Hazen S. Pingree and the Detroit Model of Urban Reform

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ABSTRACT. Hazen S. Pingree was a remarkable civic leader. In his four terms as mayor of Detroit from 1889 to 1897, Pingree lowered the cost of vital public utilities, including gas, lighting, and transit; modernised the city's sewage system; and rooted out corruption and dishonesty in municipal government. He successfully spearheaded the movement for the three-cent streetcar fare and brought Detroit to the brink of public ownership and operation of its own transit system. Pingree's social reform program for Detroit centered around two interrelated urban reform movements gathering steam at the turn of the 20th century: the movement for municipal ownership and the movement to equalise taxes by increasing taxes on corporate property. Both of these movements drew heavily from Henry George's single tax. In particular, Pingree's efforts to secure a municipally owned and operated street railway system and effort to increase taxation on corporate property illustrate the ways in which turn-of-the-20th-century civic leaders drew from the rhetoric and substance of George's ideas to implement progressive urban reforms.

Introduction

By most accounts, past and present, Hazen S. Pingree was a remarkable civic leader. In his four terms as mayor of Detroit from 1889 to 1897, he lowered the cost of vital public utilities, including gas, lighting, water, and transit; modernized the city's sewage system; and rooted out corruption and dishonesty in municipal government. He successfully spearheaded the movement for the three-cent streetcar fare and brought Detroit to the brink of public ownership and operation of its own transit system. At the height of the Depression of 1893–1894, he instituted one of the most famous systems of outdoor relief. Pingree’s Potato Patches, as the system became known, provided free farms to poor families on unused land where they could grow, among other things, potatoes. Pingree also oversaw the construction of new parks, better schools, and public baths. At the end of his fourth term as mayor, state voters elected him to the governorship where, in two terms, he helped pass one of the most sweeping tax reform bills in the state's history. In 1985, urban historian Melvin Holli (1999) conducted a national poll among urban scholars and journalists to find the 10 best and worst big city mayors in the United States since 1885. Pingree came in third, just below Fiorello La Guardia (1934–1945) of New York and Tom Johnson (1901–1909) of Cleveland. Pingree was not just a remarkable mayor, he also was a pioneer. When Pingree first assumed local office in 1890, Holli (1969: 157) pointed out that, in the United States, “there was not a single municipal model after which Pingree could have fashioned his social reform programs for Detroit.” In the era of machine politics and boss rule, most other big city mayors prioritized structural improvements designed to make municipal government more efficient and less corruptible. Such reforms included new city charters, improved auditing and accounting mechanisms, and electoral reform. Pingree also pursued structural changes. He secured, for example, expanded veto powers, and he fought for a new city charter. But he also discovered early in his political tenure that the complexities of urban life demanded a more robust social program. In prioritizing social justice over political change, Pingree crafted a new model of municipal reform. Pingree’s social reform program for Detroit centered around two interrelated urban reform movements gathering steam at the turn of the 20th century: the movement for municipal ownership and the movement for tax equalization.
Both of these movements drew heavily from Henry George’s single tax. In particular, Pingree’s efforts to secure a municipally owned and operated street railway system and increase taxation on railroad property illustrate the ways in which turn-of-the-century civic leaders drew from the rhetoric and substance of George’s ideas to implement progressive urban reforms. Besides his incorporation of single-tax principles, Pingree’s success in passing meaningful social reform also depended on his ability to enforce political loyalty, willingness to sacrifice personal time and money for his causes, and direct appeals to the city’s voters. Although highly critical of the machine-style politics practiced by political bosses like New York’s William Tweed or George Cox of Cincinnati, Pingree utilized some of their same techniques to remain in office and win support for his programs. As Dorsett (1972: 151–152) has pointed out: “The Pingree organization assessed political appointees for campaign funds and made loyalty to the mayor’s principles a requisite for keeping jobs.” Additionally, Pingree chose not to prosecute prostitution, violations of the state’s Sabbath laws, or illegal liquor sales. “Accepting support from the underworld,” Dorsett continued, was “part of the machine tradition.” To Pingree, however, these “unsavory” practices were mere symptoms of the much more serious social problems of unemployment, low wages, and the rising cost of living.

Pingree’s success also stemmed from his willingness to invest a considerable amount of his personal time and interest. To raise money for his Potato Patches, for example, Pingree sold his prizewinning Kentucky racing horse, Josie Wilkes, at auction. Although largely symbolic, the gesture made a significant impact. “The important thing was that the transaction had the desired psychological effect of capturing the public imagination,” Detroit historian George Stark (1943: 420) explained. “Funds poured in on the mayor and land was soon available.” Similarly, when Pingree discovered that the gas companies in Detroit had been overcharging customers—including himself—he successfully filed a lawsuit, demanding reimbursement. As a wealthy man, the lawsuit served the mayor’s larger purpose of demonstrating that his administration would not tolerate dishonest business practices.