Lincoln Steffens, The Shame of the Cities

Perhaps the most influential of the muckrakers was Lincoln Steffens. Steffens's articles were published in McClure's magazine in 1902 and 1903 and then collected in The Shame of the Cities.

The following excerpt is taken from the introduction to the 1904 volume.

Now, the typical American citizen is the business man. The typical businessman is a bad citizen; he is busy. If he is a "big business man" and very busy, he does not neglect, he is busy with politics, oh, very busy and very businesslike. I found him buying boodlers in St. Louis, defending grafters in Minneapolis, originating corruption in Pittsburgh, sharing with bosses in Philadelphia, deploring reform in Chicago, and beating good government with corruption funds in New York. He is a self-righteous fraud, this big business man. He is the chief source of corruption, and it were a boon if he would neglect politics. But he is not the business man that neglects politics; that worthy is the good citizen, the typical business man. He too is busy, he is the one that has no use and therefore no time for politics. When his neglect has permitted bad government to go so far that he can be stirred to action, he is unhappy, and he looks around for a cure that shall be quick, so that he may hurry back to the shop. Naturally, too, when he talks politics, he talks shop. His patent remedy is quack; it is business.

"Give us a business man," he says ("like me," he means). "Let him introduce business methods into politics and government; then I shall be left alone to attend to my business." There is hardly an office from United States Senator down to Alderman in any part of the country to which the business man has not been elected; yet politics remains corrupt, government pretty bad, and the selfish citizen has to hold himself in readiness like the old volunteer firemen to rush forth at any hour, in any weather, to prevent the fire; and he goes out sometimes and he puts out the fire (after the damage is done) and he goes back to the shop sighing for the business man in politics. The business man has failed in politics as he has in citizenship. Why?

Because politics is business. That's what's the matter with it. That's what's the matter with everything—art, literature, religion, journalism, law, medicine—they're all business, and all—as you see them. Make politics a sport, as they do in England, or a profession, as they do in Germany, and we'll have—well, something else than we have now—if we want it, which is another question. But don't try to reform politics with the banker, the lawyer, and the dry-goods merchant, for these are business men and there are two great hindrances to their achievement of reform: one is that they are different from, but no better than, the politicians; the other is that politics is not "their line"....

The commercial spirit is the spirit of profit, not patriotism; of credit, not honor; of individual gain, not national prosperity; of trade and dickering, not principle. "My business is sacred," says the businessman in his heart. "Whatever prospers my business, is good; it must be. Whatever hinders it, is wrong; it must be. A bribe is bad, that is, it is a bad thing to take; but it is not so bad to give one, not if it is necessary to my business." "Business is business" is not a political sentiment, but our politician has caught it. He takes essentially the same view of the bribe, only he saves his self-respect by piling all his contempt upon the bribe-
giver and he has the great advantage of
candor. "It is wrong, maybe," he says, "but if
a rich merchant can afford to do business
with me for the sake of a convenience or to
increase his already great wealth, I can
afford, for the sake of living, to meet him
half way. I make no pretensions to virtue,
not even on Sunday." And as for giving bad
government or good, how about the
merchant who gives bad goods or good
goods, according to the demand?

But there is hope, not alone despair, in the
commercialism of our politics. If our po-
litical leaders are to be always a lot of politi-
cal merchants, they will supply any demand
we may create. All we have to do is to estab-
lish a steady demand for good government.
The boss has us split up into parties. To him
parties are nothing but means to his corrupt
ends. He "bolts" his party, but we must not;
the bribe-giver changes his party, from one
election to another, from one county to
another, from one city to another, but the
honest voter must not. Why? Because if the
honest voter cared no more for his party than
the politician and the grafter, then the honest
vote would govern, and that would be bad
for graft. It is idiotic, this devotion to a
machine that is used to take our sovereignty
from us. If we would leave parties to the
politicians, and would vote not for the party,
not even for men, but for the city, and the
State, and the nation, we should rule parties,
and cities, and States, and nation. If we
would vote in mass on the more promising
ticket, or, if the two are equally bad, would
throw out the party that is in, and wait till
the next election and then throw out the
other party that is in—then, I say, the
commercial politician would feel a demand
for good government and he would supply
it. That process would take a generation or
more to complete, for the politicians now
really do not know what good government
is. But it has taken as long to develop bad
government, and the politicians know what
that is. If it would not "go," they would offer
something else, and, if the demand were
steady, they, being so commercial, would
"deliver the goods."

QUESTIONS

1. Why, according to Steffens, is the attempt to reform politics by replacing politicians with "businessmen"
   bound to fail?
2. What does Steffens mean when he claims that "there is hope, not alone despair, in the commercialism
   of our politics"?