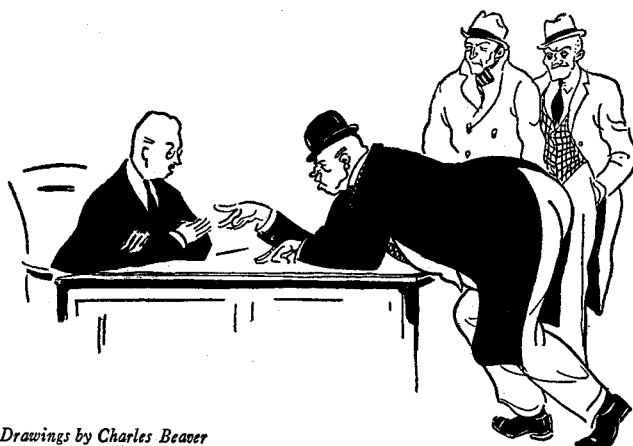


# Honesty in Politics



Drawings by Charles Beaser

by **RICHARD F. WARNER**

**I** SUPPOSE everyone thinks that politicians should be honest if not brilliant. Apparently it is assumed that the mere business of being honest rests entirely with the individual politician, whereas he cannot be held solely responsible for his mental attainments. College professors, students of economics, sociologists, and editorial writers, all have a great deal to say about honesty and dishonesty in politics. It is one of their favorite themes, and since politics — whether we know it or not, or will it or not — infringes upon all of our lives to varying degrees, these men are quite correct in spending so much time writing and talking about it.

In my own opinion I very seriously doubt that the average politician can be honest, and by honest I am not resorting to an unreal, to a Sir Galahad, definition of that word, but merely to its conventional meaning. My approach to politicians has differed from that of political students. As a newspaperman it has been my business to write about politicians, to interview them, to attend their conventions and party caucuses, to hear their press agents, to talk with their district leaders and with the lieutenants of their district leaders, to campaign with them, and, when it is all over and the public has registered its choice, to print their swan songs or their victorious thanks to the electorate. I have followed politicians

elected or appointed to office, have heard their deliberations as members of the legislature and of city councils, and have spent many hours indeed writing about them and the measures which they advocated for the public weal or opposed for the public weal.

Frankly, I like politicians. I have always found them very human and, on the whole, far less affected than many of my friends who are engaged in professions of a type considered superior to politics, such as medicine and teaching. I have, also, invariably found politicians personally honest. This does not mean that all of them are personally honest. It simply means that those whom I have known are. Personal honesty and political honesty are — and, I think, should be — two different things.

## GETTING THE NOMINATION

**N**OW, TO PRESENT my contention and essay to prove it — namely, the practical impossibility for any man entering politics to remain conventionally honest.

You, let us say, have decided to enter political life. You have no particular ax to grind. You are not representing any concern which might be desirous of having one of its members, or at least a sympathetic individual, identified with the city or state régime. You are motivated by a very natural and proper ambition to make a name for yourself in your community

and to be of service to the public. You are favored with a small independent income. You enjoyed a "good" education. You went to one of the better preparatory schools, graduated from Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, where you specialized in government. In brief, you are a "gentleman" and the type of man that Citizens' Unions and Good Government Associations the country over love, simply love, to see go into politics.

Well, to continue our assuming, let us suppose that you live in a fairly large city and that you have been approached by certain friends already engaged in politics to run for the City Council. Things begin to happen. You have accepted the nomination and the election comes on November fourth. We will pass over the matter of obtaining the nomination — a matter, incidentally, which can be quite as revealing as being elected. The nomination, in your case, has been handed to you on a silver platter.

Of course there were vague suggestions about a campaign contribution; about a contribution to the city committee of your party; about a contribution, perhaps, to the state organization of your party. Naturally the bearers of these at first vague but later somewhat more insistent suggestions said that you yourself would not be expected to give a great deal, but they reminded you that your uncle, a wealthy old soul, might possibly aid the party if you dropped a hint and told him that you were about to run for office. Also, the organization in your district is building a clubhouse, and the building fund is sadly behind. Your college friends and clubmates might be interested in that fund, and your uncle might be interested in helping it along himself. Yes, the nomination has been handed to you on a silver platter, which may or may not be sterling.

