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# Searching for Virtue in the City: Bell and Her Sisters

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**Searching for Virtue in the City:**

**Bell and Her Sisters**

H. George Frederickson

Jack Meek

The burden of our claim here is that virtue in the city is to be found not so much in the abstractions and theorizing of higher philosophy but in “vulgar ethics,” Lewis C. Mainzer’s brilliant description of moral education in the classroom and street-level moral practices in the city’s departments and agencies (1991). The hope of virtue in the city is to be found not just in the individual propensity to be virtuous but more so in the development of political and organizational rules and procedures, in virtuous leadership, and in the development of virtuous public cultures.

We make these claims as a way to view what has come to be known as the Bell scandal.

The Bell scandal fits squarely in the traditions of the municipal reform movement, one of the most interesting and important narratives in the history of American political science and public administration. Indeed, the Bell scandal and the other local government scandals in south Los Angeles in the early years of the twenty-first century, are echoes of widespread patterns of corruption in city government across the United States in the early twentieth century. To put the Bell scandal in context and to ground our claims we first briefly review the municipal reform movement and then turn to the Bell and other scandals. We then return to our claim that virtue in the city is most likely to be achieved through the application of vulgar ethics.

### **Municipal Reform**

Among the many challenges facing the states in the newly established United States of America was how to govern cities. Initially most of what we now call local government was accomplished through informal networks of community leaders who functioned according to informal rules and understandings (Warner, 1968). Gradually, as cities grew and it became necessary to provide for some form of local government, the states simply made available the model of government adopted by each of the states and by the United States—the balance of powers between the branches of government or the checks-and-balances model—with an elected executive, the mayor—; elected law makers, the city council, and a court, empowered to govern within particular geographic boundaries. The states also provided a form of local government for rural areas by dividing the state into counties.

As American cities grew, so too did city problems—smoke, mud, dirty water, human and animal waste, epidemics. The largest cities—New York, Boston, Baltimore—were also portals for waves of immigrants: the Irish, the Germans, the Jews, the Italians, the Scandinavians.

Larger East Coast cities rapidly became centers of commerce and industry, and by mid-century the industrial revolution was at full throttle. In the dirt, noise, and chaos of the city it was clear that what was most urgently needed was order. Cities established police departments, fire departments, schools, and public works departments to build roads, bridges, and street lights, to provide for order. With municipal order came boss mayors with long incumbencies, machine politics to confound checks-and-balances, graft and bribery with contractors, and large politically powerful groups of city employees tied to the political machine. Large city governments that were corrupt, lacking virtue, were simply given a particular label, a kind of corruption shorthand, depending on the city—Tammany Hall, Boss Tweed, the Pendergast Machine.

The response to corruption in the city was the municipal reform movement, a significant part of the Progressive Era in American history. Leaders of the Progressive Era included both Democrats—Woodrow Wilson, Al Smith, William LaFollette—and Republicans—William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, Robert Taft. The wider progressive movement included women’s suffrage, prohibition, busting the banking and industrial trusts, public school improvement, self-improvement, and scientific rationality including scientific management. At the center of the progressive era was a particular kind of popular journalism—muckraking—valiant journalists exposing corruption and other dirty things, raking the much to get to the source of bad odor. In many cities the progressive era was notably WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant), and in other cities it was anti-immigrant, opposed to “the great unwashed.” Local advocates for good government came to be known as “goo-goos,” and municipal reform was advocated by leading civic groups and fraternal organizations. It was not unusual to hear

Protestant pastors give sermons against the evils of city government corruption and to advocate reform (Flentje, 1993).

The centerpiece of municipal reform came to be a new form of city government, known as the council-manager plan, or the city manager plan. Unlike the model of city government based on checks-and-balances between the executive (mayor) branch and the legislative (city council) branch of government, the model that was found in virtually all American cities at the end of the nineteenth century, the council-manager model called for a directly elected city council, preferably elected at-large rather than by district, and an appointed, professional, full-time city manager rather than an elected mayor to be responsible for the executive branch of city government. In the council-manager plan, the mayor is a member of the city council and exercises a primarily symbolic role as mayor, presiding at city council meetings, greeting visiting dignitaries, cutting ribbons. The mayor is elected to the city council member and then is selected by the council to be the mayor. The city manager appoints the heads of city departments, including the police and fire chiefs, and they report to him (In the early years of the council-manager plan all city managers were male. Today about twenty percent are female.). Along with many other cities, Wichita, Kansas, adopted the council-manager plan in 1917. Louis Ash was appointed to be the first city manager and in his statement to the press he said, "I believe in a clean city. . . . I will insist on an absolutely clean city. . . . I am a member of the Presbyterian Church and believe in the highest moral standards. . . . I will not let politics enter the city affair in any way" (Flentje, 1993. 36). By the 1960s, about sixty percent of American cities with a population over 10,000 use council-manager form government.

