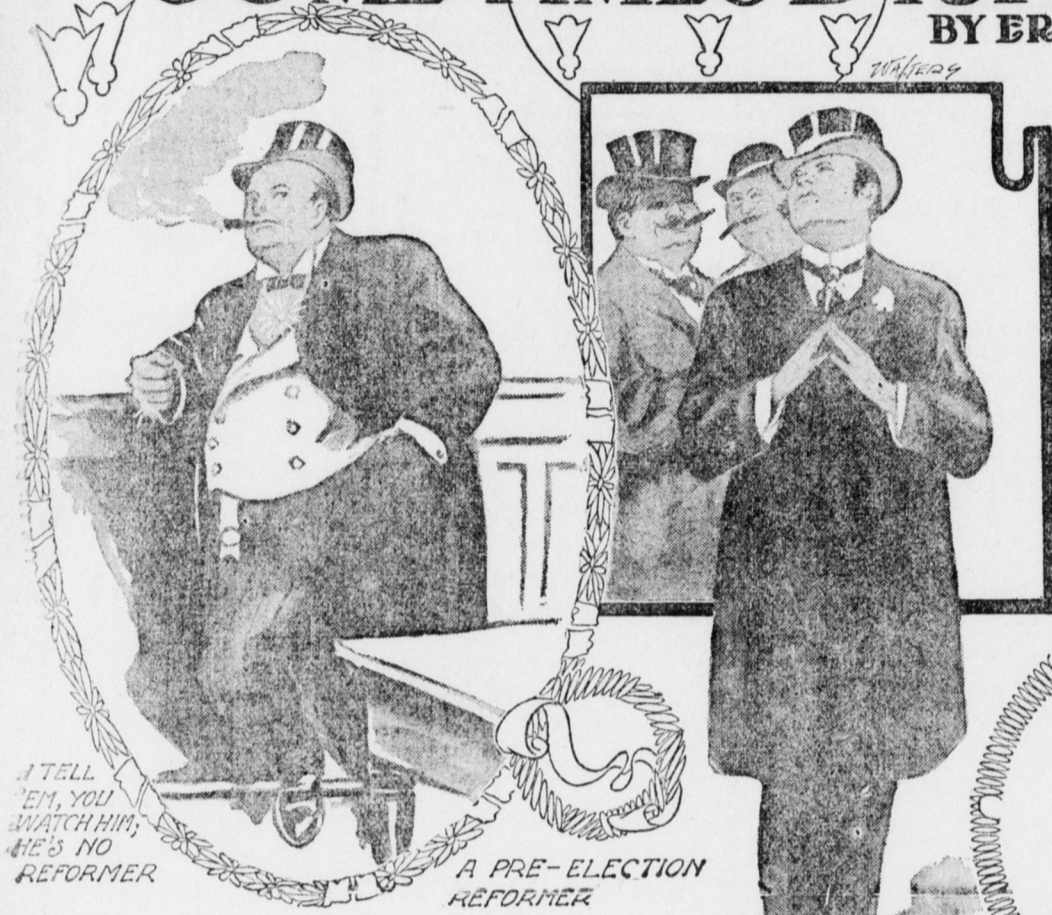


POLITICAL REFORMER

SOMETIMES DYSPEPTIC

BY ERNEST McGAFFEY



A REFORMER in politics is sometimes a dyspeptic, but not always. He is also sometimes actuated by motives entirely impersonal and unselfish. But not always. And reform politics may be classed as of two kinds the counterfeit variety and the genuine.

Independent, or reform movements in political campaigns, are intended to be the breaking away of members of the old parties and a consolidation of these "bolters" for the purpose of electing a ticket which is supposed to be better than either of the old-line party tickets. Sometimes an independent movement means this. Sometimes it means that a Democrat or a Republican who has failed of the regular party nomination has been persuaded to make the race on the ground that he has been deprived of the nomination by unfair means. But the basic element of independent movements is always a claim toward a bettering of conditions, and therefore arguing a reform, politically.

