



CIVIC AFFAIRS

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THE ROLE OF CITIZEN RESEARCH IN METROPOLITAN COMMUNITIES

For the combined annual meeting of the Bureau of Municipal Research and the Citizens Research Institute of Canada which took place on April 30, 1954, the guest speaker was Mr. Loren B. Miller of Detroit. Mr. Miller dealt with a subject on which, it is felt, our membership will welcome an informed presentation because the essential justification of our type of work is not easily expressed and not always fully appreciated. Mr. Miller's ten year period as the executive head of a sister organization, the Citizens Research Council of Michigan, has enabled him to speak authoritatively from a comparable background. The substance of his talk is reproduced below.

It is with both pride and humility that I appear here today. While I deem it a privilege to speak on the occasion of the anniversaries of your two organizations, I am also conscious of the responsibility contained in appearing before one of the oldest municipal research bureaus in existence, and one with a respected and outstanding record, garnered by many years of faithful service to the community. We in Detroit tend to think of ourselves as one of the first such organizations to have maintained a continuous history since its founding. Yet, here I am before an organization founded two years before our own.

Other similarities besides approximate age link our two organizations. In each case, Mr. Hardy and I are but the second director our organizations have had. Each of us was preceded by a man - Dr. Lent D. Upson in my case; Dr. Horace L. Brittain in yours - whose many years of outstanding effort gave top leadership to the field of citizen research. I might add, incidentally, and I think Mr. Hardy will concur, that, in accepting the positions we hold, and in following the men

we did, we have proved very definitely that fools still rush in.

In yet another way I feel we are related, perhaps as first cousins. The roots of both organizations stem from Dr. William H. Allen and the old New York Bureau of Municipal Research. It was the survey by the New York Bureau of Municipal Research that prompted the establishment of your bureau. I consider myself as representing the third generation of the New York Bureau--Dr. Allen to Dr. Upson to myself.

Finally, our organizations are similar in that we are both located in cities which form the core of a metropolitan area. Thus, basically, we are both trying to solve the same problems. While the details of our methods of approach may differ, our goals are substantially the same.

Before proceeding with a discussion of some of our common problems, let me indulge in a bit of philosophizing about the nature and role of citizen research. I do so, and I believe it is always ap-

appropriate to do so, because too often, whether we be one year old or forty, the underlying nature and role - the unique qualities of citizen research - are not understood. And even if understood, I still think it well behooves us to review what we are seeking to do, and why.

I suggest this because the longer I remain in the business, the more I come to appreciate some of the unique characteristics involved in citizen research. In combination they tend to make a citizen research agency somewhat different from any other organization.

Unique Features of Citizen Research

The first fact that makes a citizen research agency different has already been implied: there is no other such organization in any given governmental jurisdiction. Hence we lack the bases of comparison which usually help provide identification and understanding. Knowledge of one professional or trade association helps us to understand all other such groups. But it does not help provide understanding of the what, why and how of citizen research.

A second characteristic is not peculiar to citizen research but still definitely influences the over-all character of the citizen research agency--the lack of a profit and loss statement. In a business enterprise, the profit and loss statement reflects the degree to which any business does or does not meet public need and demand. No such statement exists to measure the need or demand for citizen research, or to help appraise the adequacy and degree of competence with which such a need is being met. The inevitable result is that evaluation must reflect subjective judgements.

Adding to the difficulties caused by lack of a profit and loss statement is the fact that much of the work of a citizens research agency is, of necessity, intangible. May I cite an example from recent experience? In the course of surveying our county general hospital which, with a psychiatric unit and infirmary, has a total load of some 6,500 patients, a major task was to counter the prevailing attitude that the institution was run for the benefit of the

employees with the concept that the primary purpose of the institution was to benefit and render services to the patients. To the extent that we were successful, the result, even though intangible, will be most important in improving the operation of the hospital.

Another example, and one perhaps relating to your own situation, is the influence we can wield in getting officials to think in terms of, and to be interested in, dimensions and perspectives larger than those of the particular governmental unit they may represent.

