seven years ago, at a time when he was president of the United States Senate, said that the decalogue and the golden rule had no place in politics and that the purification of politics was an iridescent dream. We have proceeded upon the assumption that the decalogue and the golden rule are

peculiarly applicable to political life, and, also, that if a public official was worth his salt he was bound to try to show that the purification of politics was not an iridescent dream.

Yet again, the application of common honesty to public affairs. In the abstract nobody will deny that a public officer ought to be honest, but in the concrete it is lamentable to see how we pardon it. "Oh, well, yes, I know he's a bad fellow, but they're all tough in political life and the men of the opposite side are just as bad." It is bad enough to allow a man who is dishonest to stand as the representative of your party in any position. You can, however, invent excuses for it. I do not think they are valid excuses, but they are excuses that often have weight. I have been told: "Oh, well, you don't want to prevent that man. He isn't a good fellow, but we can't let the other side elect their man. Think of the effect if you should have the other party get the speaker through just one vote, or the other party get the senatorship through just one vote in the legislature." They can advance those arguments. I do not think they are good arguments, but they can advance them in national politics and State politics. In municipal politics they can't. What you want in your municipal authorities is, first and foremost, absolute honesty. Their views upon any conceivable question of public policy come second to that. You must have in an executive officer willingness to be faithful to his oath of office; willingness, again, to show the common virtues; willingness to behave with that measure of probity which you exact from every successful business man, from every reputable lawyer.

Another quality on which to insist is courage. Be a man ever so honest, if he be cursed with a sufficient

quantity of timidity he is a mere nuisance in any emergency. I think I am more apt to lose my temper with the timid good man than I am with the sharp, resolute, clever scoundrel whom I am going to fight anyway. I can get along with him. He will hit me and I will hit him, but the timid good man who says: "Oh, yes, certainly, as a matter of principle that is excellent, but do you think that it is expedient to say that absolutely you shall not steal? Don't you think that you had better say, 'You mustn't steal much'?" I want to put down criminals, but not in a way that will hurt their feelings." Can't do it, gentlemen. You grasp the thistle like that (*indicating a delicate touching*) and you hurt yourself badly and you do not crush the thistle. If you are going to go into business, do it thoroughly, and you have got to do it in a great many different ways. If it comes to putting down a riot, make up your mind that the person with whom to feel sympathy is the law-abiding citizen, not the lawless. When people put themselves in opposition to law, start to put them down with a healthy desire to see that they get put down quick, and if any damage comes, let it come on them and not on the men who have refrained from violating the law. If you think it right—and if you are honest you must think it right—to enforce a given law, although there may be a doubt whether local sentiment is or is not in favor of that law, go on and do it and if the sentiment is against you, your duty is plain. You recognize public sentiment as embodied in law. The remedy of the public if they do not like your action is to turn you out at the end of your term. And don't be afraid of that either. There are prices too dear to pay for success or to pay for retention in office, and one of those prices is the loss of self-respect.

Then again, take Americanism from another side. I have spoken of showing Americanism in creed. Now show it in race. Remember, that the one being abhorrent to the powers above the earth and under them is the hyphenated American—the “German-American,” the “Irish-American,” or the “native-American.” Be Americans, pure and simple! If you don’t act on the theory that every man who in good faith assumes the duties and responsibilities of an American citizen in a spirit of true Americanism is an American, and is to be treated as such, if you do not act on that spirit, you are yourselves unfit to take part in managing our government and you are bound to make a failure if you try to better the condition of our cities.

Let me illustrate what I mean, for a moment—and again, gentlemen, I am going to draw for concrete instances from my experience this summer, my experience at this moment, from what we are doing down there in New York. The other day I spoke on the East Side with two of my fellows in this administration, the president of the excise board and the counsel of the excise board. We three all spoke on precisely the same lines, on precisely the lines that I am speaking to you here to-night. The president of the excise board is a Catholic, born in Ireland. The counsel of the excise board is a Hebrew, whose parents, or he himself, were born in Germany. We are all three Americans, and nothing else! All three of us believed that only the United States flag should float over City Hall, and we all approached the problem from the point of view of common honesty, of common good faith, and believed that you could solve most of our difficulties in New York by the application of such old time-worn remedies as the commandment that “thou shalt not steal,” and others of similar simplicity.

There is another point which partly hangs from non-partisanship. It should be the rule in our city governments, but which is partly independent of it; I mean the application to our departments of what we have grown, for lack of a better name, to speak of as civil-service reform. I do not like the name if I could get something better for it. I appreciate a little bit the feeling of that gentleman who said that when Doctor Johnson spoke of "patriotism as the last refuge of a scoundrel," he was ignorant of the infinite possibilities that lay in the word "reform." But put it in this way: Of ruling out any political consideration in making appointments; of paying attention solely to the public servant's honesty and capacity to do the work assigned.