Then there is usually the Prohibition movement to be reckoned with, and this is strictly founded on reform principles. Or there may be an educational feature in the campaign which will prove to carry the balance of power as to votes, and which may be adopted in the platform of either of the parties, with a view to secure votes for the whole ticket. Politics is largely a game of expedients, and as the only things that count, in the last analysis, are the votes, it follows, therefore, as the night the day, that votes are the prime necessities, and any expedient to catch votes is considered justifiable.

Other phases of reform politics may enter particularly into national campaigns, and may influence local conditions enough to swing victory to a side which may be weaker on paper than its antagonist.

In every large city and noticeably in my own city, I found two well defined types of the political reformers, with a smattering also of what were known as "cranks," "dreamers" and "visionaries." One of the two types referred to was the hard-headed citizen who, regardless of ridicule and discouragement, steadily set himself to work to better the class of official selection. Without caring anything for party affiliations, he associated with organizations which "went after" weak or unfit candidates, and supported and encouraged good candidates for all offices, whether state, county or municipal.

This class of men accomplished, with the aid of decent politicians, a great deal of good. In the beginning, like all men actuated by really high motives, they were derided and lampooned, and their lot, like the policeman's, was not a happy one. But as time went on they became a force which had to be reckoned with, even by the most hardened of the "bosses," excepting in what may be classed as strictly "saloon wards."

In the saloon wards, where the aldermen for instance, were saloonkeepers, or where the saloon influence predominated overwhelmingly, the "bosses" did not mind reform politics any more than a rhinoceros would mind the bite of a mosquito. I never could understand, knowing the absolute hopelessness of it, why the reformers would sometimes try to "break into" such a ward in an aldermanic campaign. I remember very well the occasion of a gentleman calling on me and endeavoring to enlist my services as a speaker in a campaign of this sort.

"You know the disgraceful condi-

tions obtaining in that ward?" he asked, inquiringly.

"Oh, yes," was my answer. "Well, we want to put up a candidate for alderman there and see if we can't arouse the better element there. We want to go in and fight the saloons to a finish," was his next remark.



-WANTED DOGS CAUGHT WITH A SOFT CURTAIN ROPE

"Whose finish?" said I. "Oh, we will probably be beaten," he admitted, "but we want to give them a campaign of education and enlightenment. What that ward needs, what every ward needs, is a chance to have its higher nature aroused. What they want, I'm convinced, is more opportunity to see the light."

"My friend," was my reply, "I've traveled some in that ward. What they want there is not more light, but more beer."

Yet, despite sometimes misdirected energy, these men and their associations did much in making political conditions better. For that they deserve substantial credit. So long as they were absolutely non-partisan they wielded considerable influence, and properly, but on occasion they allowed prejudice to bias them and did injustice to good men.

The other type of well-known reformer was the one who continually headed "reform" movements. He might be a candidate for alderman, or the legislature, or congress. But wherever there was a "kick" coming, and a meeting advertised to protest, or organize, this class would be on hand early and get the chairmanship of the meeting, usually coming out in a "ringing" speech of denunciation against the infamy which the citizens had met to combat. This put the reformer "next" if it was a proposition to nominate an opposition candidate, and he often got away with the nomination. Or, if he was a professional man, a lawyer, a doctor, or a real estate man, even, it was a pretty fair advertisement, wasn't it? Not so "poor" to have your picture in the paper next day, with a long account of you, your business and your speech, etc. Something that would have cost you coin to have in the papers, and you got it for nothing. And then the reporters out to interview you and quite a racket started about you.

And in every large city I suppose there are only a few bright promoters like that standing around waiting to sell a gold brick or two.

Some of these "reformers" were pretty fierce when they happened to land in an office. A few of them were swept into the city council astride the top of a wave of "popular indignation" and they were the hungry boys, some of them. They were simply on the qui vive to be "approached." And when they were tempted they fell swiftly and without a sound. Their motto was that of the Hon. Webster Flanagan, with a different interpreta-

tion. "What are we here for?" was their slogan, and they went after franchise "divvies" or any other "divvies" like a terrier after a rat.