Parallel to the quality of being intangible is the fact that much of the best work of a citizen research agency is carried on back stage, in cooperation with government people. They must, and quite properly should, be given credit for resulting improvements. But that does not make the public role of the citizen agency any easier. To cite a very practical example, it increases the difficulty of establishing sufficient knowledge of what is done to facilitate the raising of adequate funds. I fear, however, that this is one of the inescapable crosses citizen research must bear if it is to operate with maximum effectiveness. It is here, also, may I point out, that officers, trustees, and friends of a citizen research agency can serve a most valuable purpose by helping to transmit and translate to the community what the agency is doing and why it is needed.

Next among its special characteristics, may I remind you that citizen research must, of necessity, be concerned much of the time with long-range considerations, coupled with what sometimes seems to be the need for endless patience. I remember hearing Dr. Upson say, many years ago, that a reformer in government must have a geologist's sense of time. My experiences since have but served to corroborate that observation. Government resists change, and changes slowly. Frequently it is only by the continuous repetition of the same point that ends are accomplished. And it is through the application of just such continuous attention that citizen agencies often accomplish their best results.

asserting and maintaining an independent and continuous vigil over the conduct of their public affairs does not change. The nature of the need for citizen attention and concern changes in some respects over the years, but the need is always there. Moreover, as the complexity and volume of that problem represented by "government" becomes larger, so also does the need become greater for the continuous, technically-competent attention of an impartial, independent citizen research agency.

A citizen research agency today is concerned with many of the problems of forty years ago. A few relatively minor problems of government may have faded into insignificance or even disappeared. At one time, hitching posts instead of parking meters, watering troughs instead of gasoline stations, were subjects of municipal concern. The fact remains however that while municipal problems, like old soldiers, never die, neither do they fade away. Their nature may change in some respects, and in consequence the areas to which a citizen agency devotes its attention may vary from time to time, but the fundamental problems remain essentially unchanged. Motorized patrol and radio modified police operating techniques, but did not materially alter the fundamental nature of the problem of law and order. Skyscrapers have dictated changes in fire-fighting techniques and equipment--but essentially the purpose and objectives have remained the same. It is interesting to recall, for example, that the original survey of Toronto's government carried out for your people by the New York Bureau of Municipal Research covered subjects such as treasury, assessments, public works, fire and property. Such subjects are not actively pursued all the time by all organizations, but they will surely remain part of the general field of concern of citizen research agencies.

New Responsibilities

In addition to these perennial problems, some of us at least are now confronted with two additional types of problems which are often more difficult than the traditional ones. The first of these does

It happens we now have a good example of that in Detroit. My organization has talked for years on end about consolidating and reducing the number of police precincts in our city. This year, finally, it has been agreed to consolidate two districts at once and then to locate a site for a new station in order to permit consolidation of two others. It has been a long, slow, tedious road, but the point is that if there had not been a citizen research agency to pursue that course, it is dubious at best whether anything would ever have been done. Fortunately, all achievements do not always take so long; progress also can be swifter and sometimes more dramatic.

The sixth and final characteristic is that, in the broadest sense, a citizen research agency's only pressure is the pressure of its facts, supplemented by the prestige, personality, and (very often!) the persuasiveness of its staff and governing body. True, some agencies have "members". They usually, however, are not sufficient in numbers to create, and seldom are used in the sense we consider as a pressure group. Certainly, most of the time the pressure of the citizen research agency is the pressure of its facts and logic.

Those, as I see it, are some of the characteristics that make citizen research what it is. It also is obvious, I believe, that a number of the conditions I have touched upon make the work no easier. Again, adequate fund raising is the point that I am sure would readily come to mind among those who have had active experience with a citizen research agency. Our type of organization offers neither the appeal of direct service or benefit, nor the appeal of a "good-activity"--church, school, library, art museum, symphony. It must depend in large measure upon those with sufficient vision and sufficient civic interest to see and appreciate its necessity.

Traditional Problems

Regardless of the difficulty of understanding what it is and what it does, the need for citizen research is always with us. The fundamental concept of citizens

to do so, because too often, we are one year old or forty, and the nature and role of the citizen research agency is not understood. And even if understood, I think it well behooves us to review why we are seeking to do, and why.

Let us because the longer I remain in the business, the more I come to realize some of the unique characteristics of the citizen research agency. They tend to make a citizen research agency somewhat different from any other organization.

Characteristics of Citizen Research

First, that makes a citizen research agency different has already been said. There is no other such organization. Hence we lack the bases of comparison which usually help provide identification and understanding. Knowledge of the citizen research agency is not widespread. It is not understood all other such groups. It is not help provide understanding of why and how of citizen research.