However, there is nothing dishonest about a campaign contribution; nothing dishonest about your uncle's loosening up a bit — he can well afford it; nothing dishonest about your college friends' helping the party if you can prevail upon them to do so (and you probably can't). So far everything is aboveboard, and you start your campaign. First your district leader comes to you and talks things over. He wants to see you elected. Your district, "his" district, has been going the "other way" politically and it just so happens that he doesn't like the district leader of the rival party and he

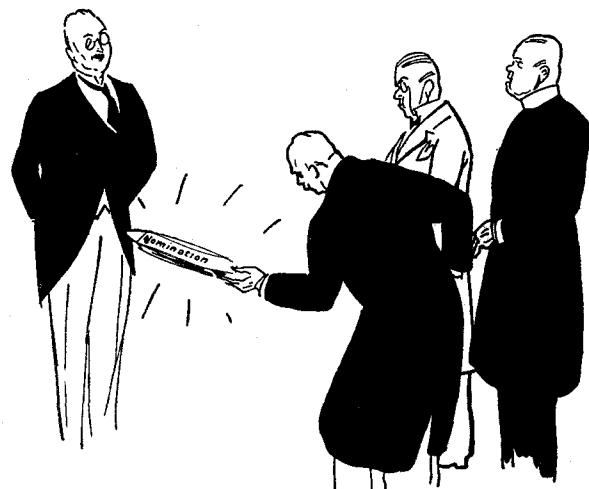
wants to get back into control. He tells you something about this. It seems, and probably is, all right. If elected you will be in a position to get him some municipal jobs that he can hand out to deserving workers of the party in the district. Of course he will recommend only those men who would be qualified to do the work.

You begin campaigning. You find yourself with a press agent and you also find that this press agent is getting quite a salary. He has been recommended to you by a friend of the district leader, and the district leader has assured you that you are getting him cheap. You have a headquarters and there you find several stenographers and a couple of other young women who clip newspapers. They all seem to be drawing pretty good salaries too. The district leader tells you that they are part of the organization, daughters and sisters of leading members.

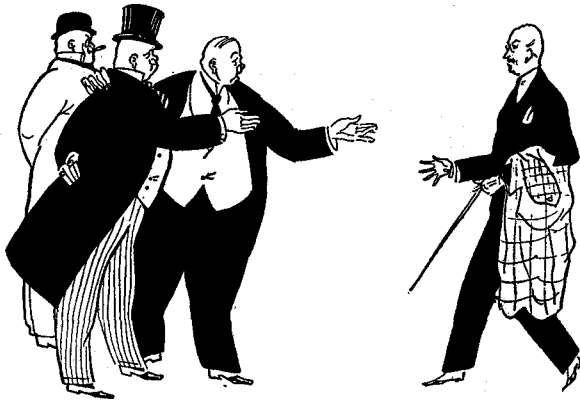
The newspapers have hailed your candidacy. You have been termed "the type of young man we enjoy seeing entering politics, the type of young man not beholden to any political organization or to any individual." Editorial writers have sung your praises, and you have read their writings with satisfaction and sent copies to your relatives. After all, why the devil shouldn't that skinflint uncle of yours shell out for the party organization? He should be proud that one member of the family stands ready to serve the public.

#### INCONVENIENT PREJUDICES

**T**HE DISTRICT LEADER tells you something about your district. It's considerably larger than you thought it was. It seems there



is a Lithuanian section over on the west side; a Negro section up toward the north; a Polish section over east. The residential section these days has quite a number of Jews and (to avoid giving offense to any nationality, let us invent one) Cambians; and the Cambians are in the majority. Of all the races, the one for which you have the most abiding dislike is the Cambian; and of all the Cambians the one you detest the most is the president of the Cambian-American Club, one Cuno, an immigrant who made good by gyping people, first in the cloak and suit trade, then in stock promotions, and



who entered your life by putting over a slick real estate deal which left certain members of your family very flat indeed.

