

## The Civic Revival in Ohio

### Self-Government

By ROBERT H. BREMNER

"I have shown how Privilege used local, county, and state officers, city councils, the state legislature and the courts to frustrate our efforts. Is it not strange that witnessing the power of Privilege through the control of these agencies the people do not awake to the fact that with these agencies in their hands *they* would be supreme?"—Tom L. Johnson, *My Story*.

WE HAVE SAID that the Civic Revival was a fight for self-government and we must repeat once again that the interest of the leaders of this movement in the political remedies popular during the Progressive period sprang from their conviction that cities would be unable to adopt privilege-destroying reforms like municipal ownership and the single tax until the people of the cities had obtained a larger degree of actual self-government. We have already noted the emphasis Samuel L. Jones and Brand Whitlock placed upon the principle of non-partisanship as a way of making politics reflect the popular will rather than the interest of parties. Two other measures by which the Civic Revivalists believed that government could be made more honestly representative of the people were the initiative and the referendum and municipal home rule.

The opinion of the leaders of the Civic Revival in regard to the value of political remedies as aids to the solution of civic problems is made plain by contrasting their attitude toward the revision of city charters with their belief in the initiative and referendum and home rule. Unlike many municipal reformers the leaders of this movement were not primarily concerned with the form of city government. They recognized the utility of a model charter but they had learned that privilege was indifferent to forms. They believed that no matter how perfect a paper system of government was devised, tinkering with city charters would do no real good until privilege had been overthrown.<sup>1</sup> The enthusiasm of Tom L. Johnson and Golden Rule Jones, Brand Whitlock and Frederick C. Howe was saved for the kind of political remedies which would fill the forms of

<sup>1</sup> For an illustration of the ability of privilege to circumvent the best of charters, see Lincoln Steffens, "Autobiography" (New York, 1931), p. 409. Frederick C. Howe gives his opinions of the model charter in "The City, the Hope of Democracy" (New York, 1905), pp. 177-86; and Whitlock states his ideals of the best form of municipal government in a letter to Richard S. Douglas, May 11, 1909, Allan Nevins, ed., "Letters and Journal of Brand Whitlock" (New York, 1936), p. 112.

popular government with the substance of it. They knew that direct legislation and home rule solved no problems in themselves but they felt that these reforms left the solution of problems in the hands of those who were most competent to give them an equitable answer. They agreed with Lincoln Steffens that while the common people might be no better and no more intelligent than the "best" people, they were more disinterested. Having fewer possessions to protect and fewer friends to reward they could afford to be fair. Their economic interests did not interfere with their duties of citizenship. "And though each individual in the great crowd lacks some virtues, they all together have what no individual has, a combination of virtues."<sup>2</sup>

According to Herbert S. Bigelow, then, as now, Ohio's foremost advocate of direct legislation, one's attitude toward the initiative and referendum is the test of the Progressive. A Progressive is one who believes in the people's ability to govern themselves. No one who feels like a man quoted by Judge Lindsey can honestly support measures which propose the further democratization of government. "You know the corporations give this state good government. . . . Suppose the corporations have got millions of dollars worth of franchises; they know how to use them and the people don't," said this defender of the rule of "the beast" in Colorado. "Now be honest! You know the people aren't fit to govern themselves. If the corporations of this state didn't do it for them, what kind of a state would we have?"<sup>3</sup>

The Civic Revivalists looked upon the initiative and referendum as powerful weapons for an awakened democracy. By giving the electorate the right to originate legislation, the initiative would make it possible for the people to secure the enactment of measures whose passage a reactionary legislature or council might otherwise prevent. The referendum would give the electorate a veto over acts or ordinances passed by the legislature or council and thus check corruption. Privilege would not corrupt the legislature to obtain laws which the people would overrule. The effect of the initiative and referendum, thought the supporters of direct legislation, would be to remove the influence of privilege from assemblies by enlarging these bodies to include all the people. The initiative and referendum would make it easier for the people to get home rule, municipal ownership, and the single tax. Privilege might be able to corrupt a council or the

<sup>2</sup> Steffens, "Upbuilders" (New York, 1909), p. x. The preface to this book gives a clear exposition of the basis of the Progressive's faith in people.

<sup>3</sup> Ben B. Lindsey and Harvey J. O'H. O'Higgins, "The Beast" (New York, 1910), p. 228.

legislature, but it couldn't corrupt the whole electorate.<sup>4</sup>

Brand Whitlock thought the fight of the cities of Ohio for municipal home rule linked them with the struggle of the medieval cities of Italy, Germany, and England to free themselves from vassalage to royal, noble, or ecclesiastical overlords.<sup>5</sup> Newton D. Baker likened Whitlock and his own defense of their cities' rights against the inroads of state legislation to the American colonists' defense of their charter rights against the impositions of the British Parliament.<sup>6</sup>

The desire of the Civic Revivalists for local home rule was only in part a manifestation of the traditional American distrust of centralized authority. It was not centralized government they distrusted, but the irresponsible government which the rule of privilege brought. They wanted home rule as much because of the actual situation with which they were confronted as because of any theoretical justification of local autonomy. Nearly every attempt they made to better conditions in their cities, practically every step they took to put their program into effect, brought them into conflict with state officials. Until the ratification of the home rule constitutional amendment in 1912 the cities were the creatures of the state legislature. It not only determined their form of government but limited the powers that municipalities could exercise. The legislature fixed their debt limit,<sup>7</sup> prevented them from engaging in municipal ownership of certain industries, and refused them the right to devise their own system of raising revenue. Whitlock explained that the cities' subjection to the legislature meant that they were ultimately ruled by men from rural districts who seldom understood city problems and who were often joined in a conscious or unconscious alliance with the system of the public utility corporations and the political bosses.<sup>8</sup> Three acts passed by the legislature in its 1902 session show the extent of its interference with local affairs: One act took the administration of the Toledo police force from the mayor and put it in the hands of a bi-partisan board appointed by the governor;

