

THE INVESTIGATION OF THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENTS *

MR. SPEAKER: Your committee, appointed by the resolution of this House, had its first meeting on January 19. Since then we have been nineteen days in session, sitting continuously often from ten in the morning till five or six in the afternoon, in addition to which we have done an immense amount of work when we were not in session. As the resolution adopted by the House calls special attention to the Department of Public Works, we felt it our duty to try and investigate that department first, but we found it already under investigation both by the Senate Committee on Cities and the special Grand Jury, one body having the witnesses we asked for and the other having the books that we needed. We were therefore obliged to give up trying to investigate that office, and took up various other departments instead.

We conducted our investigation rather with a view of seeing what the evils of the present system were, and if they were due to bad laws, and then to proposing such legislation as we deemed would best remedy these defects. But we also found a large number of abuses were due, not to bad laws, but to the violation or evasion of good ones. These abuses we have brought to the notice of the proper prosecuting authorities of

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the county and State—namely, the corporation counsel, the district attorney, and the attorney-general. We have examined very fully the offices of the county clerk, register, surrogate, and sheriff. We have also made a hasty examination in the Department of Parks and the Department of Taxes and Assessments.

As far as we went, we certainly found the government of the city of New York to be in a condition that was simply appalling. It was in a condition that would not be allowed to exist for a moment if the majority of the voters of that city were alive to the dangers that threaten it and were influenced by the slightest particle of public spirit. The testimony taken before the committee in relation to the alleged "deal" by which the present mayor obtained his office, and in relation to the acknowledged deal by which the president of the board of aldermen obtained his office throws a curious side-light on the history of politics in the city of New York, and shows that the men who nominally hold office in that city are not really those who control the powers. The latter, on the contrary, are outside parties who cannot be held responsible to the law for their deeds or misdeeds.

We submit with this report nine bills, all submitted unanimously. Three of them have reference to the sheriff's office, one to the county clerk, one to the register, one to the surrogate, one to the Tax Department, and one to the Department of Public Parks. If these bills are adopted they will not only remedy many of the present abuses, but they will also effect a direct saving to the city of New York of two hundred thousand dollars a year from the time that the laws go into effect, or, in other words, capitalizing this sum, the result of the investigation of this committee will be

equivalent to a saving of over three million dollars to the city and county of New York. We submit with the bills an abstract of the testimony taken before us in relation to the various departments.

We found that the county clerk received last year something like eighty-five thousand dollars; the county clerk, during his term of office receiving, in other words, nearly a quarter of a million of dollars. This would be bad enough if it all went to himself, but it does not. A large proportion of it is given to the various halls and organizations which support the successful candidate for the office, and it thus becomes one of the most gigantic corruption funds in the city of New York. We report a bill putting the county clerk on a salary of fifteen thousand dollars. This salary was agreed to by the committee after very careful consideration and by the advice of their counsel, Messrs. Peckham and Miller, who considered that any less sum would fail to secure the county clerk against the responsibilities inherent to his office and would not be sufficient to get a man of ability to undertake the work. We provide that his subordinates shall be paid a salary out of the city treasury, and that all the fees received by him shall be turned over to the city treasury. In addition to the fees legitimately taken by the county clerk, we found that the present incumbent of that office had, no doubt in good faith, taken one hundred and thirty-seven thousand dollars to which he had no possible title, and that his predecessor, Mr. Butler, had taken thirty-six thousand dollars in the same way, and also that Mr. Butler's predecessor, Mr. Thompson, had taken certain sums of money without warrant in law. We will lay these facts, or, indeed, we have laid these facts, before the corporation counsel, and suits will be

brought to recover these sums, amounting in the aggregate to between fifty thousand and sixty thousand dollars, which have been taken illegally from the city.

We make similar changes in the office of register, which is also a fee office. We could not find out the exact amount that was received by the register during his term of office, for the predecessor of the present incumbent, Mr. Docharty, had, in direct contravention of the law, failed to make the return required by law to the secretary of state annually, and had also removed his books from the office. We will direct the proper authorities to take action in these cases. Mr. Docharty himself had been obliged to go south to Cuba on account of his health, and we were unable to have him appear and testify before the committee. The present register having been in office but one month, could only give an approximate idea of what his fees were. Taking the first month as a sample, according to his own statement, he would receive only between thirty-five thousand and forty thousand dollars a year. All this was on the assumption that he would spend one hundred thousand dollars a year on salaries. This sum we consider greatly in excess of what need be spent for salaries. The present register testified that he could not remember whether he had spent over or under fifty thousand dollars to insure his election, which goes to show the fees received by the register, as in the case of the county clerk, constitute in a large part a great campaign fund, upon which the various halls of all parties and organizations, without any regard to their political affiliations, draw. We have put the register on a salary of twelve thousand dollars, the same salary as now received by the surrogate, as the

duties of the register are certainly as hard as the duties of the surrogate.

We examined into the surrogate's office very carefully, also, and we report a bill to make the surrogate's employees be paid salaries to be fixed by the board of estimate and apportionment. We found in the surrogate's office that the main difficulty was that a system of the grossest blackmail and extortion prevailed among the employees, and that it was practically impossible for any outsider to get any work done in that office without paying for it, or, in other words, that a man would have to bribe public servants before they would do their duty. We also found that the surrogate had permitted certain men to have desks in his office and allowed them to exist under the shadow of his official presence and to charge the people who came into that office all sorts of exorbitant fees. We found that these men had a practical monopoly of certain duties and were allowed to charge therefor whatever they saw fit. We believe that the best way to prevent abuses in future is to have these men removed. The testimony taken in relation to the subordinates in the surrogate's office was placed before the Grand Jury. As we believe, that testimony fully warrants the indictments of the parties implicated; and we also feel constrained to say that the evidence tends to show the surrogate must have been guilty of the grossest negligence, or else of actual connivance with the acts of his subordinates, because they were so gross and flagrant that it was clearly his duty to have known of their existence.

We have examined with great care the sheriff's department. It was impossible to put the sheriff on a salary on account of a provision in the constitution which prevents us making the county liable for the

deeds of the sheriff. We found in that office the grossest abuses existing—that his deputies consistently blackmailed all those with whom they came in contact—and we think the courts should take cognizance of this matter, rather than the legislature. We found, also, that he had received enormous sums of money for doing in reality no work. For example, he charges fifty cents for sending a copy of each conviction to the secretary of state, which amounts to about twenty-three thousand dollars a year. In other words, he charges twenty-three thousand dollars for what could be done by one clerk at one thousand two hundred dollars a year. I could mention other instances, but they are already familiar, throughout the testimony. In reference to the sheriff, we recommend that the board of apportionment fix the amounts of his fees in detail.

We have also investigated very briefly the Department of Public Parks, and we found that the main characteristics of that department were imbecility and extravagance. It is at present under a four-headed commission, and one of the results of this was that for two years there was a deadlock in the board. Every man was voting for himself for president, as that is the only salaried office in the board. Finally they have adopted a rotation plan, and each member is president for three months. We report a bill making the Department of Parks single-headed.

We have also investigated very briefly the Department of Taxes and Assessments, and we found an extraordinary state of things existing there as regards the assessing of real-estate property. There is absolutely no system whatever in the assessing. The time was too short to complete our investigation here. We

accordingly make this report with these bills, and we feel it our duty, though an unpleasant one, to ask for a longer time to continue the investigation into the other departments of the city government. The committee make this request with extreme reluctance and ask that their time be extended until April 15.