

SIDE-LIGHTS ON NON-PARTISAN POLITICS

BY GEORGE S. BUCK

FORMER MAYOR OF BUFFALO

NON-PARTISAN politics sounds like a contradiction in terms, but the fact remains that no campaign can be conducted for the settlement of issues or the choice of candidates to manage the affairs of a great municipality without the use of political methods. It is the purpose of this article to give some experiences with Buffalo's plan to relieve its city government of machine politics.

The present Charter was adopted by an almost two-to-one vote in the fall of 1914. It is what is known as the straight commission form of government. All the legislative and executive powers of the city are vested in a Council of Five, elected at large. The Mayor is the only member of this body who runs as a candidate for the position which he is to fill. His duties are fixed by the Charter. The other four are elected simply as members of the Council, and after taking office are assigned to head the other four departments into which the administration is divided. Three weeks before election a special city primary is held in which any one may be a candidate who can secure three hundred signers to a petition placing his name in nomination. After primary day there are left in the field twice as many candidates as there are positions to be filled, and these candidates are the ones who have received the highest vote in the primary. The old-line party organizations are not forbidden to take part in the primary, but one need not be affiliated with them in order to enter it. This primary was devised for the express purpose of loosening the grip of party organizations on nominations. The Buffalo Charter is the work of a group of citizens who were actuated by no motive except the desire to gain better government. They were goaded into activity by the sufferings of the city from bi-partisan political control plus a complicated Federal Charter. The new one went into effect on January 1, 1916. Four municipal elections have been held under it, and certain tendencies have developed which are worth the consideration of all who are interested in the subject of city government.

Just a few words as to the writer's qualifications as an observer of political conditions in Buffalo. For four years I was a member of the Republican County Committee, and in contests within the party have always been a supporter of the regular Republican organization. In the past twenty years as a county official and as Mayor I have fought ten campaigns in my own behalf either before primary or election day, and have helped in campaigns conducted for others.

While a firm believer in party organizations, I have been of the opinion that it would be better both for the municipality and for the party organizations to divorce the city government from partisan politics as far as possible, and have held the faith that the evils of democracy as shown in our governmental organizations could be lessened by bringing the management of affairs closer to the people.

The men in control of the regular party organizations have been bitterly opposed to Buffalo's Commission Charter. The reason for this is not far to seek when one understands the conditions with which the leaders of an organization must contend. A party machine cannot exist without patronage, the opportunity to do favors, and some money to be expended in bringing out the vote. In certain limited portions of a large city it is possible to secure volunteer work at the primaries and on election day. In the greater part of a city this kind of work will not be done unless those who do it are paid for their services. Let no one imagine that this means the buying of votes, nor corruption of any kind. The fact is that most people have to work hard to make a living. They cannot give time to politics unless they are paid for it in some way, either by cash or favors or by the hope of securing appointment to a position. People of this type have in large measure the human virtue of gratitude. There are few who do them favors, and when they receive one it generally takes the form of help in some trying situation. They will show their appreciation by working hard for the politician who has befriended them. This explains the great hold of Tammany Hall or any well-organized political machine.

In the spring of 1921 a bill was passed by the Legislature to wipe out Buffalo's Commission Charter and restore the old federal type of city government. Under the law of New York State, this bill had to be submitted to the Mayor. I vetoed it with an emphatic message. This earned for me the bitter hostility of my own party organization, and in the fall, when I became a candidate for renomination, the chairman of the Republican County Committee also entered the race. He received the support of the Republican organization, and my friends created a temporary one in my behalf. There was also in the field a candidate backed by the Democratic organization. In the primary the Mayor received more than the combined votes of the two candidates, backed, respectively, by the Republican and Democratic organizations. In the four municipal primaries which have been held under the present Charter there has been a total of not less

than seventy-five candidates, but I can recall only one supported by a regular party organization who succeeded. I was that candidate, and came within three hundred votes of defeat by the Socialists. This shows very plainly that the public at large so distrusts the regular party organizations that they are powerless to pick the candidates in a non-partisan primary.

It is a common failing of human nature to leave undone those things which ought to be done. This is so well recognized that it has found a place in religious liturgies. Men who ought to insure their lives will not do so unless hounded by some agent who follows them up until the act is accomplished. Many people will not vote unless they are sent for and carried to the polls. In order to do this work of getting out the vote it is necessary to have an organization in every election district. In Buffalo, which is a city of a trifle over half a million people, there are 240 election districts, and \$20 in each district, on the average, is a moderate sum to spend in bringing out the vote. When I was a member of the Republican organization, I was always given \$40 for this purpose. That was when a dollar was worth twice what it is to-day, and \$40 was none too much, so that in order to work effectively the first item of expense confronting a candidate is \$4,800 for primary day. This must be repeated on election day. Here is a perfectly legitimate item of expense, amounting to nearly \$10,000, without any allowance for office rent, stenographers, printing campaign literature, auto hire, advertising in the press, and a number of other unavoidable items if a candidate is to reach the people. There is only one way to do this without a large expenditure of money, and that is by a very long speaking campaign, utilizing every kind of gathering to which the candidate can gain admission. Furthermore, he must have some message that will catch and hold the crowd. When I was a candidate four years ago, my opponent had neglected to try to remedy a distressing breakdown in street railway service, and my promise to undertake the task found a ready response in a suffering public. The result was a great success at the polls.

Last fall I could present only a record of excellent administration, a promise to keep it up and to do my duty as the executive sworn to enforce the laws. While essential to the welfare of the municipality, there was nothing in this equal to the stirring quality of my opponent's promise to bring back good beer and wine. The result was a victory for him.

