
Franklin D. Roosevelt — “The Great Communicator”

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**Albany, NY - Radio Address re Reorganization
of Local Government**

Reorganization of local government, county and town, radio
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Two months ago I came to the conclusion that it was a waste of time to keep on asking a politically-minded Legislature for some evidence of active interest in improving local government. For three years running I had most politely begged the legislative leaders to have at least a study and report made to see whether ways and means could not be devised for applying business principles to the conduct of public affairs in our towns, villages, cities, and counties.

I have often described the fact that our local government machinery is practically the same as when it was first set up under the auspices of the Duke of York 250 years ago. And, furthermore, I have constantly called people's attention to the fact that 80 per cent of all taxes paid in the State of New York, excluding Federal taxes, goes to the support of local government and only 20 per cent to the support of the State government.

It is, of course, a simple fact that reorganization of local government means the abolishing or elimination of a good many political jobs. And, it means also, getting better trained people for work that requires special training. These two facts no doubt account in large part for the unwillingness of legislative leaders to do anything to change existing local political or governmental machinery.

It is also perfectly clear that in 1929 when the country was on the crest of a speculative and unsound boom, the average citizen was paying little attention to the unsatisfactory character of the smaller units of local government. Now, however, the tax problem is hitting nearly all of us. There are certain activities of government which cannot be eliminated, or even cut down, such as welfare and unemployment relief, education, hospitals, and the keeping in repair of public necessities such as highways. Nevertheless, very large savings in expenditures can be made by putting the business management of all of these essentials on a more economical basis, chiefly by the method of making consolidations and changes in the structure of local government itself.

I hope I have made myself clear as to the fundamentals. I want to make myself equally clear on another fundamental. It is my thought that changes should be made strictly in accordance with the principle of home rule, i.e., that the Constitution and the laws of the State should be so changed that local units may decide for themselves whether they want to adopt some new form, providing for consolidations, eliminations of officials, or even the setting up of new administrative methods. In other words, I want to make it possible for people in the towns and counties and in the smaller cities to have a referendum on whether or not they want to change.

Why is it that these local government institutions are out of date and are not adapted to present day conditions? Here are some of the reasons:

(1) We have come to a technical age involving engineering, health, accounting, assessing, education, welfare work, and administration of justice—all of them on an entirely different scale from what they were 50 years ago. Our grandfathers did not have the same problems to meet.

(2) Space and distance are wholly changed. The automobile, the hard road, the telephone, the methods of finance, all have contributed to make four, or five, or six towns as accessible and homogeneous today as one town was two generations ago. The unit of economic life has grown to four, or five, or six times the size it was in the old days.

(3) We have a new concept in regard to the functions of local government. It is no longer merely an agency for regulating peace and order but has become an agency for furnishing important services—roads, schools, health, fire protection, water, sewers, sidewalks, police protection, etc. As a result we have not merely town government and village government, but also a lot of other little governments called districts, each one of them with the power of taxation, the effect being a patchwork adjustment with many overlapping layers of government, and overlapping layers of officials, and overlapping taxes.

(4) We have in many parts of the State new problems caused by the transition of rural communities to urban, suburban, and industrial conditions.

The effect of all of these using an outgrown system is that we are getting bad service—more expensive service, unplanned service, confused service—and as a combination of all of these we are getting also the development of an invisible government which, because it is complicated, is working too often without our knowledge or consent.

When I decided that it was useless to keep on asking the Legislature for some action, I invited the Institute of Public Administration, a non-partisan civic organization, which had already made important studies in other states, to give me a survey of conditions in this State and to make to me suggestions for improvements.

This institute has made a most interesting report to me and I am using it as a basis of an appeal to the people of this State to arouse their interest, to give them something concrete to think about and to urge them to insist on some kind of action by their representatives in the Legislature.

The report which has been made to me gives 100 per cent confirmation of what most of us already know in regard to the thoroughly unbusinesslike system of local government existing today. Let me give you a few simple facts.