The district leader informs you that the election hinges on the Cambian vote. If you can win that vote, you go to the City Council and will be able to introduce the reform legislation in which you are sincerely interested and about which you and your press agent are issuing so many statements. Cuno controls the Cambian vote, and Cuno, the district leader tells you, is going to support you. All that you have to do in return is to attend the reception that the Cambian-American Club is giving in your honor and at which Mr. Cuno will preside and introduce you as the speaker of the evening. Mr. Cuno is supporting the organization not only verbally, but with hard cash. The district leader promises you that you will not be under obligations to Cuno, now or hereafter.

Well, here is the first problem. There was nothing really dishonest about that Lithuanian dinner that you attended, or your telling the Lithuanians what a wonderful people they were and how much they have contributed to American civilization and the sacrifices they

underwent during the World War. Nothing dishonest about the Polish ball. The mere fact that the Lithuanians and the Poles chance to have a private feud on in your particular city is no fault of yours.

You had a little trouble at one of the get-together Jewish meetings. Some fellow heckled you about one of your club organizations which discriminated against Jews, and although at the time you agreed to that discrimination, you have since learned by practical experience that it isn't for the public good to be narrow-minded. You even wrote to ask one of your old college professors who happened to be Jewish to come to town and make a speech for you, and you were very nice to him indeed when he accepted, even inviting him to your apartment to spend the night.

There is no use being silly about these things; one has to be practical. But this Cuno affair is something else again. You know Cuno is a crook. You know that a "gentleman" — that is, the type of gentleman which the editorial writers say you are — does not associate with Cuno. Yet how can you possibly introduce that reform legislation; how can you possibly start a campaign for the playgrounds which the poor children of your district need so badly, if you are not elected? Besides, you honestly believe — and moreover have every reason to believe — that your political opponent for the City Council is a crook. Certainly he is not the type of man who is receiving the support of the independents, of the intellectuals, of the Good Government Association. The district would suffer by his election, no doubt of it.

Right at this point is where that rationalizing which all politicians have to do begins. The district leader is uneasy. He tells you that Cuno is wondering why you have delayed in accepting the Cambian-American Club invitation. He emphasizes the fact that the Cambians are a clannish lot and that Cuno, for all his hard dealings, has a sensitive spot, his pride. Should Cuno go over to the opposition, all is lost.

As for yourself, you have been enjoying a new and very pleasant sensation — public importance. Daily you have been giving out interviews to the press. Reporters have been covering your meetings; photographers have been sending off their flashlight powders. Victory is in the air. Your press agent — he turned

out to be a damned decent chap after all — says so. The election is only two weeks off, and at this stage you can't afford to throw all those people down who have been working for you — the district workers, members of your own family, the various committees organized for your election. And, too, this campaign has cost you a good bit more in the way of money than you expected.

But, deeper than all this, you have learned something about your district and the people who live in it, their problems, their needs. Pleasant and flattering as are the editorial comments and the assurances of your press agent and the glowing introductory speeches made in your behalf, you wish to serve your district. You have become sincerely convinced that it needs you. As a member of the City Council, you will be able to help the district. To cite just one specific benefit, you will be able to give it those playgrounds needed so badly.

You rationalize. You accept Cuno's invitation and attend the dinner.

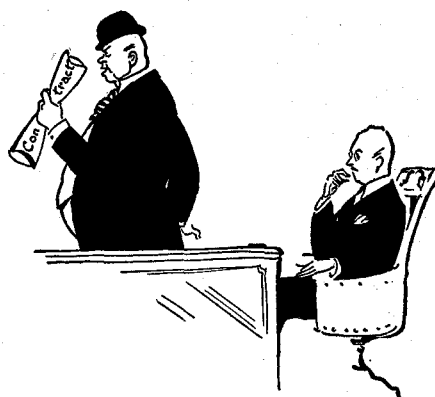
#### ELECTION AND AFTER

**O**N NOVEMBER fourth you are elected and on the following January first you take office and begin to serve the public as one of the twelve members of the City Council. Does your district leader now pass out of the picture? Is Cuno eliminated? Not at all. Your district leader is after you about those appointments. You discover that his choices are some of Cuno's men, and not very good men at that. You discover, too, that if you are to accomplish anything you must work with your colleagues on the City Council, for it so happens that the party to which you belong is the minority party, and if you are to obtain those playgrounds you must play the game sensibly.

