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CIVIC AFFAIRS

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The Development of Senior Municipal Officers

CONTENTS

	Page
Summary - - - - -	1
The Problem - - - - -	2
Recruitment and Retention of Municipal Officers	2
Duties of the Senior Executive - - - - -	4
Qualifications of the Senior Executive - - - - -	5
Conclusion - - - - -	7

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BUREAU OF MUNICIPAL RESEARCH

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The Development of Senior Municipal Officers

SUMMARY

The failure of the municipal public service to recruit and develop sufficient personnel capable of stepping into top management positions has been called the primary personnel problem of local government. This condition is in part attributable to several popular misconceptions with respect to the duties and responsibilities of senior municipal officials. An examination of their duties, particularly in light of the expanding role of local government, indicates that we can afford no less than the most competent men directing the affairs of our municipalities. However, present recruiting and development policies for chief permanent executive officers indicate that the present level of competence amongst these officers may not be maintained in the future.

Due to today's greater availability of education, the university graduate now exhibits intelligence and potential roughly equivalent to the high school graduate of thirty years ago. A Canada-wide survey of the educational backgrounds of the senior officials of municipalities — clerks, treasurers and managers — indicates that a majority of these officials completed high school. However, more than half these officials, apparently overlooking today's higher standards of education, feel that their successors will be adequately qualified with academic backgrounds similar to their own.

If a policy of recruiting future senior officials from high schools is maintained, it is likely that the relative quality of senior municipal officials will decline. It also is probable that without higher education, recruits will neither appreciate nor

exploit fully the potential of local government as a positive force in the development of the community.

The importance of this is best shown by an examination of the duties of the senior municipal official under the common forms of local administration in Ontario. If elected representatives are to be effectively assisted in the determination of sound policy, they must be advised by senior executives who grasp a tremendous range of subjects relative to the overall programme of council. They should be assisted by executives whose practical experience and academic training enable them to understand the objectives of local government in its relation to the community and the means by which the municipality gives effect to its programmes and policies. Senior executives also must be aware of the social and economic forces shaping urban life and be able to appreciate the needs of citizens for whom the municipality acts.

Such qualifications reduce the likelihood that technical experts may effectively assume the position of senior executive. To at least maintain the level of competence of officials holding the senior executive position, university trained recruits are required whose academic backgrounds permit them to understand the effect and ramifications of municipal activity. A policy of recruiting personnel of this calibre must be supported by attractive conditions of employment and by training programmes designed to familiarize future senior executives with the diversity of local government operation.



The Development of Senior Municipal Officers

THE PROBLEM

New and expanded services required by the inhabitants of urban centres have increased the complexity of day to day administration of local government. Of the many problems occasioned by the expansion of municipal activities, the recruitment of trained, capable personnel into the municipal civil service is of primary importance. Yet, while business and other levels of government have made great strides in recruiting techniques, local governments have continued to rely on hit and miss methods of obtaining senior administrators and technical staff. Unless this situation is remedied, the urban dweller will eventually feel its effects in inefficient administration and higher taxes for inadequate services.

The existing shortage of qualified personnel in cities and metropolitan areas of Canada, has caused concern for a number of years. In 1956, a submission of the Canadian Federation of Mayors and Municipalities to the Royal Commission on Canada's Economic Prospects stated that: "the primary personnel problem confronting the municipal public service lies in its inability to recruit and develop sufficient personnel capable of stepping into top management positions". Its conclusion is as applicable today as it was six years ago.

Two popular misconceptions associated with municipal employment constitute a severe handicap to recruitment. The first is the common belief that city hall jobs are given out as patronage or charity to those who are not up to the standards required in business or industry. The second is the picture, held by many, of all municipal employees being little more than errand boys for council. Although both concepts may have had some validity years ago, and occasional vestiges of the old system can still be found, both are now outmoded. As long as these beliefs are harboured by a significant percentage of the public, however, the municipal service will be denied the respect it deserves and employment in local government will be less attractive as a result.

The depression marks the point at which a perceptible decline occurred in the importance of patronage and charity in municipal employment practices. The security offered by government positions, in all three jurisdictions, increased their

attractiveness in unstable times and competition developed for the posts that were available. Since then, improvements in salaries and working conditions have made municipal employment competitive in these respects with business. The rise of urbanization has increased the challenge and scope of local government, and thus its appeal for talented individuals.

The second anachronism, the view that municipal officials are handmaids of council, would find few subscribers among those with a knowledge of contemporary local government. While senior personnel carry out policy set by elected representatives, they must also fulfil certain statutory obligations that in unusual circumstances may supersede their duty to follow council instruction. But it is through the influence that an official, whose competence is respected, can exert on the formation of policy that opportunity for his most significant contribution lies.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF MUNICIPAL OFFICIALS

The importance of obtaining and retaining good officials

Senior executives of municipalities have one important advantage over elected representatives — they enjoy continuity of office. This permits them to draw on a combination of technical knowledge, continuous experience and familiarity with local conditions in forming their opinions and programmes. If a council has confidence in the basic intelligence and ability of its officials, the unique background they possess will lend weight to their views and incline council to give careful consideration to their judgment. Combine with this the political insight and diplomacy developed by officials through years of dealing with elected representatives, and the potential capacity of senior personnel to assist in the determination of policy is expanded still further.