And again I am going to refer to the department with which I am now pretty familiar, the New York police. People have told me that civil-service reform was academic. Well, the Police Department is not. If you can get a less academic problem than grappling with the New York Police Department, I would like to know it. And we could not possibly have solved that problem if we had not from the very outset rigorously excluded every consideration of politics from each single detail of our work—making an appointment, a promotion, a reduction, a dismissal—or from any measure or policy that we have undertaken. We could not have done anything if it had not been for that. Let me show you the non-academic side of it. You know we all have heard familiar arguments—"Oh, well, you have got to have people in sympathy with your administration in order to get good work." Gentlemen, the last legislature, in its infinite wisdom, left us rather worse off than the department had been before in New York in matters of legislation. We work under laws worse, not

better, than our predecessors worked under. Our hands are a little more tied. There is not much difference, but what difference there is is against us. We have the same force, very largely, but we have the widest differences in the way that force is behaving. By the simple process of turning out one hundred scoundrels, of putting in the fear of the law three hundred or four hundred more and by making the honest men feel that if they did well we would stand by them and the dishonest men feel that if we got any kind of proof of their dishonesty no power in the State could save them. We have worked that change. The police force of New York, like the police force of any other big city, is semimilitary in its character and must be semimilitary in its character. Every policeman continually has to face, as a matter of business, as a matter of ordinary, everyday duty, certain risks and certain dangers. In addition to that he now and then has to face very serious dangers, very serious risks, and that should be borne in mind by the critics of every police force. While the unfaithful policeman, the corrupt policeman, deserves to receive the merciless condemnation of good citizens, yet all good citizens should be equally prompt to recognize that the honest and fearless member of the force is entitled to the highest respect and to every consideration from all decent citizens who wish to see order preserved and life and property protected. Remember that.

The promotions we made serve to illustrate four or five of the points upon which I lay emphasis. The men we promoted were some born of parents who came from abroad. Some were of parents born on this side, and some of one national origin, some of another; German, Irish, none, I think, of my own particular nationality, which was Dutch; but all of them men who were doing

their duty faithfully and squarely; some of one creed, some of another; some, I know, of politics opposed to me, and others I know nothing about, and may have been—although I do not know it—of politics the same as mine. Don't you see—can any reasonable man fail to see—that those promotions benefited the force; that not only did we get good men when we promoted those men, but that we got a good spirit in the force? Is it necessary to have to point out that we would have gotten the poorest kind of a spirit if we had paid consideration to anything but the very qualities to which we did pay heed? Would the force be better or worse; would it be more or less in sympathy with the principles for which we stand, if we had tried to say that the men should all be like us in politics or come up to a standard of a kind? Can you imagine anything more practical than applied civil-service reform of that kind? I can't.

Yet again, learn, in trying to solve the municipal problem, that you cannot afford to neglect theory on the one hand and still less to neglect practice on the other. The sneer of the professional politician at the theorist; at the man who gets his knowledge from books, is so silly that one does not have to pay much heed to it, especially before an audience of this kind. Read "The Federalist." It is one of the greatest—I hardly know whether I would not be right to say that it is on the whole the greatest book—dealing with applied politics that there ever has been—the creation of Hamilton helped by Madison and Jay; and you will see a book there consisting of a series of pamphlets which had an incalculable effect in procuring us our present National Government, which could not have had that effect if, on the one hand, the three writers had not been men trained in theory of politics and if, on the other hand,

they had not been themselves veteran practical politicians. You have got to have the theory; you have got to have the book-learning; and if you have nothing else, you will be helpless and useless. If you think that you can go in and make a permanent benefit in our municipal affairs by merely coming to meetings of this kind you are very much mistaken. You have got to go out and rub up with the men who do not think as you do; with the men with different ideas; with the men who are doing the practical work; men who are running the machines. You have got to go up and rub with them, if only for the sake of beating them.

I was boss of my assembly district in New York at one period—middling-good boss, too—and I know of what I am speaking. If I want help in getting clean politics, in getting a clean administration, I want people with some acquaintance with practical politics, and the one man whom I don't want is the man who thinks that practical politics means dirty politics. We have often—I say we—I mean decent people who believe in decency and honesty—we have often been at a great disadvantage in struggling for good government in the past, because there was an element of truth in the accusations brought against us by people who said we were willing enough to come together in meetings where we thought alike and say how very bad politics were and what miserable wretches they were who managed the politics, but that we did not go out, go down into the struggle; work in the heat and the sweat, to better them ourselves. You remember Lowell's fine lines when he warned his countrymen that freedom was not a gift that tarried long in the hands of cowards. I think I quoted them more in full the last time I spoke at this club. Well, it is just as true that decent government will not

long be obtained because it won't be deserved by people who won't take the trouble to get it. If you won't work and work hard; if you won't work at the polls, won't work in trying to get out the vote, if you won't do your share of the actual business of politics, you cannot expect to win in the long run against those who do.

