

BUREAU OF MUNICIPAL RESEARCH

Monthly



Letter

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137 WELLINGTON STREET WEST, TORONTO

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Citizens of Toronto:

Should the Assessment Department
be Placed Under a Commission?

After several months spent in preparation and cleaning house, the Assessment Department has begun the important task of reassessing all Toronto properties. As owner or tenant, you have probably by now received and filled out one of their questionnaire forms. A much more scientific appraisal of your property is promised. Some assessments will be increased, others reduced, in an effort to bring greater equity to all.

The changes began last year. One important move sponsored by the Board of Control, was the appointment of a Board of Assessors, intended to help raise the efficiency of the Assessment Department. Its members were the Assessment Commissioner and two men selected from outside the Department. Last fall the Commissioner retired and was replaced by one of the other Board members. This has left a two man Board--the Chairman and the present Commissioner. It is an open question which man is in charge of the reassessment job.

Commission Control Proposed

The Board of Control may soon seek legislation at Queen's Park to give the Board of Assessors the powers of a commission. What would this mean? The Board of Control and Council would voluntarily be giving up immediate responsibility for the Assessment Department's operations, aside from approving its budget. The Board of Assessors would take over, and also, in place of the central Personnel Section, they might take on responsibility for hiring, classifying and promoting the staff.

From reports already given to the press it seems quite plain that assessment reform was badly needed. But is creation of commission control going to help? As long as the Board of Control is the executive committee, will administration be improved by removing one city department from its immediate supervision.

Fortunately the matter is not settled. The council has deferred action (at the time of writing) for two weeks in order that the proposal may be considered.

"Politics" Feared

Some who favour this move are alarmed by "politics" in the Assessment Department. They would surely admit the public's right to be concerned with the efficient operation of civic departments. What is feared is undue influence.

The facts which have come to light suggest that the Assessment Department has suffered more from sheer neglect than from "political" influence. However, if such influence is present at the City Hall, is it likely to be confined to one department? If the setting up of a commission will effect a cure, or prevent infection in one department, it should in any department. Do those who believe the Board of Control should give up active control over the Assessment Department, want it to continue to supervise the Treasury, or Health, Works or Welfare? Certainly we are not likely to elect better men to office if their sphere of authority is reduced.

The central Personnel Section was set up only after a long struggle. It is bringing in the merit system for appointments and facilitating transfer of employees between departments. Will it increase the efficiency of the city staff as a whole if one department is now taken out from it on the grounds of promoting efficiency?

Commission control may have an effect on the use of personal influence in appointments and affecting administration. But will it suppress such influence or only hide it? The best way to keep out "politics" is to bring a Department's operations more directly into the public view. This is done when it is made subject to closer supervision by the central executive, the Board of Control. Moreover, our elected representatives should face this problem, not avoid it. They must make every effort to stamp out the use of undue personal influence.

Reassessment Needs Public Support

The city fathers have embarked on an extremely difficult task. Now that reassessment is under way everything possible should be done to carry it to a successful conclusion. Perhaps a temporary Board of Assessors, acting only in an advisory capacity, can help through the critical months of reassessment. The transfer of responsibility to a commission, particularly while the work is in progress, could have a quite harmful result.

What is needed most now is a strong publicity campaign explaining

reassessment and the need for it; and the over-all job should command the active support of every member of council.

Civic officials have already offered the public two guarantees. First, the property owner will have a better opportunity (a) to state his case before his property is assessed, and (b) to appeal against an assessment which he considers unreasonable. Second, although taxes on some properties may be higher, it has been stated that reassessment is not being undertaken to bring in an increase in total taxes through the back door. Citizens should hold their representatives to these assurances. At the same time they should not exert influence to block the main objective -- a fairer deal to all taxpayers.

Yours respectfully,

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