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THE COUNCIL-MANAGER PLAN OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

Story No. 4

*Arguments Advanced Against
the Council-Manager Plan
with Possible Rejoinders*

This series is intended to give information. It is not a brief for or against the Council-Manager Plan of Municipal Government. It is published in response to repeated requests for definite information.

Some Arguments Advanced Against the Council-Manager Plan of Municipal Government

1. It is a foreign system.

Possible Rejoinder.

As a matter of fact its basal principle of a clear line of responsibility is very nearly allied to the British System of responsible government. As a matter of fact, also, it is the system of government worked out in England for private corporations carried over into the field of municipal corporations. In any event is it a mark of high mentality to refuse to adopt a good idea because its origin is foreign or because during the development it received some addition from foreign sources? The alphabet, printing and the mariner's compass are all of foreign origin.

2. The playing of politics is still possible under the Council-Manager System. The centralization of policy-forming power in a small council and of executive power in one man may, if special interests secure control, lead to greater waste and mal-administration.

Possible Rejoinder.

It is really more difficult to put something improper over in a small Council than in a large one. Most corrupt deals have been engineered by a small group in a large body which did not know what was going on. Few people do wrong when some one is looking at them and when they find it impossible to hide. It is harder to hide among 5 men than among 25, and certainly one man cannot hide at all. If the electorate goes to sleep, then government may be taken away from them, but it is easier to protect their interests with 5 aldermen and 1 manager than with 25 aldermen and 15 managers.

3. The Plan has been in operation too short a time to assume that it will cure all ills.

Possible Rejoinder.

This argument is losing weight as the years pass, and as more municipalities have adopted and accumulated experience under the plan. Besides, its proponents never claimed it to be a cure-all. Placing a sharp axe beside a tree trunk will not hew a timber. Adopting any plan of municipal administration does nothing except provide a tool for the hands of the citizens.

4. It is undemocratic because it puts all power in the hands of one man.

Possible Rejoinder.

If democracy consists in electing every public official and as many as possible, the system is undemocratic. If democracy means control of the governing body by the people who pay the bills, it is essentially and pre-eminently democratic. The City-Manager exercises autocratic power as much as any other hired man. The Council is supreme on all matters of policy forming and financial control for which purposes they are elected. The City Manager is appointed by Council, and can decide on no policies, can impose no taxes, can do nothing except carry out the policies decided upon by Council. It is true that he appoints his subordinates. In any well-governed city, actually, if not theoretically, the department heads appoint subordinates. If the Council exists to supply as many suitable citizens as possible with civic jobs, and if this is democracy, then the Council-Manager System is undemocratic. It has never been satisfactorily explained how a City Manager can manage the city, or a department head can head his department without a practical, if not theoretical control of appointments, promotions and discharges.

Numbers in Council-Manager Series.

1. Its essential features.
2. Some important but non-essential features.
3. Advantages claimed for the Council-Manager Plan.
4. Arguments advanced against the Council-Manager Plan.
5. The history and growth of the Council-Manager System.
6. Not every city is ready for the Council-Manager System.

The Toronto Bureau of Municipal Research is an independent, non-partisan citizen organization, for the promotion of informed citizenship and, through it, of efficient municipal government. Its methods are:

1. The ascertaining of the facts regarding municipal government.
2. The study and analysis of these facts.
3. The publication of these facts in clear, concise form, with constructive suggestions based on the facts.

In twelve years the Bureau has made no criticism of any undersirable condition without offering a constructive suggestion as to means of removing or minimizing the condition.

The Bureau is conducted in the interests of all citizens and taxpayers of the City of Toronto. Its work is not spectacular, but persistent, and cannot fail to exercise a wholesome influence on municipal affairs.

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