It is hard to realize the indifference

of the public to the duty of exercising the right of franchise. The public school authorities estimate that one-fifth of the population is of school age. In Buffalo there are 44,000 aliens over twenty-one years of age. With a population of 510,000, it is safe to estimate that not more than 66,000 people are between school age and twenty-one. Therefore there must be 300,000 people with the right to vote. In the Mayoralty contest last fall 144,000 people registered and 120,000 cast their votes for the respective candidates for Mayor. Exactly forty per cent of the possible number of votes were counted, or, to put the matter in another way, in the Buffalo election twenty-one per cent of the voting population decided what kind of administration the city should have. This makes it very plain that a mere fraction of a city's population, if it knows what it wants in the way of an administration, can secure its ends and determine the kind of government under which the overwhelming majority shall live. I know that some of my fellow-townsmen will challenge these figures, but to show that my conclusions are substantially correct the reader is invited to study the returns in the State of New York for the Presidential election of 1920. Harding and Cox together received 2,652,000 votes out of a possible 5,518,000 citizens who were qualified to vote, which shows that, with all the excitement and the big issues at stake in a Presidential year and with the utmost exertions of two effective party organizations, only a little more than half of the electorate were sufficiently interested to go to the polls.

There are very practical difficulties in the way of putting together an organization to work effectively in bringing out the voters in behalf of any individual candidate when the territory is as large as must be the case in a city of half a

million population. Let the reader put himself face to face with the task of picking a man and woman in 240 districts who have enough standing with their neighbors to at least cause no harm and who can be relied upon to try to interest others in the candidate. The services of many people must be accepted about whom little is known. My experience has been that some people will come in and volunteer. No reason can be discovered why their services should not be accepted. These people appear interested. They call from time to time and report progress. After primary or election day is over it is found that, although paid for their services, they also accepted money from one or two other candidates and when the crucial day arrived they actually worked for no one. When there are opposing candidates in the field who are abundantly supplied with money, here is what will happen. Some one will turn up at our candidate's headquarters and want to know who is the representative in a certain district, professing to desire to work with that representative. The seeker after information will then go to our candidate's representative and try to persuade him to stop work. If that does not succeed, pressure will be brought to bear, and if this fails then a sum of money will be offered, and in many instances one of these methods succeeds in paralyzing the agency on which our candidate is relying to carry a certain district. Again, it will be found that some will volunteer to represent our candidate, and later events will make it clear that this was done with the deliberate purpose of betraying him on the decisive day.

In this field of organization the old-line parties have a very great advantage, because they are continuing bodies. It is part of the work of the leader of a regular party organization to know the

party representative in each district. He must watch the returns after every election. If the vote does not come out as it should, the cause must be found. If the party representative has turned traitor or is incompetent, then it becomes the task of the boss to nominate some one against him at the next primary and use all the influence of the organization to beat him. In this way the party organization is kept tuned up to a pitch of effectiveness far beyond what can be the case with any volunteer organization, because the latter can neither punish treachery nor weed out the worthless.

A regular party organization possesses certain distinct virtues just because it is in business permanently. It cannot afford to stand for what is impossible or ridiculous or illegal. It has a continuing responsibility and must pay the penalty for its mistakes. An individual candidate may stand for what is absurd, provided it catches the popular fancy, because he may be so situated that he cares nothing for his political future and is interested only in carrying the election that is immediately ahead. No party organization can play all the politics with complete abandon in one year. It must consider years that are to come.

Under the non-partisan direct primary, because of the indifference of the electorate, the prejudice against the regular party organizations which keeps them from nominating candidates, and the impossibility of creating effective temporary organizations, conditions favor the type of candidate gifted with a ready tongue and the audacity to espouse whatever will stir the hopes and rouse the interest of a fifth of the voters, while the candidate who from experience with affairs has developed moderate views and caution labors under a constant handicap.

THE RADICALISM OF THE FARMER

BY HUGH J. HUGHES

I AM speaking of the farmer from the standpoint of the farmer—as a farmer and as a farm-paper editor acquainted with him in all his moods during the past thirty years.

It happens that during very recent years the farmer has been and is roundly damned by a certain vigorous portion of the press as a profiteer, an ingrate, a follower after false political gods, a potential Bolshevik.

If these charges were true, it remains a question whether it would show either political or social wisdom to proclaim the fact, unless supported by substantial proofs, which are usually lacking.

The fact is, that if the farmer is class-conscious or is tempted to wage a class warfare, either by direct party action or

through political "blocs," not he, but rather the non-agricultural groups have marked the lines of political and social cleavage, and the press representative of these groups has kept up a line of badinage that has at last achieved its logical result—that of forcing together by outside pressure the agricultural group.

This is no new discovery. In fact, it is so old a cause of farmer prejudice against city leaders and leadership that it is for the most part overlooked. The custom of ignoring the farmer, or, worse still, of imputing to him as a class lack of intelligence and vision, especially of political vision, is a century plant that has more than once blossomed into the ugly flower of open misunderstanding.

Mark, I am not charging that this misrepresentation of the farmer has been *willfully* done. The essential fact is that it has been done.

The daily press of the city more particularly has catered to its own clientele—has been, in the past, quite too ready to jibe at everything beyond its own balliwick.

Now jibes are well enough if deserved; otherwise, they are tools of trouble that the wise leave strictly alone. They are slow poison. They are directed at the father; they are returned by the son, and on the come-back it is not infrequently the well-meaning, the right-intentioned, who receive them. Having neither willed nor done injustice themselves, they convict the farmer of