



CIVIC AFFAIRS

A BULLETIN ISSUED BY THE BUREAU OF MUNICIPAL RESEARCH, 32 ISABELLA STREET, TORONTO 5

July 22, 1959

AN OUTSIDE VIEW OF PUBLIC PERSONNEL OPERATIONS

Condensation of a Keynote Address to the Eastern Regional Conference of the Public Personnel Association
This condensation has been prepared for the Journal of the Society for Personnel Administration, Washington, D.C.

by Eric Hardy

The subject I have undertaken to speak on is not an easy one. An outside view of public personnel operations can only be helpful when it is an informed view of what I recognize as a highly complex and specialized field. My audience, moreover, is drawn from the whole eastern region of the United States and Canada and includes, in addition, two representatives from Puerto Rico and visiting delegates from twelve other countries or territories.

If anything should be clear to the outside observer, it is the wide variety of public personnel practices and the great differences in the stages to which personnel management has progressed in the various jurisdictions represented here. Not only are there differences between countries, states or provinces; the conditions and the laws may also be widely divergent between levels of government--local, regional and national.

In our part of the world, some public personnel people are still engaged in the initial crusade to establish the merit system on a firm footing; much of their energies is directed towards refuting the saying attributed to Senator William Marcy "To the victors belong the spoils". Others are working in well-established career services where the most pressing problems may centre around complex negotiations with strong unions. Still others are preoccupied with organization and methods studies whose objective is to speed up governmental operations and make manpower more productive. I think, finally, of another area of the public service in which the goal is to scale down the barricades that were erected to establish the merit system in order that the public service may be made more responsive to the legitimate objectives of elected representatives and the public they serve.

In any jurisdiction where public personnel operations have been organized to take advantage of modern techniques of personnel selection, promotion and man management, there is perhaps a tendency for personnel officers to become somewhat inbred. Such people can perhaps benefit from an outsider's opinion of their activities. In effect, they may want every

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written to hear a sermon. This thought may have been in the minds of your programme committee. Indeed they seem to have encouraged me to adopt this theme--even to the extent of furnishing me with a text--from the German poet Schiller.

The Organization Man

Be that as it may, I am reminded of a true story which happened several years ago. A Unitarian congregation was looking for a new minister. Among the candidates for the post was a Presbyterian clergyman. He did not, however, make his application openly and, when he failed to secure the appointment, remained as a minister in the Presbyterian Church. I only happened to hear the story by one of those strange coincidences which the Presbyterian minister could not have foreseen.

Now I am not concerned with the relative merits of the beliefs held by Presbyterians and Unitarians. My point is that they are quite different. The minister in question could hardly hold two competing convictions at the same time. In one church or the other he would really be a traitor to his cause.

Like a clergyman, a conscientious personnel officer has to believe in what he is doing in order to serve satisfactorily. In taking this stand, I am not, however, suggesting the viewpoint expressed to me one day by a sales representative for an oil company. He said he could not work for the company if he did not feel that their products were the best on the market. I doubt that all employees of private business are convinced that the goods they sell and the services they provide are the very best obtainable. Nor, as I see it, do they have to feel that way. They should, however, be satisfied that the product or service is essentially good and that the organization is basically honest.

The same holds true of a public personnel officer. He should believe that there is enough good about the government which employs him to provide an opportunity to serve in it constructively and with integrity.

Let me take the point one stage further. Sound attitudes in personnel work can only be based on understanding of what is involved and of what is happening. I recall some work the Citizens Research Institute did in helping develop a correspondence training programme for municipal assessors. In addition to the basic technical requirements of the assessors work, the lessons were designed to give the student a somewhat broader background knowledge. There were lessons on land economics, on taxation and revenue raising generally, on the history and structure of local government and so forth.

Whether through preparatory education, in-service training, evening classes, or correspondence courses, the personnel officer today should equip himself both with a detailed and a broad knowledge of his field of work. In particular, he should develop some genuine appreciation of the respective roles of the elected representative and of the administrator. Let me illustrate with a few examples.

In a period of creeping inflation, the problem of revenue raising for local government purposes can be quite different from the situation which develops at the provincial, state or national level. In Canada, local governments continue to rely heavily upon the real property tax. At the national level, by contrast, the most important form of taxation is the income tax and particularly the personal income tax.

The effect of a gradual devaluation of the dollar upon local governments is to require repeated increases in the assessed values of property or, failing that action, in property tax rates. Whichever is chosen, the increases must be consciously engineered with the full backing of the municipal council.

The impact of inflation on the yield of the personal income tax is just the reverse. The basic exemptions which are normally allowed become worth less and less to the taxpayer. The progressive rate structure, which is expressed in percentages of dollar income, presses more and more heavily upon wage earners as the level of wages is forced up under inflationary conditions.

A public personnel officer attached to a local government will get further in pressing his claims for upward revisions in salary classifications, which become particularly essential in a period of inflation, if he has some understanding of the elected representatives' problem of revenue-raising and some sympathy with it.

Next, let us consider for a moment the merits of the case for maintaining an independent civil service commission. You all know, if you think about it, that the independent commission was regarded as a basic part of the machinery required to wipe out the spoils system and thereby to place civil service employment on a merit basis. Where today the competition of political parties remains fierce and standards of conduct within party administrations are not well defined, it would be folly to abandon the independent commission and bring personnel operations under the unrestricted control of the administration. At the local level, however, government is organized everywhere throughout Canada on a non-partisan basis, while in the United States the proportion of non-partisan elections is growing steadily. Accompanying the latter development, the introduction of new patterns of organization such as the council-manager plan have helped to raise the ethical standards of politics. Today, in consequence, it is quite realistic for many city governments to organize central personnel departments which stand in the same direct relationship to the municipal administration as central purchasing, real estate, assessment or even treasury departments.