Real reforms were not so elaborately advertised as the sham ones; the louder the "holler" about the reform, the less genuine reform was in sight. And then there were the "fad" reformers, going about seeking what they might devour in the shape of having unmuzzled dogs caught with a soft curtain rope instead of a wire noose, cab-horses provided with seats while waiting for a fare, the distribution of copies of Browning's poems to crossing policemen, or some such similar projects.

There are sometimes uneasy people in every community who want to run the rest of their neighbors; the bigger the community the greater they are liable to be in number. And in a city of two millions of inhabitants they are sure to be found. They haunt the gallery in the council chamber of the city, they infest the mayor's office, they surge in with the crowds having hearings in the public offices in the city halls, and whenever they have no connection whatever.

Substantial reforms are of slow growth. It took over 20 years' steady work to drive the infamous justice of the peace system out of Cook county. Some notable reformers went along very well for a time until they got so prominent that they were offered a high-salaried political position. And then they dropped practically from sight as reformers and reappeared as pay roll artists. This caused at times a revulsion of feeling among the reformers at heart, but they did not let a little thing like that entirely discourage them.

I got so that I could usually "spot" a reformer as far as I could see him. The majority of reformers are very busy walkers and talkers. They are not confined to one nationality, although I should judge that the bulk of them are Americans. They all have "missions." If you agree with them, and do everything they ask, you are "a patriot." If you disagree with some of them in any way, shape or manner, you are either a scoundrel or without mental balance. But to be "a patriot" in the eyes of those who were fanatical you must accede to their demands.

"Patriots," said Sir Robert Peel, "they spring up like mushrooms in the night; I can make 50 patriots in a single hour; I have only to refuse some unreasonable or absurd request, when up starts a patriot."

There were a number of women reformers, too, during my political years and they were invariably enlisted on some moral question, as they looked at it, tobacco, whisky, child labor, the bettering of conditions for women, the saving of girls, etc. They were very much in earnest, faithful and enthusiastic to their ideals. Occasionally they succeeded, and at least, they never seemed discouraged. It is to the credit of politicians in general, that they were listened to with perfect respect, even when it was apparent that conditions made it an absolute waste of time to discuss the questions. Sometimes an ordinance barred their way; at other times a state law, or possibly the constitution of the United States itself was a stumbling-block, but they were heard with patience.

Reform politics during my day concerned itself most particularly in rehabilitating the personnel of the city council. In this it met with substantial success, and it was the one excep-



"REFORMED"

tion to perennial reform which was genuine. Not that the reformers did not occasionally have "an ax to grind," but that, in the main, they aided the best candidates. But at times they saddled themselves with some bogus reformer and jammed him through at the polls, felicitating themselves that they had "put another over the political plate" when they had in reality only added a "cheap grafter" to the city's pay roll.

When this happened it made the regulation, gilt-edged grafters in the council indignant. Not that the "reformer" should turn out to be "looking for something," but that he so often took anything he could get. This made trade bad, for it scaled prices and such a recruit to the ranks of corruption caused a "bear" market in votes.

A cheap scoundrel earned just as much contempt in the council as an overcoat thief earns from a railroad manipulator of stocks. I recollect the arraignment that one of the "regulars" gave one of these easily purchased "reformers."

Said the "regular," puffing slowly at a big black cigar, the little finger of his left hand adorned with a four hundred dollar "shiner," and his shirt-front sporting its mate, presented by his admiring "constitents":

"I reckon I size that guy up right, at the start. I tell 'em I seen what kind of a lobster he is, the first flop of the box. I tell 'em, you watch him; he's no reformer, and he's no thoroughbred. He blows up in the stretch the first time they're off at the gut. An', say! Did he? Well, he's elected all right, and he goes over an' hooks up with the geezer in the next ward that went in the same time he goes in. Them two frames up and goes out for the stuff. Do they get it? Yes, they get it, and how much? Say, on the level now, on the square, they split three hundred between 'em for a little thing they pull off. A hundred and fifty apiece, see?"

He paused and took a fresh puff at his cigar, and resumed: "Why, if any cheap stiff 'd come to me and try to insult me with less than \$500 I'd throw the skate out of my office." And the end of his cigar glowed with righteous indignation.

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