But between the 1960s and the early years of the twenty-first century, almost all American cities had incrementally altered the details of their governments. For example, more than 85 percent of council-manager form cities now elect their mayors directly, and many have given their mayors certain executive powers such as the veto. All but a few council-manager form cities now elect council members by district. Many of the features of council-manager form government are now found almost universally in mayor-council form city government: these include a merit-based civil service; a city manager like official often designated the chief administrative officer and reporting to the mayor; strict budgeting, accounting, and auditing protocols; open meetings and records transparencies requirements. As the details of city government structure have shifted and adapted over the past fifty years it is clear that the two models—the original mayor-council model and the reform council-manager plan—have come increasingly to resemble each other (Frederickson, Johnson, Wood, 2004).

The municipal reform era resulted in a well-known list of agreed-upon assumptions, accepted standards, and preferred practices which, taken together, constituted the aspects of public administration ethics that have to do with cities. Let us call this list the traditional municipal reform and public administration ethics canon, or simply the canon. The canon includes:

### Politics and Administration

- Clear lines between day-to-day professional city administration on one hand and city politics and political office holding and particularly electoral or campaign politics on the other
- the understanding that appointed administrative officials do not meddle in politics and elected officials do not meddle in administration
- Prohibitions against nepotism and cronyism

### Ethical Management

- Merit-based appointment and promotion of the administrative staff as an alternative to political spoils
- professionalization of city employees
- Objective and transparent procurement and contracting procedures
- Encouragement of and support for whistleblowers

### Ethics Standards and Requirements

- Prohibition against conflicts of interest on the part of both elected and appointed officials
  - Fair and equal treatment of citizens
  - Formal adoption of ethics rules and both institutional and professional codes of ethics
  - Prohibitions against bribery
  - Ethics training
- 
- Prohibition against the use of public property or time for personal or political purposes

- NASPAA Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation requirement that MPA degrees curricula include ethics education

### Oversight and Accountability

- Annual external auditing
- Strong systems of state oversight

There are, of course, many more things that could be included in the canon. Taken altogether, full implementation of the municipal reform canon should result in clean, honest, uncorrupt city government. The canon does not rely on the assumption that public officials will be good; indeed it assumes that canonical procedures and processes reduce the likelihood that public officials will be bad. Not being angels, public officials may need help to be virtuous, hence the canon, a hedge against the frailty of human virtue.

There are two “good-government” organizations that were and continue to be particularly influential in municipal reform, the National League of Cities with its “model city charter” and the International City-County Management Association and its advocacy of professional city administration (Frederickson, Johnson, and Wood, 2003). Both organizations serve effectively as guardians of the canon of municipal reform.

Did the municipal reform canon work? Did we find virtue in the city? Mostly yes. As a result of the widespread adoption and implementation of most of the elements of the canon, by the 1960s American city government was far more honest and ethical than it had been at the beginning of the century. This is particularly the case in the American suburbs, newer cities established just before and after the Second World War. Almost all those cities chose the council-manager form of government and adopted the structures and procedures that would



enable the municipal reform canon. To be sure, the traditional ethics canon is vulgar, focusing as it does on what should *not* be done rather than what *should* be done. The full application of the traditional ethics canon can slow government down, cause procedural red tape, and focus on small or petit ethics such as the misuse of computers, cars, expense accounts, and cell phones. The canon can leave big ethics issues such as goal displacement and the weakening of civil society untouched. And difficult ethical issues such as what to do about poverty or the homeless were also left untouched (Anechiarico and Jacobs 1996). Nevertheless, the story of American local government in the last half of the twentieth century and the first few years of the twenty-first century, is a narrative of good government. That is why the Bell scandal and other somewhat similar scandals in south Los Angeles stand out.

To ask again, by the 1960s had the widespread application of the traditional canon of public administration ethics helped the city to find virtue? Yes, but often in small things. It was, however, big events and big ethical issues that punctuated the 1960s—political assassinations, an unpopular war, urban riots. In the context of these and other large-scale events and movements, American public administration, however well it might have earlier contributed to ethical city politics and administration, seemed badly out of touch. As those associated with Minnowbrook and with the so-called new public administration claimed, the public administration of the 1960s seemed adrift and irrelevant to the important ethical issues of the day (Frederickson, 1980).

Because cities were far less corrupt than they once were, beginning in the 1970s the emphasis in public administration ethics shifted from a focus on cities to a national and international institutional emphasis. At about the same time the emphasis on public administration shifted from vulgar ethics to more reputable and elegant philosophical matters

(Denhart, 1988; Rohr, 1978; Rohr, 1998; Cooper, 2006). By the end of the twentieth century, as the attention of the media, of academics, and of opinion leaders was directed elsewhere, problems of local government corruption began to reemerge, and in the southern suburbs of Los Angeles they reemerged with a vengeance.

This brings us to the Bell scandal and to scandals in Bell's neighboring cities.

### **City Corruption in Southern California**

While cases of local public corruption in Southern California are not new, the number of cases and the severity of those cases in the past fifteen years is notable. Corruption is now understood to be an on-going problem (DePangher 2014). According to the Illinois Integrity Initiative of the University of Illinois, Los Angeles is placed second – behind only Chicago - in federal public corruption convictions between 1976 and 2010 (Simpson, et al. 2014).