Second characteristic is not peculiar to research but still definitely characterizes the over-all character of the citizen research agency--the lack of a business statement. In a business statement, the profit and loss statement, the degree to which any business does not meet public need and demand. No such statement exists to the need or demand for citizen research. It is hard to appreciate the advantage of competence with which such research must. The inevitable result of research must reflect subjective

the difficulties caused by lack of understanding and loss statement is the fact that the work of a citizen research agency is of necessity, intangible. May I give an example from recent experience? In surveying our county hospital which, with a psychiatric and infirmary, has a total bed of 500 patients, a major task was to determine the prevailing attitude that the hospital was run for the benefit of the

employees with the concept that the primary purpose of the institution was to provide and render services to the patients. To the extent that we were successful, the results, even though intangible, will be most important in improving the operation of the hospital.

Another example, and one perhaps relating to your own situation, is the influence we can wield in getting officials to think in terms of, and to be interested in, dimensions and perspectives larger than those of the particular governmental unit they may represent.

Parallel to the quality of being intangible is the fact that much of the best work of a citizen research agency is carried on back stage, in cooperation with government people. They must, and quite properly should, be given credit for resulting improvements. But that does not make the public role of the citizen agency any easier. To cite a very practical example, it increases the difficulty of establishing sufficient knowledge of what is done to facilitate the raising of adequate funds. I fear, however, that this is one of the inescapable crosses citizen research must bear if it is to operate with maximum effectiveness. It is here, also, may I point out that citizen research agency can serve a most valuable purpose by helping to transmit and translate to the community what the agency is doing and why it is needed.

Next among its special characteristics, may I remind you that citizen research must, of necessity, be concerned much of the time with long-range considerations, coupled with what sometimes seems to be the need for endless patience. I remember hearing Dr. Upson say, many years ago, that a reformer in government must have a geologist's sense of time. My experiences since have but served to corroborate that observation. Government resists change, and changes slowly. Frequently it is only by the continuous repetition of the same point that ends are accomplished. And it is through the application of just such continuous attention that citizen agencies often accomplish their best results.

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A citizen research agency today is concerned with many of the problems of forty years ago. A few relatively minor problems of government have faded into insignificance or even disappeared. At one time, parking problems instead of gasometers, water problems instead of municipal line stations, were subjects of municipal concern. The fact remains however that while municipal problems like old soldiers, never die, neither do they fade away. Their nature may change in some respects, and in consequence the areas to which a citizen agency devotes its attention may vary from time to time, but the fundamental problems remain essentially unchanged. Motorized patrol and radio modified police operating techniques, but did not materially alter the fundamental nature of the problem of law and order. Sky-scrapers have dictated changes in fire-fighting techniques and equipment, but essentially the purpose and objectives have remained the same. It is interesting to recall, for example, that the original survey of Toronto's government carried out for your people by the New York Bureau of Municipal Research covered subjects such as taxes, assessments, public works, fire and property. Such subjects are not actively pursued all the time by all organizations, but they will surely remain part of the general field of concern of citizen research agencies.

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difficult and final characteristic is that the most serious, a citizen research agency's only pressure is the pressure of the public. It is (very often) the pressure of its staff and governing agencies. The same agencies have often said they usually, however, are not used in the sense we consider. Certainly, most of the pressure of the citizen research agency is the pressure of its factors

as it is, it is some of the characteristics that make citizen research what it is. It is also obvious, I think, that a number of the conditions which would make the work easier, the adequate fund raising is the point. I am sure you would readily come to among those who have had active contact with a citizen research agency. The type of organization offers neither direct service or benefit, but the appeal of a "good activity" -- a school, library, art museum, etc. -- it must depend in large measure upon those with sufficient vision and sufficient civic interest to see and

Unsettled Problems

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not ask "how" -- how to pave a street, or dispose of garbage, but "whether" -- whether we should have publicly subsidized housing, whether government should provide off-street or street parking, and so forth. These might be called questions of policy, yet I do not like the word in that use. The so-called "debt policy" of a city, for example, is properly and traditionally a concern of a citizen research agency. Actually what is meant is not "policy", but philosophy -- social, economic, governmental. Is it the proper role of government to provide subsidized housing? Such a question is one of individual philosophy; it is the type of question not ordinarily pursued by citizen research agencies. But whether or not the citizen research agency takes a stand on that issue, once a community embarks on a program of public housing, it is up to the citizen agency to make sure that the program works as well as possible to fulfill the intent of the citizens in authorizing it.

