

Cleveland Municipal Light

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In Gilded beds, behind closed doors, unfaithful municipal government officials laid down with the moguls of private utilities to violate faithless vows to the public interest. Every trick and position unnatural to the civic welfare was performed when public officials and monopoly interests snuffed out the lights for their roll in the sack of special privilege. Government officials and private utility executives consorted in the granting of lengthy franchises and the tacking of confiscatory utility rates. The silence which followed the seduction of the public officials forced an unsuspecting public to pay the highest price, again and again, for transportation, gas, and electric service.

The introduction of a Cleveland municipal electric system in 1904, in the wake of Gilded-age business-government liasons represented a triumph of principle over prostitution, a victory for the highest expression of popular government, the idea that a city should be run in the economic interests of all; the assertion that the poor and the humble people of a community have just as much of a right to survive as the rich and powerful.

Cleveland's Municipal Electric system sprang from the philosophical commitment to public ownership of Mayor Tom Johnson who wrote, "A large proportion of the political evils of our cities is due to private ownership of public utilities. Private ownership lodges the power to grant franchises and special privileges in some council, legislature, or other public body or official. Just as soon as a man becomes the owner of stock in a public service corporation, he has an interest absolutely opposed to the interests of the city."

Municipal government in this era was an arena in which the democrat sometimes contested with the plutocrat. Progressive reformers such as Mayor Johnson who preached municipal ownership believed there really was such a thing as a *public interest* which was mutually exclusive of the interests of the barons of transportation, finance, energy and utilities. Cleveland's Mayor Johnson took it upon himself to define the public interest in terms of the greatest good achieved for the largest number of people in Cleveland. The establishment of a municipal electric system bespoke a more democratic view of capitalism in a city where monopolists imperiously claimed the utility franchise prerogative.

Mayor Johnson understood well the rapaciousness of the monopolists. He had been one himself. His status as a street car monopolist in Indianapolis gave him an understanding of the dangers of public service monopolies and the moral incentive to later break the City of Cleveland's street car monopoly. Mayor Johnson knew from his own experience that popular government was being destroyed by Privilege whenever government granted a monopoly in a public service area. He viewed municipal ownership of an electric utility as a public right whereas the private utilities coveted their monopolies as private loot. It was this public-private dichotomy in political and economic philosophy which telescoped from the Gilded Age through the establishment of Cleveland Muni Light and into a Hundred Years War between the City of Cleveland and the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company.