There are certain audiences before which I feel that it is especially incumbent upon me always to lay especial stress upon the fact that they must be decent and straight. There are other audiences, like this, where I know that it is entirely needless to make an appeal for decency and righteousness and where I make my appeal purely that you shall be effective, that you shall be efficient, that you shall work, that you shall do the work yourselves, even if you do it imperfectly, rather than stay outside and criticise the work when done.

Now, gentlemen, to sum up then, let me once more speak of the need of a radical, a thoroughgoing Americanism and of the need of the common virtues for the solution of our municipal problems. They are not very difficult if you come down and face them. If you pardon again a piece of egotism, take my own case in the Police Department in New York. I had never made any special study of police systems, and I recollect a very good, a very nice fellow, a gentleman who is sincerely interested in me, saying: "Now that you are going to be a police commissioner, I suppose that you will model your force upon the system of London, will you not?" I said no, I wouldn't. I didn't know what the system was and I wasn't going to take the time to hunt it up. I was going to model it largely upon certain of the elementary virtues advocated in the Old and New Testament. It goes without saying, if I had the time to make a careful study of the systems of Berlin, Lon-

don, and Dublin, in all three of which there are excellent constabularies, I should like to get any wrinkles I could get in studying those systems, exactly as we took one or two wrinkles from the study of the police system of Boston, but I didn't have the time to do it. I worked all day and a good part of some of the nights during the four months that I have been there as commissioner, and I had no possible time to study the police systems anywhere excepting New York. What you need, after all, is so simple! Go in, make up your mind that a policeman when he is patrolling is to patrol!

That seems an elementary proposition, does it not? I labored hard to convince my men that it was an elementary proposition, and some of them have bought their experience dearly. For instance, when a policeman believes that he is patrolling if he sits down and smokes, it is an error of judgment on his part. That is one simple thing. Another thing is that it is a mistake if a policeman regards himself as a sultan on his beat, with the power of dispensing, if not life and death, at least wounds and comfort to the citizens there. He is to show all proper respect and courtesy to citizens; he must remember that courtesy is a very cheap commodity and a valuable one. Third, that he is not, however, to confound the good citizen and the tough. Courtesy is wasted on the tough. I have not the slightest sympathy when I find a member of a gang who has suffered considerably owing to an encounter with a policeman. I am with the policeman. I am glad that the tough had an uncomfortable time. You don't want any mushy sentimentality when you are dealing with criminals. One of the things that many of our good reformers should learn is that fellow-feeling for the criminal is out of place. You may be sorry for him;

you may not feel revengeful toward him; but if you are going to do good you will put him down, and you've got to put him down. That is what the policeman is there for. Now, yet again, a policeman is not to take bribes.

Take all of those four or five things that I have mentioned. No amount of study of the Berlin or London police would have made me at all more firm in my convictions on those four questions, and if I once get the police to be honest and vigilant and active, prompt and resolute in dealing with toughs, and courteous and considerate in dealing with citizens, I've got a pretty good police force. There are details that I can improve, but I've got ninety-five per cent. I can help get the remaining five per cent by studying other systems, but the ninety-five per cent I have got through studying, simply striving, for applied morality. That is all. The science of good municipal government isn't anything recondite. It is not like the higher mathematics or anything of that kind. Any moderately brave, honest man, with common sense, who is prepared to do what he thinks right, what he thinks according to his lights is the decent thing to do, without regard to the effect either upon himself or upon the party with which he is connected—he has got to disregard that, gentlemen, if he is going to accomplish anything that is worth accomplishing—any man who will have those qualities can do something decent; he can accomplish something in our municipal life.