<sup>4</sup> For the attitude of the Civic Revivalists toward the initiative and referendum, see Howe, "The City, the Hope of Democracy," p. 171 *et seq.*, and the following article and pamphlets by Herbert S. Bigelow: "From Pulpit to Stump," *The Independent*, vol. LXI, nos. 1036-37 (November 1, 1903); "Initiative and Referendum" and "New Constitution for Ohio. . . ."

<sup>5</sup> "Forty Years of It" (New York, 1914), p. 348.

<sup>6</sup> "Letters and Journal of Brand Whitlock," p. xiv.

<sup>7</sup> William Allen White, in "The Old Order Changeth," *The American Magazine*, vol. LXVII (April, 1909), p. 610, thought the desire to escape debt limitation was one of the most important reasons for the demand for home rule.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Richard S. Douglas, May 11, 1909, "Letters and Journal of Brand Whitlock," p. 114.

another act removed control of the Cleveland park system from city officials and gave it to a county board; the third practically suspended the cities' right to assess property for taxation by giving the county auditor the right to demand the appointment (by State Board of Tax Revision) of a Board of Tax Review whose assessments were to supersede those of all other local bodies.<sup>9</sup> Howe noted that while cities had long been ruled from the State Capitol, there was a growing tendency for them to be ruled from Washington. This was not because of the extension of the Federal government's regulatory activities but because of the increasing practice (which Howe illustrated in "The Confessions of a Monoplist" of the state boss to send himself to the United States Senate.

The Civic Revivalists had a reason more fundamental than expediency for demanding home rule. They wanted the city free so that it could prove itself the hope of democracy. Conscious of the advance of industrialism and urbanization, they saw the city, after centuries in which world civilization had been predominantly rural (ever since the fall of Rome, said Howe), finally resuming its place as the controlling feature of social life. Henceforth, they believed, the battle for democracy will be fought in the cities, for the city is the microcosm in which is concentrated the problem of achieving democracy in an industrial era.<sup>10</sup>

Few of their contemporaries realized more strongly than the Civic Revivalists the problems with which industrialism confronts democracy, and none were more aware than they of the suffering which life in an industrial city can impose on humanity. But as with Howe, so with other leaders of Civic Revival, faith in people was the magic glass which made them see the promise of the city beckoning through its problems. Never before have the people had such an opportunity as democracy affords for the orderly solution of their problems, Howe asserted. "Never before has society been able to better its own condition so easily through the agency of government."<sup>11</sup>

They thought that the efforts of Cleveland and Toledo to free themselves from privilege were important in the long movement in which the city has been the philosopher's symbol of social harmony.<sup>12</sup> "Was there ever such material for an experiment in democracy as Cleveland offers?" asked

<sup>9</sup> These acts are discussed by Milo Roy Maltbie, "Home Rule in Ohio," *Municipal Affairs*, vol. VI, pp. 234-44 (June 1902).

<sup>10</sup> "Forty Years of It," pp. 157, 184. For Johnson's attitude on this question see the quotation from him in Edward W. Bemis, "The Street Railway Settlement in Cleveland," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. XXII (August, 1908), pp. 574-75.

<sup>11</sup> "The City, the Hope of Democracy," p. 301.

<sup>12</sup> See Whitlock's peroration on the city, "Forty Years of It," p. 374.

Howe. "A growing city strategically located in the region where coal and iron ore can be brought together more economically than anywhere else in the world; a ten-mile water front for commerce, a spreading hinterland for homes, and an enlightened population. And how many peoples undertaking such an experiment have had a leader as resourceful as Johnson?"<sup>13</sup> Whitlock wished that all the people could realize Johnson's sincerity and ability as clearly as privilege did.<sup>14</sup> His work, and Jones' work—the work of all the people connected with the Civic Revival—was significant, Whitlock believed, not for Cleveland and Toledo alone, but for all cities. They were building communities that would be working models of democracy.

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<sup>13</sup> This quotation is a condensation of a passage in "Confessions of a Reformer" (New York, 1925), pp. 113-15.

<sup>14</sup> Letter of Johnson, November 19, 1907, "Letters and Journal of Brand Whitlock," p. 84.

### *A Remote Factor in Productivity*

INVESTIGATIONS CARRIED ON at Yale a while ago indicated that the human organism functions more efficiently on four light than on three heavy meals daily. Wartime industrial plants provided snacks and time to eat them, morning and afternoon, and said this increased worker productivity. A department store has noontime troubles because customers swarm in then and if the help has swarmed out to lunch, that's bad. So Chicago's Marshall Field & Co. suggested that clerks volunteer to combine the 1-hour lunch period with their two 15-minute rest periods, morning and afternoon, and instead take 45 minutes off sometime during the morning and again during the afternoon— but no midday lunch period. The system pepped up the volunteers who took their breaks at 10:30 or 11:15 a.m. and 2:30 or 3:15 p.m.

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