There is talk of putting you up four years from now as president of the City Council. If you win, the party might make you mayor, and from mayor it might lead to lieutenant-governor and governor and, if you succeeded, who knows, it might mean the White House. Can you risk your political future, especially now that you have started so well? Is it worth your while to make an ethical issue with your district leader and with Cuno? You are under no illusions about yourself. You are not — as yet — in any position to dictate. You are nothing more or less than a young fellow starting out

in politics, and you know that there are several other young fellows living in your district ready to start out also, some of them from a financial standpoint much better fixed than you are.

Besides, what have you done that is dishonest? Absolutely nothing. You have not received any money from anyone. Cuno's men — the ones that your district leader wants you to appoint — may not be good men, but you have no proof that they are dishonest; and the jobs they would get are not important, certainly not as important as your job on the City Council, or as important as the reform legisla-



tion that you are introducing and your playgrounds. You appoint Cuno's men and you attend the City Council meetings. You have amassed a wealth of material on playgrounds. You have statements from the leading physicians in your neighborhood indorsing them and from the various health and welfare societies. Money must be appropriated for them, and the Mayor must sign the appropriation measure. The Mayor belongs to the opposition party.

One day you are approached by one of the opposition (it may be the Mayor's secretary, or it may be one of the City Councilors) about the letting of a certain contract for, let us say, a subway extension. You know all about that contract. The Good Government Association opposes it; independents oppose it; the better press opposes it. You have no proof, no positive proof, but morally you are certain that there is dirty business in it. The contract bill is scheduled before your playground bill. You are no fool and you know very well indeed that if your playground bill is to get by and receive the Mayor's signature and not be tabled or endlessly referred back to the committee, you will have to vote for that subway contract.



The contract, because of the manner in which the funds are to be raised, is a special piece of legislation. Under the rules of the city charter, to prevent any shady business, special legislation of that character must have the unanimous support of the City Council. Although a minority member, you can block that contract. It all comes down, very simply, to a deal. Are you ready to become a partner to a deal which you are morally certain is dishonest?

You rationalize again. No special harm, certainly no direct harm to the poor of the city, or to the wealthy for that matter, will be done by the letting of that subway contract. A few insiders may take a split somewhere along the line. It may not be according to the ethics that you were taught at school or in accordance with the ideals of editorial writers or in keeping with the lofty pronouncements of the Good Government Association. You, as a humble member of the City Council, are in no position to change things. When you become president of the Council, when you become mayor — ah, that would be different! But now nothing that you might say will make any difference in the civic administration.

The harm that may be done in the letting of that contract is as nothing when contrasted to the benefits that the children of your district will derive from the playgrounds. It is ridiculous to compare the two. One belongs to a small clique having no bearing upon the public; the other belongs to the public and helps the public. You vote for the subway contract.

#### UP THE LADDER

**A**ND SO GOES your political career. The breaks in the game have favored you. Your health remains good and you were, after serving out your term on the City Council, elected president of that body and now, after two terms as president, you are mayor of the city. Political writers predict that you will be the next governor of the state. You are even being mentioned as your party's presidential candidate six years hence.

No longer does the Good Government Association refer to you as the type of young man, *etc.* In its annual report on your character it "views with regret" certain episodes. It harks back to the letting of that old subway contract and it mentions several other bills that passed the City Council while you were a member. As

for yourself, you knew then and know now that it was essential for you to have voted for those measures which the Association criticizes adversely if the reforms that you advocated were to become laws.