The other relatively new problem, or rather group of problems, with which we must now be concerned are those, usually related to old functions, which transcend the geographical boundaries of any one government unit. While these problems of metropolitan areas are not entirely new, only in recent years have they become pressing.

There is one thing that has particularly concerned me in connection with our metropolitan problems. The geographical limits of each is not the same. For example, the Detroit area water problem covers a much different territory than does our port problem or our transportation problem. For this reason and others, there are some objections in the Detroit area to creating an overall metropolitan authority. On the other hand, if we create separate metropolitan authorities for water, transportation, parks, recreation, and others, we will have numerous overlapping units of government, which is obviously undesirable.

In the Detroit metropolitan area the major present problems are water and sanitation, transportation (both for autos and rapid transportation), parking, airports, waste disposal, ports, and some aspects of

recreation. But there are also questions about other services which at this time do not appear to be of area-wide concern in Detroit. Included among these are police, fire, welfare, schools, street lighting, garbage and waste disposal, and most aspects of health. While, of course, there should be intergovernmental cooperation in these fields, they are not now metropolitan problems.

Citizen Research in Metropolitan Areas

I do not propose to discuss each of the metropolitan area problems, but rather to mention what I feel is the proper role of the citizen research bureaus in attacking such subjects. Let me first point out one thing -- I do not believe the citizen research agency should try to do all the work involved in solving any one of the metropolitan issues. The primary reason I say this is because of our staff limitations -- both in terms of size and specialized technical competence. My organization normally operates with a professional staff of eight to ten, none of whom is, for example, an engineer. If we were to undertake a comprehensive study of the metropolitan water problem in the Detroit area, it would require the services of all the staff for several years and, in addition, we would have to hire consulting engineers. There are too many other things going on that constantly need our attention for us to be able to forsake all else to do one study.

I do believe, however, that the citizen research agency has a significant contribution to make in the field of metropolitan area problems.

The first contribution the citizen research agency can make is in discovering the dimensions of those problems that have already arisen and in anticipating new ones before they arise. I believe we are in an excellent position to do this because we are a clearing house for information within the metropolitan area and, in addition, have valuable contacts with groups in other comparable areas. Our concern is not, or at least certainly should not be, confined to only one unit of government.

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The second useful function we can perform is in bringing a particular problem out in the open and in making public officials, the business community, other civic organizations, the newspapers and radio aware of its existence. Again, we are in an excellent position to do this for we have the necessary contacts and we have (or certainly should have) a reputation for objectivity. Since we have no special interest we are able to call our shots as we see them.

Having brought the problem to public attention and aroused some interest in it, we can then move to the next step--the formation of some type of group to study it. Here also, our impartial point of view, plus our experience in creating and working with such groups, gives us another opportunity to make a valuable contribution. We can perform an essential function in advising the group as to what the scope of its activities should be, how it can best attack the problem, who it can get to do the required technical studies, and who can do the necessary administrative studies.

When the problem has been analyzed technically (for instance, the Detroit area has been found to need so much additional water supply), there is still another contribution which the citizen research agency can, and should, make. While an engineering firm can competently analyze a water supply question and can suggest the technical solutions, such a firm is somewhat limited in indicating the best

way for the governmental units concerned to get together on the project. The citizen agency, by contrast, can sell the project and is also qualified to suggest the best method by which the various governmental units can cooperate in developing satisfactory administration and control.

There is one other contribution I should mention that is perhaps the most important that the citizen research agency can provide. In the Detroit area, and I'm sure the same thing applies in Toronto, there is a tendency for local officials to guard their own operations somewhat jealously. Often these officials do not appreciate the larger problems of the metropolitan area and tend to oppose anything that might upset the status quo. There may also be the feeling that the core city is trying to take the suburbs over. I believe the citizen agency can do much to counter this attitude; for it alone represents no special interest, governmental or otherwise. In other words, if the citizen agency has the respect of the community it serves, it can do much to broaden the perspective of local officials.

I believe that in your interest in, and support of, your citizen research agency lies the best opportunity for solution of the governmental problems of your community. I further believe that only by such enlightened interest and support can the citizen effectively control the conduct of his government.