The city of Bell is at the center of the current focus on municipal corruption in Southern California. Bell is one of a contiguous cluster of smaller cities about five miles south of the center of Los Angeles, situated between three major north-south traffic arteries: the Harbor Freeway, or the 110 on the west; the San Diego Freeway, or the 5; and the Long Beach Freeway, or the 710, on the east. Bell's contiguous sister cities include Vernon, Bell Gardens, Maywood, South Gate, Lynwood, Cudahy, and Santa Fe Springs. All of the eight cities are 80 to 90 percent Hispanic. It is estimated that just fewer than half of the residents of these cities are immigrants. All eight cities are poor: median family annual incomes range between \$30,000 and \$35,000, with the rate of "families in poverty" between 20 and 25 percent of the residents.

Taken together, Bell and her sister cities have a population of 310,000, three times the size of Burbank or Inglewood, twice the size of Pasadena, one third larger than Glendale, and

equal to the size of Riverside. If Bell and her sister cities were one city it would be the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> largest city in California. The boundaries of Bell and her sister cities encompass 33.5 square miles, with a population density of XXXX, making it the XXXX most dense area in greater Los Angeles.

To put the Bell scandal in context, it is helpful to employ the classic social science methodology of broadening the scope of inquiry and lengthening the time of inquiry. To do this we briefly review cases of corruption in Bell's sister cities in the south Los Angeles suburbs. Corruption in six of those cities—Bell Gardens, Lynwood, Vernon, Cudahy, Maywood, and Santa Fe Springs—while serious, did not rise to the level of hyper corruption that Bell experienced. But one city did—South Gate. We lengthen the time of inquiry by beginning in the year 2000, giving us 15 years of evidence. After brief treatments of the 6 “less corrupt” sister cities, we focus the remainder of this chapter on “corruption on steroids” in South Gate and Bell.

In 2001, Maria Chacon, an elected member of the city council of Bell Gardens (1961: 44,000), engineered an appointment as city manager. She “ran Bell Gardens like a Mexican cagigne, or political boss (Quinones, 2015). She was convicted of violating conflict-of-interest laws. In 2006 and 2007, councilman Mario Beltran was convicted of filing false police reports and of violations of the Political Reform Act for failing to properly disclose campaign contributions (Castillo and Alvarez, 2010). Political reform groups have formed since these events, pressing for accessibility to easy to understand information for residents regarding city operations.

In the City of Lynwood (1921: 20,000) in 2005 Mayor Paul Richards II was convicted of corruption charges for funneling \$500,000 of city business to his family consulting company and

was sentenced to 16 years in prison. In 2007, five others were charged with siphoning hundreds of thousands of dollars to their personal benefit (Sewell and Garrison ,2012) In 2012, Louis Byrd and Fernando Pedroza were found guilty of illegally boosting their salaries, accepting stipends for sitting on city commissions that did little work (Sewell 2012). They were also found guilty of misusing city credit cards and accepting stipends for having attended non-city related events.

With 110 residents, Vernon (1905) may be the most unusual city in California and possibly in the United States. On any given work day there are more than 40 thousand people working in warehouses and assembly and manufacturing plants in Vernon. The mayor and city council members all work for the city. Leonis Malberg, the grandson of the founder of Vernon served as mayor for more than 50 years. Elections are seldom held in Vernon because if there are no challengers, elections can be cancelled. Mayor Malberg lives eight miles away in a six bedroom, six bath mansion in Hancock Park, which is about as high end as it gets in Los Angeles. He lives in his second residence, his primary residence being a cot in his office in the Vernon city hall.

In 2006 Bruce Malkenhorst Sr., one time city manager of Vernon, was convicted of misappropriating public funds. And Mayor Leonis Malburg was later found guilty of public corruption. In 2010, the then city administrator Donal O'Callaghan, was indicted on felony counts of conflict of interest and misappropriation of funds. Eric T. Fresch served for a time as Vernon city administrator and also as a legal consultant to the city, received fees in excess of million dollars a year for four years. Malberg, O'Callahan, and Malkenhurst were all found

guilty of fraud. Eric T. Fresch was found dead. He drowned in the Pacific Ocean near San Francisco in June, 2012.

In the City of Cudahy (1960; 25,000) Mayor David Silva, Councilman Osvaldo Conde and Code Enforcement Director Angel Perales were found guilty of bribery and extortion in 2012.

Maywood (1924; 28,000), faced with financial deficits in 2010, disbanded its police department, laid off virtually all city workers, and outsourced operations to the City of Bell. In recent years, Maywood city operations, particularly police and fire, have been outsourced to the government of Los Angeles County, a not uncommon arrangement for smaller cities in Los Angeles County. In the same year, the FBI investigated city council member Felipe Aguirre for receiving federal grants with a partner and receiving bribes from businesses (Becerra 2010). It was while they were investigating alleged corruption in Maywood that *Los Angeles Times* reporters Jeff Gottlieb and Ruben Vives heard rumors of remarkably high salaries for both elected and appointed officials in neighboring Bell, the city to which Maywood had just outsourced its city operations. Following that rumor they uncovered the much larger Bell scandal.