I have spoken of it as applying to the police. It applies just as much to every other branch of the government. Take notably the schools. I do not suppose there is anything quite as important to our government as the public-school system. We must have that prop-

erly conducted, and the one thing we must insist on in it is that those who administer it shall be honest and efficient. Not even in the police force is it more utterly, more absolutely, of no consequence as to what a man's feelings are in national politics, provided he is honest and efficient, as it is in the school service; and there again, gentlemen, we come back to the old question of Americanism. When we say that we want our schools to be non-sectarian we must mean what we say; we must mean literally that and not mean to proscribe any religion. Two years ago, when I was a member of the Civil Service Commission, I made but one political speech in the campaign. I did not feel at liberty to make many. There was one subject that I was bound I would speak on, and that was in Boston, when they were running a school ticket for school trustees in Boston, and they had one ticket composed of men, all of them staunch friends of the public schools, some of them Protestants, some of them Catholics. An element of the city's population ran against it a ticket composed exclusively of Protestants, and it gave me the greatest pleasure to go on and speak as strongly as I knew how for the first ticket; and I esteem myself the staunchest friend of the public-school system for so doing, and I esteem our opponents the worst foes of the public-school system for the course that they took.

The one thing upon which we must insist is ruling out questions of creed in our politics so long as the men for whom we vote are honest and in good faith Americans. I have not had too smooth a course this summer in New York anyhow, but it would have been fairly strewn with mountains if my friends had been limited to any one creed or to any one nationality. The man from whom I have had, I think, more help than any

man outside of my own department in New York this year is a reporter—by birth a Dane—Mr. Jacob Riis. He is the author of a book which those of you who are interested in municipal politics ought all to read, although it does not deal with politics at all—a book entitled “How the Other Half Lives,” which, I suppose, is the best study of American tenement-house life which ever appeared on American soil. He came to this country twenty-five years ago; just exactly as good an American as I am, and my people came over here two hundred and fifty years ago; and he has given me more help than almost any of my fellow officials. I say “almost any”; there are three or four from whom I have had an immense amount of help, of course, not including my colleagues. I am speaking of my colleagues and myself all together.

Then again, in the fight we have waged there in New York, on the whole, what has been most gratifying to me has been the support we have received from decent citizens; the support we have received from priests and clergymen who are interested in decency, without regard to creed. We have had our staunchest friends in men such as two that are sitting at this table to-night, men such as Father Malone and Mr. Slicer. The first great encouragement that I received, the first letter of encouragement I think that I received, came from a Methodist conference; the second came from a Buffalo priest, Father Zucher. And, frankly, I will say I thought it rather to the discredit of the priest or clergyman or the good citizen who did not stand up for us. I believe in all proper humility; I believe in cultivating a spirit of impartiality; but I have never gotten to that point of impartiality where I could regard the law-breaker and the man who kept the law as equally good,

and I never have gotten to that point in city government where I would say that the opponent who believed in dishonesty among public officials was as good as the man who believed in honesty.

I challenge the support of honest and decent men for what we have tried to do in New York. We doubtless shall from time to time make errors. If we did not we would probably make nothing else. If you are going to "lead freely" you have got to "take punishment," if you will allow me to speak in the language of those who box; you have got to "take punishment" when you "lead freely," but you can only win the battle by being aggressive. If you stand off; if you stand aloof; if you never do anything for fear of making a mistake, you won't get anywhere. As I say, we are bound to commit errors, but on the whole we know we are doing what is right. We know we are raising—I am tempted to say we are raising incalculably higher—the standard of public morality, the standard of decency. We have done it absolutely without regard to party. We have acted absolutely without regard to creed; we have acted simply as honest American citizens, and I feel that we have a right to challenge the support of all other honest American citizens.

In closing, I have but one thing to say. We have at times been told, sometimes as a threat, sometimes as a warning, sometimes with a note of entreaty and despair from the man who told us that our course was jeopardizing the reform movement; that we had made the reform dose a little too drastic. To that I can only answer this: That if our people when they won the election did not mean what they said, they would better have lost it; that if we can only stay in power at the cost of doing exactly what we denounced our foes for doing,

we would better go out of power. We may lose; nobody can prophesy exactly what will turn out always in American politics; we may lose, but we might have lost in any event, and if we had lost and had not done what we deemed right, then we would have merely been covered with infamy, and if we had kept in and had not done what we thought was right we would have gained nothing. I would rather, of course, see our system, the system of honesty and decency, perpetuated; I would rather see the people who think as we believe all honest officials should think, keep the reins of power, but I would infinitely rather see our people lose than see them flinch one hair's breadth from the course we have marked out.

I have immense faith ultimately in the sober judgment of the American people. I believe that they are a law-abiding and an upright people, and I know that Republican government is worth preserving only on the supposition that in the long run the mass of the voters will stand for honesty and decency, but I admit that at some given election under the influence of some particular demagogue, or misled by some particular emotion or chain of events, they may go wrong, and I can only say that I would infinitely rather lose power because of having enforced the laws honestly than keep power at the cost of corrupt connivance at lawbreaking and corrupt association with lawbreakers.