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THE COUNCIL-MANAGER PLAN OF MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

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PART B.

Some British Opinions

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 BRITISH OPINION FROM SOURCES WHICH HAVE HAD FIRST HAND CONTACT WITH THE PLAN IN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES.

Mr. I. G. Gibbon, C.B.E., D.Sc., Assistant Secretary, Ministry of Health of England and Wales, speaking before the Eleventh Annual Convention of the International City Managers' Association, held in Montreal during September, 1924, gave an outline of the British system of municipal government, showing how, for example, large Councils and the Committee system worked well, in most cases, under British conditions and for certain definite reasons. In a paragraph near the close of his remarks he spoke as follows:

"Whereas it would be unwise, very unwise, I think, to attempt to transfer any form of government which has proved successful in one place without considering the particular conditions prevailing in each, I feel quite sure (speaking for myself) that not only it is interesting but very helpful to consider and to examine very closely the forms of government, the ways, the measures, the particular fashion in which problems are worked out in other countries."

Extract from article by same author in the Journal of Public Administration, January, 1925:*

CITY MANAGER SYSTEM A BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT.

"The City Manager is the latest and, on the whole, the most characteristic element in the municipal life of the United States.

"He has his roots in the respect for business methods, and his opportunity in the difficulties in the way of efficient local government in that diversified country of many interests.

"He has justified his coming, and his triumphs grow; but whether, without still further changes, he will spread over most of the land, particularly whether he will prevail in the largest cities, remains problematical.

"In any event, the movement in the States is full of interest, and also of no little instruction for us in this country, different as are our own conditions and much more fortunately favoured though we be in local government, for the many difficulties in the States, and the, in some respects, somewhat hectic efforts made to overcome them, show in a high light some of the problems inherent in democratic government.

CORRESPONDS TO GENERAL MANAGER IN PRIVATE FIRM.

"The City Manager occupies a position in local government similar to that of the general manager in a private firm.

"The City Manager is appointed by the Council (or Commission, as the governing body is called in many places: it is then always small in number) and may be dismissed by them.

"The City Manager will have under him a number of heads of departments—finance, public works, police and the like. A circumstance which will appear strange to English ideas is that the Manager appoints these heads himself, and, subject to certain conditions, can dismiss them. The American mind does not readily see how any other arrangement is compatible with full discipline, although the practice in this country amply shows the contrary.

"Subordinates also may be appointed by the City Manager or the heads of departments, but a large number of these appointments are now subject to "Civil Service" rules—which, however, are not so tight that they cannot be circumvented—and it is significant that a number of keen city managers are already complaining that these rules, adopted as stout bulwarks against the spoils system, hinder efficiency.

"The City Manager attends, and may speak at, meetings of the Council; but has no vote and is not supposed to have any responsibility as regards policy.

"In practice, however, many energetic City Managers are the leading advocates of policy, a real danger to the system. The American, despite his genuine democracy, wants one head, which he can readily chop off, electorally, at one blow if affairs go awry.

"Another matter which is necessary to bear in mind in respect of all matters of local government in the States is that there is little uniformity. This applies to the position of the City Manager, and whereas in some cities his powers are wide and ample, in others they are far more circumscribed.

FEW LARGE CITIES YET UNDER THE SYSTEM.

"It is noteworthy that of over 300 cities now with the plan, not half a dozen have populations over 100,000, and only one (Cleveland, Ohio), now nearing a million inhabitants, has a population of over 500,000, although Cincinnati, with a population of over 400,000, has just decided to adopt the system. (Note: Kansas City has also recently adopted the system.)

*The sub-headings are the Bureau's.

"Now it is significant that, at both these large cities, the plan has been adopted by the electorate after grievous failures on the part of the previous municipal administrations, which landed both cities in difficulties, and, further, that Cleveland appointed as City Manager a man of different type to the usual City Manager and that, although it is yet too early to test the system there, he appears to occupy very much the position of the elected 'strong Mayor,' who is the dominant municipal power in most of the largest cities.

"There are also City Managers in a number of Canadian cities, but generally with powers differing somewhat from those in the States, the general form of local government there being more akin to that in this country.

POSITION BECOMING A PROFESSION.

"There is a tendency for the post of City Manager to become recognized as a separate profession. The majority of City Managers are drawn from the engineering profession. This is partly due to the fact that, most of them being in cities of small size, the City Manager who is also an engineer can take direct charge of some of the principal departments. A number are lawyers, and some are business men. It is recognized that for the large cities men of exceptional qualifications can alone fill the part, men with high capacity for general administration. It may be mentioned that there are two women City Managers.

"Municipal Government in the States is, as a rule, somewhat parochial in outlook, and there is a prevailing tendency to restrict appointments to local inhabitants. It is a tribute to the strength of the City Manager movement that this tenacious prejudice has already been largely overcome; 'Strangers' have been appointed on their qualifications, and there are several instances where men who have gained experience in small cities have been chosen by Councils of larger cities, almost a revolution in American municipal practice.

"Furthermore, some universities have already started courses for the work, at the same time recognizing that all they can do is chiefly to lay a good theoretical foundation, on which a graduate can then build by experience.

"There is a thriving association of city managers, which, as I can testify from personal experience, holds excellent conferences, and also produces an informative monthly magazine devoted to the work and interest of its members.