In the city of Santa Fe Springs (1957: 17,500) city council member Joseph Serrano, Sr. was convicted of receiving bribes from an owner of a marijuana store in 2010 and 2011 (Sewell et al. 2012).

We turn now to the South Gate (1928; 94,000) and Bell (1927; 36,000) scandals. Although our current concern is Bell, to consider the South Gate scandal alongside the Bell

scandal reveals points of difference and similarity. Although the South Gate scandal occurred a decade earlier than the Bell scandal, the Bell scandal is a rather clear, albeit delayed, echo of the South Gate scandal.

In 2001, city officials of the City of South Gate, city treasurer, Albert Robles, mayor Xochitl Ruvalcaba, vice mayor Raul Moriel, and city councilwoman Maria Benavides formed a coalition that effectively controlled the city. Led by Robles, this group gave themselves exorbitant pay increases and gave big pay increases to certain other city officials. They approved of \$4 million in federal loans and grants to their own business partners and they appointed Robles a deputy city manager so the city could cover his legal defense against felony charges. The city clerk informed the California secretary of state of allegations of corruption and election fraud (Marosi 2003). Robles and other then cut the clerk's salary by three-quarters in an attempt to silence her. City reserves, once \$8 million, were reduced to \$1 million. In 2003, these four city officials were recalled by voters and in February 2003. Albert Robles was convicted of bribery in 2005 and was later sentenced to 10 years in federal prison. He was also ordered to pay \$639,000 in restitution. He is now free.

With an undergraduate degree from the University of California at Berkeley, and a master's degree in public administration from California State University, East Bay, after having been the assistant city manager of Rancho Cucamonga in the early 1980s, and then the first city manager of Hisperia, Robert Rizzo was hired in 1998 as the city manager of Bell, one of the poorest cities in Los Angeles County, in part because he was willing to take a comparatively low salary. Not long thereafter, Rizzo, among others, put together a ballot initiative that would designate Bell a charter, or "home rule" city, thereby exempting city officials from state salary

limits. It passed, 336 to 54, with fewer than 400 votes cast, less than 2 percent of registered voters. Of the 336 votes in favor, 239 were cast by absentee voters. In 2010, Jeff Gottlieb and Ruben Vives of the *Los Angeles Times* engaged in detailed investigative reporting on what would come to be known as the Bell scandal. The *Los Angeles Times* received the Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting for the work of Gottlieb and Vives. The reporting detailed exorbitant salaries, several large loans, greatly padded retirement accounts, shake-downs of local business owners, and a property tax rate higher than that of Beverly Hills.

Follow-up reporting by *The Times* found that further examples of public fund allocations for personal enhancement was established. In the fall of 2010, the then attorney general Jerry Brown filed a lawsuit against Bell city officials, and they were found guilty of misappropriation of public funds: Robert Rizzo former city manager (12 years, \$9 million in restitution); Angela Spaccia, former assistant city manager (11, years 8 months, \$8 million in restitution); former city councilmembers (George Mirabal, George Cole, Teresa Jacobo, Victor Bello, and mayor Orscar Hernandez) each received 1 year in jail (Cole received home confinement) and community service and restitution requirements.

The California Board of Accountancy fined the audit firm Mayer Hoffman McCann \$300,000, suspended their license, and placed them on probation for two years for failing to correctly audit the accounts of the City of Bell.

Having briefly reviewed each of the eight cases—Bell and her sisters—we now turn to a consideration of these scandals, using the municipal reform canon described above as a framework.

### Politics and Administration

The Bell scandal is, all by itself, an interesting, instructive, and disturbing case study of city corruption. But in the language of the social sciences, the Bell scandal case study is an “N of one.” However well crafted a case study may be, and the Gottlieb, Vives and colleagues reportage is very well crafted, a single study is limited as a basis for generalizations about the subject at hand—local government corruption.

The Bell scandal is the story of an educated and seemingly qualified city manager, Robert Rizzo, and an assistant city manager, Angela Spaccia, corrupting all the members of the city council and others, looting the city treasury, shaking down businesses, paying themselves outrageous salaries and ballooning up their retirement accounts, and overtaxing the citizens. A correct and true description of the Bell scandal leads the reader to a particular set of generalizations about local government corruption, and particularly about administrative corruption (Smoller, 2014).

Add to the story of scandal in Bell the story of Bell’s larger neighbor, South Gate, a remarkably similar scandal ten years earlier. The villain in the South Gate scandal was Albert Robles, an educated, smooth talking, ambitious politician. From 2000 to 2003, Robles was at various times either elected or appointed treasurer, mayor, deputy city manager, and council member of the City of South Gate. Like Rizzo in Bell, Robles corrupted the South Gate city council, paid himself and others outrageous salaries, loaded up their retirement accounts, looted the city treasury, misappropriated public funds, and overtaxed the people (Quinones, 2007; Quinones 2015). The South Gate case would seem to be primarily a narrative of *political* corruption. The Bell case is primarily a narrative of *administrative* corruption.