For instance, one of the achievements of your administration as mayor has been the consolidation of overlapping municipal departments. The result has been greater efficiency and a saving of the public's funds. It meant, of course, fewer jobs for district leaders to hand out to their henchmen, and you faced stubborn opposition. You had to indorse and vote for that totally unnecessary "public improvement" in Smith's district — an indoor swimming pool that cost the city \$150,000 — and you had to support Harmon's bill for a street-surfacing project, equally senseless, which cost one hundred thousand dollars. You had every reason to believe that both Smith and Harmon received a cut after the contracts for the two public improvements had been let, yet you never would have been able to consolidate those municipal departments without their votes. The unnecessary money spent in their districts was picayune compared to the amount saved and efficiency gained by the department consolidation.

You have learned a great deal since you were the type of young man that the Good Government Association loves to see entering politics, the type of young man beholden to no organization or individual. The better press still supports you, and deservedly so. You have made good contacts with the writers of public opinion. You talk things over with editors and with the various prominent civic leaders in your community. The Good Government Association, as I have said, views with regret certain aspects of your career. It wishes to know why Cuno should have been a member of your recent campaign committee for the mayoralty and why Cuno's nephew is now your private secretary. But the Good Government Association indorsed your candidacy for mayor because your record as a member of the City Council showed definite reforms; and, for the same reason, the Association will indorse your candidacy for governor.

You have made your district a stronghold of your party and you have done it by making the Cambians members of your party. You now realize that when you first ran for the City

Council and had Cuno's support, Cuno was backing you because he chanced to be sore, for the moment, at the opposition district leader. You needed the Cambian vote, not only in your own district, but throughout the city, if you were to be elected mayor and that is why Cuno was a member of your campaign committee. You will need that Cambian vote for governor, too.

If you had not been elected mayor, those overlapping city departments would not have been consolidated. The public would not now be enjoying the splendid services of the excellent public health commissioner whom you appointed over the protest of certain organization politicians who knew that they would not be able to "control" him. You have been honest. You have served your public. You have been a party to deals, some of them fairly rotten, but for every deal you put through a measure that far outbalanced any shady contract. For every minor appointment that you winked at, knowing that some district leader was getting a job for "his" man, you made a major appointment. You rationalized and saw the political game, not subjectively, but objectively, and, what is of more worth, played it effectively.

#### HONESTY — THE BEST POLITICS?

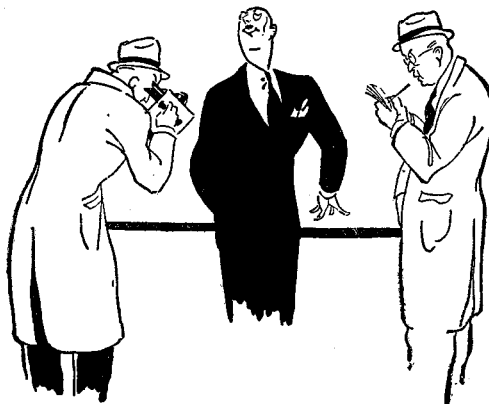
**T**HIS, THEN, is the recital of a young man who entered politics in a large city. I doubt if anyone who has experienced practical politics will see in it any exaggeration. I doubt, too, if the young man presented here could have, or should have, acted differently than he did. I suppose that it was dishonest, even from a conventional standpoint, to have attended Cuno's dinner and accepted Cuno's support; dishonest to have voted for the letting

of that subway contract which was itself dishonest; dishonest to have signed public improvement measures he knew to be wrong.

But it appears to me logically unsound to compare the actions of a man engaged in politics to the actions of a man removed from politics. Politicians, doctors, ministers, editorial writers, and plumbers all work in different mediums. My criticism is that those who write about dishonesty in politics go on the basis that honesty is a commodity that remains the same under all conditions. To me, honesty or dishonesty in politics is subject to change, and perfectly and properly so.