Again, the personnel officer who becomes familiar with the role of the elected representative and the qualifications for such an office will recognize this further point: elected representatives can be blissfully unaware of the requirements for highly skilled personnel in branches of government which are unfamiliar to them. Whether or not the personnel operation enjoys the protection of the independent commission, personnel people have, in my opinion, a responsibility at every opportunity to acquaint elected representatives with the nature and scope of their operations.

Government and Business

For many years public personnel people have tended to stress the differences between government and business. They have pointed out how unfair it is to attempt to judge public employment by business standards and to set salaries accordingly. There has been much talk about the difficulty of measuring work output or of evaluating the worth of a job where the profit motive does not exist. I feel that the more important objective today is to examine the possibility of establishing genuinely

competitive pay scales with private enterprise through carefully documented comparisons between government and business employment.

On this score, the recent report of the Canadian Civil Service Commission on "Personnel Administration in the Public Service" is quite revealing. It stresses what can be done through a Pay Research Bureau to define and develop competitive pay levels with business. In one section, the report states: "Salaries should be comparable to those paid by good private employers for similar classes of work, taking into account the other terms of employment that are necessary to make valid comparisons." Having enunciated this sound principle, however, and having indicated what a pay research bureau can accomplish in a practical way towards achieving this objective, the report then departs from logic, bowing perhaps to the weight of entrenched attitudes on this subject. It recommends that the terms of the Civil Service Act with respect to fixing of salaries and working conditions should not apply to "purely commercial enterprises" or to "industrial organizations". Yet surely these are the very types of operation where competitive pay scales and benefits could most easily be established.

Professional Standards

One reason for setting up the municipal assessors training programme, to which I referred earlier, was to help create recognized professional standards for the occupation of municipal assessor. Yet in my judgment, the quality of personnel officers themselves is very uneven, measured in terms of education and experience, and there appears to be little solid agreement as to what the standard should be. Perhaps you will forgive me, therefore, if I attempt some definition of the requirements for responsible personnel work as one outsider sees them.

Most personnel officers are very conscious of the need for precise technical knowledge and familiarity with modern techniques of interviewing or examining present or potential employees. With this requirement, I heartily agree. But I am not sure that this qualification needs to be the product of long study. I recall spending some time with the personnel officer of a large Canadian city. He had been responsible for creating a central personnel office and for introducing modern techniques of job classification and rating, written and oral examinations and so forth. He had been brought from a completely different department in the civic service; and his formal schooling had gone little beyond the elementary level. Yet at the time I talked with him--some three years after taking on this new work--he seemed as well versed in the technical aspects of his job as any personnel officer I have encountered.

The reason for this official's success was simple enough. He was an essentially practical person. He had a first-rate mind and was prepared to use it.

This personnel director was exceptional. He had achieved success in spite of a decided lack of formal education. My contention, however, is that a good formal education should be an essential prerequisite for all or almost all new entrants into the public personnel field. Nowadays enough people have the opportunity to attend university to warrant making a university degree one of the requirements for those we hope to see grow into senior personnel officers. I am not thinking of a course in engineering or any other specialized or technical field of training. What we need most is people with a broad education, the kind which stirs the mind and

ensures that the person who graduates has a mind which is capable of being stirred. The path from office boy to commissioner is one which fewer and fewer people will travel in the future.

Perhaps I have said enough earlier to make a further point clear. My idea of a senior personnel officer is someone with a wide general knowledge of government. In one way or another, each novice should be expected to acquire such knowledge before being considered for a really senior post.

To ensure the success of the merit principle, the personnel function was usually organized in a department which was divorced from the regular administrative departments. More and more it is being questioned whether a separate and centralized personnel agency can do the whole job and do it well. Personnel officers are being appointed in increasing numbers to the staffs of the regular administrative departments of government. Sometimes, also, they are expected to take on direct administrative responsibilities as well as their staff services and related advisory functions.

A good personnel department seeks to facilitate transfers of personnel between operating departments. In this way the work experience of promising employees can be greatly enlarged. Unexpected talents can be revealed. Should not the same system be applied to people who begin work in a personnel department? Whether personnel operations are segregated and specialized, or partially integrated and more generalized, I believe that every senior personnel officer should himself have demonstrated administrative ability. And there is only one way to ensure this fact--to make successful administrative experience an actual requirement.

A good many years ago, when I was myself a civil servant, I had along with others to negotiate with the personnel department for new staff. The personnel officer was doubtless attempting to size me up, in order to help judge whether the additional staff was needed staff and whether the type of person I requested was really required.

I wonder if the personnel people realized that we were, in turn, attempting to size them up? And, if so, were they aware of an attitude which was current in those days--that anyone who settled for a job in the personnel department couldn't have much ambition?

That experience in government is now history and perhaps the viewpoint is no longer accurate if indeed it ever was. Certainly the comment is not valid to the same degree.

Yet, in an outsider's view, personnel departments are not always the strongest part of the public service. At the same time, they can be strong and indeed must be so in order to do their work properly. Personnel organizations should be in the van in placing quality ahead of numbers in all the responsible positions. Their key people should be like the brain-trusters who worked in the Canadian government in the war years. These people had plenty of imagination and drive. Furthermore, I would call them realistic about pay levels: for they knew they were grossly underpaid. But they had the desire to do a job and they were content to believe that in due course anomalies on salary would take care of themselves, as I believe they now have. As an outsider, that is the kind of comment I would like to be able to make about every senior personnel officer in every public service.