In county and town governments alone in this State, leaving out incorporated cities and villages altogether, there is a vast army of about 15,000 officials most of whom are elective and have constitutional status. These include in the counties chiefly county judges, sheriffs, surrogates, county clerks, registrars, district attorneys, coroners, county attorneys, and commissioners of welfare; and in the towns—superintendents, town clerks, justices of the peace, assessors, town collectors, highway superintendents, constables, and welfare officers. These paid officers, with minor exceptions, are found in all counties and towns. They constitute what may be called the regular army of occupation. But, besides this army of occupation there is an even greater corps of what I would call the home guards, paid and unpaid, part and whole time, elective and appointive, representing the police, light, fire, sewer, sidewalk, water, and other local improvement districts and the school districts with their boards, superintendents, clerks, and teachers.

To illustrate, take just one case. Leaving out of the picture the five counties within the city of New York, and the wholly suburban counties of Westchester and Nassau, and looking at the other 55 counties of the State, there are in the neighborhood of 11,000 tax collectors. Just think of that! These 11,000 tax collectors represent 911 towns, 461 villages and over 9,000 school districts—an average density of tax collectors alone of about 12 per

town. It is interesting to note that these 11,000 tax collectors form a greater army than that which won the battle of Marathon. Note this too—this huge force is actually responsible for the collection of only about one-sixth of the property tax levied for all purposes within the State. The remaining five-sixths is collected by less than 200 city, county, town and village officers.

The great majority of the county and town officials I have mentioned are salaried officers, but fees of unknown amount are still allowed to many of them. We have been trying to get away from the ancient fee system but it still remains firmly entrenched in town and county government. This fee system should be abolished without any question but this is contingent to a considerable degree on the consolidation of local government units and a readjustment of their relations to the county and to the State.

Let me at this point make it clear that this distressful and wasteful condition affecting local government is not that of New York alone. All over the country the mounting burden of taxation is compelling public officials and citizens to direct their attention to reconstruction.

In Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Minnesota, California, Missouri, Michigan, and many other states, corrective measures are now under way. In North Carolina the state has taken over maintenance and repair of all roads including what we would call town roads. In Virginia, while county lines remain, many county functions have been consolidated into districts comprising several counties. In Minnesota a forest area county sparsely settled has been allowed, after a referendum, to abolish township government. In California a commission has recommended radical changes in the state constitution to set up the county as the responsible agency for the administration of local government. Let me sum up the situation by saying that the movement to improve local government is active everywhere and spreading all over the United States.

In this State and most of the other states the pattern of local government is so closely woven into the Constitution that mere legislative laws would not be effective without some form of permissive change in the State Constitution itself. But the Legislature alone has the power to present a constitutional change to the voters for approval or disapproval.

Before we consider what constitutional amendments are necessary we must present, at least for public discussion, some kind of a plan.

It seems to me and to those who have made the study for me that one fairly clear rule should be set up: We need larger units of local government. This involves either abolishing town governments or at least consolidating a large part of their functions. It means also abolishing special districts or at least consolidating them. And it means, even without abolishing counties, at least the union of certain functions of county government for special purposes.

It means also a clearer line between State functions and local functions because it is obvious that the State can handle some government work more efficiently and more cheaply than where the work is divided up between hundreds of local units.

Let me give you two simple illustrations of the need for reform:

(1) The highways of the State are under three forms of management—State, county and town. Over 900 town highway departments, 57 county highway departments, and the State Highway Department give us a thousand separate and independent units to carry on one single task. Four separate towns, for example, which are geographically a unit, have today four separate sets of expensive highway machinery, as for instance, four separate and distinct road rollers costing \$5,000 apiece which are used each an average of 21 days in the year. Obviously one road roller would do all four towns at a saving of \$15,000 out of the \$20,000.

(2) Is the preservation and improvement of health a State function, or a county function, or a town function? Today we have all three. Why not find out whose job it is?

The Institute of Public Administration recommends the immediate creation at this year's session of the Legislature of a commission to study local government and bring in at the next session a definite plan on which constitutional amendments can be based. We have had legislative commissions assigned to do this work in the past and they have spent large sums of money and have brought in nothing worthwhile. I hope that the present Legislature will authorize at once the creation of a commission of practical experts, of business men, of students of government, of men and women with real vision and with a determination to accomplish something practical and drastic—and without regard to partisan politics. I am asking the Legislature for this action tonight.

The report which has been made to me makes a number of tentative suggestions as a program for discussion and I submit these suggestions to you, not with my approval, because I do not by any means go along with all of them and because we all need more information and discussion, but merely as a suggestion of the problems which must be dealt with.