I said at the beginning and I repeat now that I doubt if any politician can be honest in the generally accepted definition of that word, but I maintain and repeat again that this does not mean that he is a dishonest man, even politically. Essentially it is up to the man entering politics how far he will permit himself to rationalize. The line is hard to draw and difficult to define; once one has started rationalizing, excusing one's actions to oneself, it is very easy to continue. In my opinion a politician is justified in rationalizing so long as he contributes a definite service to the public. A good politician, a big politician, will use the political organization and not permit the political organization to use him. The district leader becomes his man; the Cunos become his unwitting allies.

I know of two men, of opposite parties, who were able to accomplish this to an outstanding degree. Naturally there have been and there are many others, but these two occupy nationally important positions in the country's history. Their reputation for personal integrity is beyond dispute. One is dead — Theodore Roosevelt. The other is Alfred E. Smith.



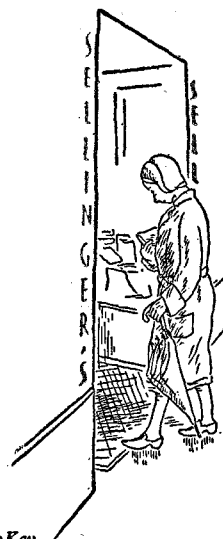
# Miss Tillson

## A Short Story

by DORIS PEEL

I

Drawings by Dorothy McKay



IT WAS one of the bad days in Sellinger's Basement.

The evening before the papers had carried the usual advertisement: "Gigantic Sale of Ladies' House Dresses" — with a row of elegant, perilously slender ladies leaning nonchalantly against the railing of a country-clubbish looking veranda. That always brought them in. By half-past eight there were tight, silent little groups outside all the doors. It was funny the way they stood — she noticed as she went past them to the employees' entrance at the Southby Street corner of the building. Quite motionless — darting suspicious, hostile glances at one another. The way people acted when there were a lot of them applying for the same job. She knew. My word, if looks could kill! They'd all be falling over like tin soldiers. A regular slaughter. . . .

By ten o'clock things were at their worst. The counter was a small wall with great waves of women dashing up against it. They snatched dresses away from one another; they shouted: "Girl! Girl! Get me a green in size forty! Where's the belt to this one? Find me a pink check! I'm next — say! I've been —" She had such a funny feeling sometimes. Suppose the wall broke! The waves would rush at her, rush over her. She felt quite frightened.

Miss Fingell and Miss Weise were thrusting things into bags and changing money like mad. Miss Fingell's hair was coming down, but she couldn't stop. Miss Weise was gnawing at her mouth, and shouting back: "All right! Just a minute, just a minute —" She'd better be careful, talking to them like that. If Mr. Crew heard. . . .

How thick the air was, stifling; and the smells — the starchy smell of the dresses, the smell of sweating underarms, and hot breath, and cheap fur that had got wet outside in the rain. And funny how many people smelled of *bacon*. She always noticed. "Girl! Girl! —" their voices struck her unceasingly. She seemed to feel them rather than hear them. Against her chest, and flat in her face. Even after all these years.

Miss Weise swooped down for another handful of bags. She was muttering again, savagely and bitterly. Miss Weise often muttered — things. She tried not to mind, but she always did. Each time something inside her protested: "Oh, *please* —" in a very ladylike voice.

"Girl! Girl!" But this was getting dreadful! Why didn't Mr. Crew send them help! They *must* have help! She called: "Miss Weise, we must have help!"

"Yeah!" jeered Miss Weise. "Try and get it!"

Oh, dear — oh, dear! "Yes, madam, I'm trying to find a thirty-eight — blue, did you say? — yellow? —" Perhaps that nice Miss Spencer would come over. She was on gloves, two counters back. She had come over last week, without anybody telling her to, and said: "Look here, I'm going to help." Just like that. She felt a warm wave of pleasure at the thought of it. "Miss Weise," she called again, quite brightly, "perhaps Miss Spencer will —"

"Can't," flung back Miss Weise. "Gone upstairs."

Upstairs. Oh — another one. She paused, just for a moment, a little faint. She saw Miss Spencer upstairs: wide, cool aisles, people