HAS PRODUCED EXCELLENT RESULTS.

"The City Manager form of administration has produced excellent results; but whether it will extend to many of the largest cities is doubtful. Its chief danger is that the City Manager tends to become mixed up in questions of policy.

"That, generally, the cities which have appointed a manager have benefited is beyond question. Administration has been improved, costs have been reduced, government generally has taken on a better tone. In one recent case, the Council in the first year of office of the City Manager were dramatically able to present the taxpayers (the ratepayers) with a refund of 10 per cent., and the electors heartily endorsed the gift at a pending election.

"The plan is also said to have a good effect on the personnel of Councils, which are generally small in membership where there is a City Manager. One difficulty confronting municipal government in the States, in much larger measure than here, is the reluctance of the man of big business to take part in municipal government. It is stated that, where there is a City Manager, there is a tendency for this to be altered. The business of the Council approximates more to that of a board of directors; subjects are well prepared beforehand; a meeting once a week may be found sufficient; the decisions are confined to matters of policy, details being settled by the City Manager.

DETERMINATION OF POLICY DUTY OF ELECTED BODY.

"Despite the example of Cleveland and Cincinnati, it is questionable whether the system of the City Manager will make much headway in the largest cities unless some more effective means are provided than at present for clearly placing elsewhere the responsibility for matters of policy, and, equally important, the public advocacy of them. The American electorate is not likely, any more than that of this country, to endure for long the determination of policy, and the responsibility for it, whether in fact or in appearance, by any officer or body not directly responsible to them.

"For us in this country, the determination of policy offers no difficulty; our Councils are too firmly entrenched, too honoured by tradition, too fortified by usage, to cause any fear that their responsibilities and duties in determining policy will be invaded by any powers of an appointed officer; we have no use for the bureaucrat except in the service of democracy.

"The interest of the City Manager movement lies for us in its concentration of executive responsibility, in its recognition that the affairs of a modern municipality, with its many branches and diverse requirements, is far different from the simple administration of two or three generations ago, and calls for a business organization fully as much as any private concern of large extent. At the same time, it is

essential fully to preserve (as in theory does the system in the States) the responsibility of the elected body for policy and (the real means of the thorough democratic control of bureaucracy) the strict supervision of results.

"The City Manager form of administration in the full exuberance of the American spirit, with, for instance, the wide powers of appointment, has practically no chance in this country, and would, indeed, be alien to our general constitutional habits, but at the same time it is not without its suggestions for our requirements."

Note.—It is probable that the advantages of the Council-Manager System could be obtained for Canadian cities without adopting all the drastic provisions of the American system. With us, as in England, there can be no danger of a City Manager assuming policy-forming functions. In reality he would have the same powers as heads of departments now, only combined so that the Council could best control the carrying out of its policies.

EXTRACT FROM THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH, 1923-1924.

"A suggestion for centralizing 'definite responsibility for the general official organization.'

"Some difficulties have been caused during the year by proposals to give the Town Clerk more extensive powers of control over other officers than are usually provided for expressly by the terms of appointment.

"It is manifest that a Town Clerk or any other officer could not properly dictate to other persons in the employment of the Local Authority, the Medical Officer of Health or Engineer, for instance, what they should do in the details of technical matters within their particular purview. Nor could any Local Authority impose on any one of their officers duties in conflict with those conferred on any other officers by statute or by central regulations.

"The proposal to make some one officer definitely responsible for the general supervision of the whole of the business of the Local Authority, and their chief adviser on all matters of policy, is, however, a different question.

"The work of the Local Authorities has changed very considerably in recent years. The large Authorities, in particular, in addition to being the bodies regulating matters of local government in their area, are in fact important business corporations, carrying out costly services, trading and other.

"There appears to be room for consideration whether, while maintaining to the full the traditions of local government service and, especially, of democratic control, the time has not come for some further development of the administrative arrangements of the Local Authorities, and for their having one chief official who, whatever his title, shall be in a position of definite responsibility for the general official organization."

"It may be premature to express any decided opinion on this possible development, but the question clearly merits attention. Two conditions would always have to be fulfilled—(1) the unquestioned control of the elected body; (2) no derogation from the responsibility of the present principal officers. The value of any such chief official as has been suggested would depend very largely on his exercising general control, on his not attempting to do the detailed work of the officers expressly appointed because of their specialized qualifications, and on his working in full harmony with them."

FROM REPORT ON COMMISSION (MANAGER) GOVERNMENT IN AMERICA,

By Sir John Sulman, K.B., F.R.I.B.A., M.T.P.I.,
Chairman, Federal Capital Advisory Committee of Australia.

"The main lesson to be learned from a study of City Government in America is that the best results can only be obtained by enlisting the services of the best man in the community, irrespective of politics, trusting them, and giving them a free hand to carry on their work, and that the Commission- (Council) Manager form of government offers the best solution of the problem."

In the intervening paragraph Sir John recommends an organization for the Federal Capital of Australia which in its real form would be made up of a Commission (or Council) of three, two elected by the citizens and one appointed by the Government, with a City Manager, "who, if fully competent, would probably become a permanent official."

"In conclusion, permit me to say that I went to America with an unbiased mind, and prepared to study the question of City Government in all its aspects. I have done so very carefully and I trust that this report will be of service not only to the Government of the Commonwealth in connection with our federal capital, but to the nation at large."