What I hope to see is an aroused interest in the problem itself, and the detailed suggestions which this study makes are intended primarily to arouse interest, furnish the basis of discussion and result in some kind of a definite plan to improve conditions. Here they are:

(1) It is suggested to abolish town government throughout the State in whole or in part and transfer all or most of its functions to the respective county governments. With this would go abolishing of all local improvement districts and transferring their functions to county governments.

The result of this drastic suggestion would be to eliminate at one stroke literally thousands of local government units and make the county the government unit in their place. Under the plan proposed the county government would administer local town functions and improvement district functions with perhaps provision for some measure of home rule or local representation. The county government would, of course, have to retain certain local offices for convenience, and a local place of contact between the county government and the local citizen.

(2) The establishment of a new form or forms of county government less subject to partisan politics and more suited to the needs and resources of the people of each county.

This means the administration of county government by a board much smaller than the present boards of supervisors, with an executive head of the county government corresponding to the city manager under the manager form of city government. Hand in hand with this goes the suggestion that most of the existing county elective officials should be appointed instead of elected and that the principle of civil service should be extended to most employees, thus eliminating party politics to a large degree.

By abolishing many local officials, such as justices of the peace, and assessors, and concentrating the administration of justice and the collection of taxes in the county itself, millions of dollars annually could be saved.

(3) The survey suggests that the present system of State and county and town highways, with its distribution of State aid to counties and through the counties and towns, should be transferred to the State and the counties alone, thus concentrating responsibility and saving millions more in existing waste.

The survey also suggests the study of transferring county tuberculosis sanatoria and county almshouses to State control with the suggestion of using the Virginia plan of district homes serving several counties.

It suggests also that the functions of the county clerks as recording officers be made a part of the State's recording system.

(4) The survey suggests the establishment of a State reserve similar to what is known as the "unorganized territory" in the state of Maine. This would abolish county lines within the Adirondack and Catskill preserves, where the actual population is so sparse that county government—as in Hamilton County in this State—is difficult to maintain.

(5) The survey suggests an optional—i.e., after referendum—consolidation of several counties not large enough to organize or pay for the different kinds of technical services that government now requires.

(6) The survey suggests establishing State administrative areas for certain functions, as for example, those of district attorneys and medical examiners.

(7) The survey suggests the establishment of county departments of education headed by a county superintendent appointed by the board of supervisors with the approval of the State Department of Education.

(8) The survey suggests readjustment of county, city and village relationships, providing, for instance: (a) that cities and villages under 25,000 population be re-established as limited municipal corporations, transferring to county government certain functions which perhaps could be better administered by county government such as police, health, welfare, assessment, and tax collection; (b) that cities between 25,000 and 100,000 population be given power by referendum to transfer certain of these functions to the county; (c) that cities over 100,000 population be established as wholly independent of the county. This, for instance, would abolish county government in the five counties that make up New York City.

Finally, the survey suggests that the State be zoned, so as to recognize the different needs of government in accord with the actual population trends, and conditions in different parts of the State. The zones suggested are:

Zone A. Unorganized territory, where governmental activities should be carried on directly by the State.

Zone B. The large cities where county government should be abolished.

Zone C. The urban area which would include those areas of smaller cities, towns, and villages, and suburban territory which by virtue of density of population and character of land utilization require the essential services of municipal government.

Zone D. The rural area which includes the vast territory which may not warrant the maintenance of any local government except that of the county itself.

I am giving to you the above brief and necessarily rough summary of suggestions which have been made in order that the people of this State may think them over and in order that the Legislature may see the advisability of authorizing immediately the appointment of a practical commission to make practical recommendations. Let me repeat again that it is my thought that whatever is recommended should, in so far as possible, be in accordance with the principles of home rule—so that each community or each county would have the option after a referendum of adopting some new form of improving and consolidating government. There is no question in my mind that the people of this State are thoroughly and deeply interested in the problem and it is fair to them to give them some kind of a plan to talk over and vote on. We are all interested first in a greater efficiency of government, and, secondly, in a lower cost of government. I am not trying to drive through any preconceived plan, but I am asking you men and women voters in this State to consider many plans and to try to get together for the purpose of accomplishing definite results. I hope the Legislature will give us that opportunity before it adjourns this year.

Good government does not come by mere criticism—it comes by trying to improve outworn systems and keeping government up to date with the changing times. May we all work towards that end. Talk must be translated into action.