Add to the Bell and South Gate cases the examples of city corruption in the “Bell and her sister cities” cluster of cities in south Los Angeles, and one finds patterns of political (elected) official and administrative (appointed or civil service) corruption that fit widely agreed-upon generalizations about local government corruption. Among Bell and her sisters, there were three elected officials convicted of corruption for every one administrative or civil service official convicted for corruption (deLeon, 2005; Henriques, 1986; Frederickson, 1997; Frederickson, 2005; McGrath, 2013).

Much greater evidence of scandal is associated with elected officials and political appointees than with the merit-based civil service. Yet the general public has seldom distinguished between the behavior of political officials and civil servants; all the people see is corruption. . . . The evidence shows, however, that it is not primarily the bureaucrats who are practicing fraud—it is the elected officials and their appointees (Frederickson, 1997, p 165).

Using the Bell and her sisters cluster of cities and the 15 year span of time, starting in 2000, it is instructive to consider this countefactual. First, assume Bell and her sisters, rather than 8 cities are a single city, a city of 310,000, the size of Riverside. Second, total the number of convictions for corruption in Bell and her sister cities between 2000 and 2015. While the numbers may not be exact, there were approximately 30 convictions for scandal during this time. It would be astonishing if there were 30 scandal convictions in Riverside between 2000 and 2015, a rate of two convictions each year for 15 years—certainly an epidemic of corruption. It would, of course, have been just as astonishing if Bell and her sisters were a single jurisdiction. But because these scandals were scattered over 8 small cities and over a span of 15 years, what is

now understood to be an obvious epidemic of local government corruption was masked by jurisdictional fragmentation.

That there should be a line between politics and administration traces to Woodrow Wilson's founding essay on public administration (1887). Often referred to as the politics-administration dichotomy, or the policy-administration dichotomy, Wilson's conceptual line was and remains a key element of municipal reform. In the early years of public administration it was argued that city administration should be clean, practiced by persons chosen on the basis of merit, expert professionals engaging in the rational and orderly management of government affairs. As set out in the earlier treatment of municipal reform, city administration should be protected from campaigns for political office, from political fund raising and the electoral process. The practices of local politics should be protected from the influence of city employees. It has long been acknowledged that in reality there is no such line between politics and administration. There is, instead, a rather gray space between the two, a space that can be narrow or wide depending on the issue. Real or not, the line between politics and administration has been an enduring and useful trope in the ethical conduct of city governance.

In both the South Gate and the Bell cases the line between politics and administration was obliterated. Albert Robles and his gang in South Gate crossed way over from politics into day-to-day city operations, because the city administration proved to be weak. In Bell, Robert Rizzo and his administrative gang crossed way over the line from administration into politics by luring the elected city council into corruption with high salaries for part-time work. Rob Zuel, the planning director in Hysperia during the period the Robert Rizzo served as the city manager, describes it this way:

Rizzo had persuaded the rookie council members to let him manage as he saw fit, even if it meant managing them as well, a pattern that Bell employees say would carry over to their city. “They were sheep and he was the herder of the sheep,” (Pringle, Knoll and Murphy, 2010).

Should the administration of South Gate have been able to keep Albert Robles mostly on the political side of the line? Should elected officials in Bell have been able to keep Robert Rizzo mostly on the administrative side of the line? From the perspective of government ethics the answer should be *yes*. After all, the line between politics and administration, however mythical it may be, works generally well most of the time in most cities in the United States. Professional city managers and their senior staff—the chiefs of police and fire, the public works directors, and, particularly, the directors of purchasing and contract management all know what the line between politics and administration is about. And they should know what is required to keep the mayor or members of the city council from crossing that line. Likewise, elected city officials and those running for city political offices are keenly alert to the slightest whiff of campaign support for their opponent coming from city employees. Obviously, protection of this line in the cases of South Gate and Bell failed utterly.

The line between city politics and administration is rather different than the line between city policy and city administration. In strictly formal terms, the power to set policy is in the hands of city elected officials; after all, in our system of democratic self-government, these officials represent the residents of the city. The mayor and the city council make policy, approve city statutes and regulations, approve the budget, and set tax rates and expenditures. What appears to be a wide range of mayoral and council power over city policy and finance is, however, rather tightly circumscribed by the layers of accumulated policy and finance decisions

inherited from previous mayors and councils. City elected officials face multi-year bonds that must be paid, a city bureaucracy with certain job entitlements, infrastructure that must be maintained, and bills that must be paid just to keep the lights on. It is the city manager and the senior staff, the professional experts, who are the guardians of standing city policies and obligations, as well as the commitments of previous city leaders. Because standing obligations leave little wiggle room for elected incumbents, they almost always make policy incrementally, taking small steps in one policy direction or another. Budgets tend also to be incremental; this year's budget is a very good predictor of next year's budget. The pattern of established stability and order has the virtue of predictability, but it has the vices of saddling incumbents with obligations, some of them boneheaded, made by their predecessors. There could be no better example than the present crisis in funding public employee retirement in California.

In both the South Gate and the Bell corruption scandals the incremental pattern of public policy change broke down. In both cases the primary policy initiative, the bold new direction for the city, was to sharply increase the salaries of city leaders. In South Gate big salary increases and retirement funding for Albert Robles and his gang were hidden (Quinones, 2007). Likewise Robert Rizzo and his assistant tucked away in the folds of the Bell city financial accounts big salary and retirement increases for themselves and their gang. These were not incremental policy changes. They were big, bold, brazen policy changes. The lines were obliterated between elected officials with contemporary preferences and city professional staff protecting standing policy and financial commitments.

### Ethical Management

If there is a universal act in the annals of city government corruption it would be the practice of political spoils, nepotism, or cronyism. All three have to do with the provision of city employment for the wrong reasons. The canon of municipal reform features the practice of city employment that is based on individual merit, merit being judged on the basis of training, education, experience, character references, and a clean legal record. The implantation of an effective merit system is understood to be essential to ethical government. If, in the first place, the right people are employed on the basis of a good merit system, the rest of the management ethics canon holds real promise for clean city government. But if initial employment and subsequent promotion are based on spoils, nepotism, or cronyism, it is very difficult to effectuate the remainder of ethics canon.

In his excellent treatment of the South Gate scandal, Sam Quinones writes:

The Robles council began firing department heads and replacing them with notably unqualified people. These replacements received contracts unheard of in California city government. For example, South Gate agreed to pay eighteen months of each manager's salary if he were fired, twelve months of his salary were he to quit. To expedite matters, the council did away with written civil service exams. People were hired based entirely on oral interviews (Quinones, 2007, p. 92).

A new, young, and inexperienced city manager was hired. A new department was established with over 100 new employees, many of them just out of high school. The mission of the new department was never made clear. The brother of a member of the city council was appointed as one of the managers of this department. The new department cost \$3.2 million (Quinones, 2007).

A rotating cast of lawyers was employed, including one who had been disbarred for embezzlement and forgery. Ordinarily South Gate spent about \$500,000 per year on lawyers. In

the first eighteen months of the Robles gang, spending on lawyers came in at \$10.6 million. City employment jumped from about 360 to about 540 in that same period (Quinones, 2007).

In the absence of a merit system, many of the other elements of the “ethical management” part of the municipal reform canon were essentially inoperative in South Gate. For example, during the Robles trial, “evidence showed that he had solicited \$1.8 million in bribes from companies bidding on city contracts” (Quinones, 2007, p. 114).

A few years later in nearby Bell, the Rizzo gang was less interested in the details of management and the principles of management designed to prevent corruption and more interested in designing the means by which to increase their salaries and to generate the revenue to cover the costs of those salaries (Esquivel and Lopez, 2010)

One principle of good city leadership is the professional development of the city staff. Albert Robles brought to South Gate a curious twist on professional development. He was a devotee of the self-help guru Tony Robbins and a platinum level member of the Robbins Leadership Academy, which included fire walking and traveling to Fiji. While at South Gate Robles enrolled the entire upper staff of the city in the Leadership Academy at the city’s expense (XXX). At Bell Robert Rizzo showed little interest in personal training or professional development either for himself or his staff.

Rizzo’s real interests and skills were in finance. While city manager of Hesperia he was noted for finding and developing new revenue sources, “He was very impressive” said Howard Roth, “one of the Hesperia city council members who hired Rizzo. None of us had ever started a city before and he seemed to know what he was talking about. He scored points early by finding revenue opportunities” (Pringle, Knoll, and Murphy, 2010). These same skills were on display

in his early years as city manager of Bell, where he “won praise from his elected bosses for righting the cash-starved city’s financial course by restructuring bonds that teetered on default and taking other measures to firm up the bottom line” (Pringle, Knoll, and Murphy, 2010).

There is no evidence of Robert Rizzo being active in professional organizations such as the International City/County Management Association (ICMA). Nor is there evidence of Albert Robles being engaged in the activities of the League of California Municipalities or the National Civic League, the professional organizations for elected city officials. These organizations are the primary means of conveying the principles, values, practices, and innovations of good city government. Rizzo and Robles were outliers, essentially disconnected from their professions.

There appears to be one important exception to this generalization. Robert Rizzo befriended Bruce Malkenhorst, Sr. who made more than \$900,000 in 2005 as Vernon’s city administrator (Pringle, Knoll, and Murphy, 2010). On occasion they golfed together. It may be a coincidence that Malkenhorst and Rizzo were the two highest paid city administrators in California. But in the same way that patterns of the “diffusion of innovation” spread “best practices” from city to city through the processes of strategic planning and bench-marking, it may be that the links between Malkenhorst and Rizzo are an example of the diffusion of “worst practices.”

The problem in both the South Gate and Bell cases was not the absence of management policies and procedures designed to prevent corruption; the problem was the ease with which these policies and procedures were ignored.

#### Ethical Standards and Requirements

Although the professional *code of ethics* of the International City/County Management Association is on the office wall of almost all city managers, and many cities have adopted their own *code of ethics* that elected leaders and city employees are expected to pledge to, there is no evidence of a knowledge of or interest in ethics on the part of Albert Robles or Robert Rizzo. There was no ethics training in South Gate or Bell during their periods in office.

Although usually a part of *codes of ethics* and ethics training, prohibitions against receiving or giving bribes in return for personal gain and prohibitions against conflicts of interest, are prominent features of state law. The convictions of officials from Bell and her sister cities were for, among other things, bribery and conflicts of interest.

#### Oversight and Accountability

South Gate and Bell are part of small suburbs of Los Angeles, towns overshadowed by the big city, places that attract little attention. Press coverage of Bell and her sister's was sporadic and shallow. Published since 1928, the South Gate Press had been sold twice and could not make the transition from a primarily English speaking to a primary Spanish speaking readership. "Television and radio never covered the politics of these towns. *La Opinion* the nation's largest Spanish daily, rarely sent reporters to the area. The *Los Angeles Times* and the *Long Beach Press-Telegram* devoted only one reporter apiece to all the suburbs southeast of Los Angeles" (Quinones, 2007, p. 73). In the absence of an investigative press, there was little public oversight of local political affairs, particularly in the short run. It was not until there was an accumulation of the smaller details of corruption that the big Los Angeles media stepped in. The outrageous political corruption in the South Gate city council elections in March, 2001, resulted in a feature story, "The Savage Politics of South Gate," in the *Los Angeles Times*



*Sunday Magazine* in which Albert Robles was profiled (Quinones, 2007, pp. 89-90). That story probably marked the beginning of the end of Robles political career.

Media oversight took longer in Bell, after all, Robert Rizzo was appointed city manager in 1992 and was in office for 18 years. The referendum that set Bell up as a charter city and made very high salaries possible was carried out under the media radar. And, for several years the astonishing salaries being paid to the city manager, the assistant city manager and members of the city council were also under the media radar as were a series of unauthorized loans, sharply increased taxes, a car towing scam, and so forth. It was not until Rizzo was arrested for drunk driving and the nearby City of Maywood contracted with Bell for police and other services that reporters from the *Los Angeles Times* took an interest in Bell. Once investigative reporters from the mainline press got on the case, the full extent of the Bell corruption scandal was revealed. With the coverage of the press, various agencies of state government, the State Controller John Chaing did an audit, the Los Angeles County District Attorney Steve Cooley did an investigation, the State Attorney General, Jerry Brown's office did an investigation. Although it took a long time for the press to engage city corruption in Bell, once it was on the case, the several oversight and accountability agencies of government were not far behind.

The era of small town and suburban newspapers is gone and with it the kind of early detailed local press coverage that might have unraveled bits of corruption and stood in the way of big time corruption. Will the Bell or South Gate scandals of the future be different in the new world of social media? Will local bloggers blow the whistle? Or, will the new digital free-for-all be more noise than it is news?

There is good evidence of forms of civil society in South Gate and Bell, groups of neighbors or like-minded residents raising issues, advocating changes, and engaging socially and politically. Some of the groups formed to kick the bums out are still active, particularly BESTA in Bell. Such groups act as a form of oversight and accountability.

Four years on from the Bell corruption scandal and there is still a bit of tidying-up. There were at least 55 law suits over charges of improper termination of employees, seeking the return of money from improperly retained law firms, etc. There are only three or four left unsettled. City audits were three years behind and are now caught up. Bank accounts and city accounts had not been reconciled for some time and are now balanced. City contracts with employee unions were all out of date and have now been renegotiated and are up to date. In sum, Bell City now appears to be well and honestly managed.

Bell politics are lively with contested races for city council. Some BESTA supported candidates hold office. Immigrants and first generation Americans are learning the ways of city government. There is a growing base of trust in city hall. At the same time there is a vocal and spirited political minority claiming that not enough has been changed. This is good evidence of effective democratic accountability.

Old issues and challenges remain. The tax burden on the people of Bell is still comparatively high. Bell lacks a strong commercial tax base and must rely over much on the taxation of residences.

## Summing Up

What happened in South Gate and Bell is twenty-first century municipal reform; a contemporary version of cleaning up the city and throwing the bums out. South Gate and Bell are stories of vice, the search for virtue, and virtue's eventual triumph.

What can be said of Albert Robles? "South Gate had melted together because of him. 'You got to know people you'd never had much contact with, and you became friends . . . . In a roundabout way, Albert may have been the best thing that ever happened to us'" (Quinones, 2007). In the local politics associated with the election to attempt to recall Albert Robles, a long standing local community policing organization of neighborhood leaders and police, Community in Action, was mobilized in support of recall. It turned out that there was strong support for the police among neighborhood activists and the police union worked to recall Albert Robles. Padres Unidos (Parents United), a group formed earlier to pressure the school district to reduce overcrowded classrooms, mobilized to work on the recall. Coffee klatches sprang up around town, people opening their homes and pouring coffee for those supporting recall. Once motivated, the grassroots of civil society proved to be strong. After the recall and after the conviction of Albert Robles, Sam Quinones, reflecting on a post-recall festival in South Gate, summed it up well: ". . . It seems to me that when it came to politics, in South Gate at least, Mexican immigrants opted for something much different than they were used to. I wondered how other cities would do it, absent a cucuy (boogie man) to unite against. Still, in the aftermath of Albert, this festival had a lot in common with the town: whites had created them both; Mexicans had now rejuvenated them by making them their own" (2007, pp. 115-16).

What can be said of Robert Rizzo and of Bell? It could be said that the Bell scandal had primarily to do with administrative corruption, while the South Gate scandal had primarily to do with political corruption. After Rizzo's resignation and the recall of the members of the Bell city council, the opening for a new city manager was advertised. On July 15, 2011, the application deadline closed. Applications were counted up. They totaled zero (Duggan, 2012). Officials from the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) offered help. Partnering with the League of California Cities and the California City Management Foundation, ICMA arranged for Ken Hamplian, the retired city manager of San Luis Obispo, to step in for 30 days, without compensation. He was followed by Arne Croce, a retired city manager of San Mateo, who agreed to serve for nine months. Pam Easter, another retired city manager stepped in, as a volunteer, to assist Ken Hamplian and then Arne Croce, Over the next few months, as the organization and administration of Bell was put back together, over two dozen local government professionals stepped in to help Bell, some of them using accrued vacation and sick leave time to volunteer. By the summer of 2012, Bell was ready for permanent administrative leadership. The new Bell city manager, now in office for more than two years, is Doug Willmore, a former chief administrative officer for Salt Lake County, Utah, and briefly the city manager of El Segundo, California. Bell now has a first rate website with wall-to-wall transparency, and virtually all of the details of the municipal reform canon. The city manager's salary is \$180,356, for all to see.

What can be said of the episodes of corruption in Bell's sister cities? After reminding us that five of the eight Bell and her sister cities cluster had at least one elected official go to prison

in the last dozen years, Sam Quinones observes that “each boil of corruption, once lanced, left its respective town a little cleaner, more chastened” (Quinones, 2015).

Because we identify with the vulgar ethics perspective, it will have been noticed that we have given little attention to public administration ethics scholarship. We have no quarrel with the study of ontology or, for that matter, deontology, or the study of moral idealism or of utilitarianism, or claims being made about either dirty hands or many hands, or the ethics of regime values, or even the further study of the patriotism of benevolence. All add to the body of ethics knowledge. Knowledge of these things helps us to know about goodness. But, as Lewis Mainzer (1991) argues, we can study goodness and we can teach *about* goodness, but can we actually teach goodness? He asks this question: Can study, research, and teaching induce moral change in ordinary people?

Mainzer writes thusly:

Socrates wondered, Who are they, having been inferior people, who have now become under your care good and noble? If, so far as one can estimate, churches and priests fail as often as not in truly gentling human nature, whether or not they work aided by the authority of schools or with heaven or hell in their armament, why should schools and professors expect to do better? We may induce a sense of moral exhilaration in the classroom, but evil one day insinuates itself in so prosaic a form that there is no time for warning. Or one seeming good conflicts with another, or embrace of a partial evil is necessary to avoid a worse. . . . Teachers may seek to be moral guides, but we can at best be confident of our professorial ability to convey a bit of knowledge.

Nevertheless, we persist out of faith.

Whatever one’s sense of the connection between knowing the truth and being good, all of us must be uneasy with any supposition that learning philosophy or being able to discuss the pros and cons of a basic issue, leads to virtuous action. Following the advice given by Mark Lilla twenty-five years ago, when it comes to the practical and applied issues of ethics, we should “send the philosophers home,” for their theorizing is too abstract. We should admit that moral education would take place, much as it always has, through examples, through families, and even a bit of indoctrination. (1991, 4–5)

Instead, Mainzer suggests vulgar ethics or, put more gently, common ethics or ordinary ethics. This is the public administration ethics of putting rules, regulations, and red tape in place to keep elected city officials and appointed city bureaucrats from behaving badly. This can be done without a discourse on Hobbes and his philosophy of human nature. This is the public administration ethics of operating trust-based relational contracting systems without a discussion of Rousseau and his philosophy of human nature. This is not the disembodied consideration of public morality. It is, instead, the fully contextualized application of policies, procedures, and so forth, set out earlier in the description of the canon of local government reform ethics. developed in the government reform era. And it is the reason that an understanding of the contextual characteristics of the present era of governance and the extended state is essential to the building of a public administration ethic suited to it.

Vulgar ethics suggests the use of ordinary cases, examples, or models, rather than extraordinary cases. Those who study ethics will have found in these remarks a decided emphasis on institutional and organizational forms, on rules and regulations, on organizational behavior. Put another way, we have purposely chosen not to emphasize individual moral and ethical choice and not to consider those forms of public administration ethics that rest on individual moral choice claims. This is out of our conviction that most public administrators will, most of the time, make good moral choices. For those tempted to be unethical, the Albert Robles and Robert Rizzos of the world, there must be policies, rules, regulations, oversight, audits, and other forms of institutional arrangements to help them be virtuous. And even then they may not work. After all, it is vice that makes virtue precious.

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