The growing complexity and range of municipal activities demand that councils secure the best talent obtainable to fill senior executive

positions. The qualifications required for such positions should increase as the duties involved become more demanding. New appointees should be better, or at least as well qualified as their predecessors.

Recruits for senior executive positions

The only objective means of measuring the quality of today's recruits, from whom must come our future executives, against that of their predecessors, is by reviewing the academic and technical standards already achieved by each group prior to entering the municipal field. Although a rough guide, achievements of this kind give some indication of the basic intelligence and capacity for application of the individual. Comparison between the two groups is difficult and the conclusions reached must be regarded with a degree of reservation.

Thirty years ago, few could afford to attend university. Today a higher standard of living and an improved system of educational assistance permit many more industrious young people to obtain a university education. A change in the public's attitude toward formal schooling has accompanied the improvement of opportunities and increased its appeal. Where in earlier years, a student might complete his formal education in high school, his counterpart today can be expected to take advantage of the greater availability of education and continue on to university or professional training outside universities.

In light of this change, it can be assumed that a young man who completes university in 1962 can be equated roughly, in terms of talent and diligence, to the man who completed high school thirty years ago. Evidence of this proposition's validity can be found in the increasing tendency of many employers to actively recruit university students, where formerly high school graduates were employed.

On the basis of this assumption, a survey covering the educational background of municipal clerks and treasurers across Canada was undertaken in 1959 to establish whether the academic qualifications of present day recruits for these positions were comparable to the backgrounds possessed by present office holders. Of the 101 men forty years of age and over who replied, a surprisingly high 75% had completed high school. Assuming that they completed their formal schooling 25 to 50 years ago, this would indicate

that a majority of those who reached the senior executive positions were recruited from among those of above average educational background, since at that time, only about 8% of children entering school, reached their final year of high school.

Unfortunately, because few young men had reached the senior positions covered in this survey (clerks and treasurers), the number of replies from officials in the 20 to 40 age group was too small to justify a comparison on the basis of these results. However, the questionnaire also asked clerks and treasurers to describe the qualifications which they felt their successors should possess in order to maintain or increase the efficiency of their offices. Fifty-nine per cent of those replying felt that academic training similar to their own would suffice. Consequently, the survey concluded that since the majority of clerks and treasurers saw little need to recruit their potential successors from universities, the relative potential of people being trained for these positions would be less than that of the present office holders. The greater availability of education apparently was not recognized by this group of senior municipal officials.

A further survey conducted by the Bureau in the metropolitan area of Toronto threw additional light on the educational qualifications of municipal personnel. The survey enquired into the extent to which municipalities employed university graduates (excluding teaching personnel) and the capacity in which they were employed. Of the 15 replies that were comprehensive enough to consider, 12 municipalities employed at least one, and 9 out of the 12 employed more than one university graduate. Degrees in engineering constituted the overwhelming majority of those reported, and planning, law and medical degrees made up the bulk of the remainder. The number of those who possessed qualifications of a general nature, such as a B.A. or M.A. was very small and these degrees usually appeared in combination with more technical training such as law or accounting.

Municipalities then, are obtaining university trained personnel for certain fields of work. In so doing, they are raising their standards as those of business and industry are raised and maintaining or improving the level of training demanded of a certain percentage of recruits. Whether the percentage from whom they require better than average qualifications is as high or higher than in former years is impossible to determine due to an absence of statistics on which to base observations.

Positions for which university graduates are recruited

As in other large organizations, the percentage of highly trained or educated personnel required by a municipality is small in relation to total staff. This small group is, in effect, the municipality's pool of management and potential management material. The positions which they fill or for which they are being groomed fall under four headings:

- 1) the senior executive, e.g. manager, clerk, clerk-treasurer;
- 2) functional executive, e.g. police or fire chief, parks commissioner, welfare commissioner;
- 3) staff officer, e.g. accountants, lawyers;
- 4) technical officer, e.g. doctors, engineers, social workers.

It is for positions in categories 3) and 4) that almost all university graduates are now recruited. This is due, primarily, to the fact that the jobs call for advanced technical training obtainable only at the university level.

The need for more highly qualified personnel in the chief and functional executive positions is, however, less obvious, since not as much specific, technical skill is required. Traditionally, candidates for these positions have come up through the ranks following some high school training. No one, regardless of his educational qualifications, would be suitable unless he had had a certain amount of municipal experience. For this reason, chief and functional executives are frequently drawn either from the municipality's staff of technical officers or from personnel who have not had the benefit of higher education.

In filling functional executive positions, the first course of action often works out well. Obviously, the head of the works department must have some knowledge of engineering, the treasurer of accounting, etcetera, to understand the functions performed in the department. To put a technical or staff officer in the senior executive position, however, does not work out as neatly. Neither his practical experience, nor his specialized educational background will have prepared him adequately for any but a small fraction of the duties for which he would become responsible as the senior executive. If this method of obtaining senior executives works out at all, it is to the credit of the individual concerned, not to his training and not to the promotional system.

Municipalities cannot afford to gamble the efficiency of the organization on the chance that such an arrangement might prove satisfactory.

DUTIES OF THE SENIOR EXECUTIVE

Senior executives require a broad general knowledge and appreciation of a wide range of subjects. They must be 'expert generalists'.

The need for such qualifications can best be appreciated by briefly examining the duties of the senior executive in three forms of municipal government in Ontario.

City manager system

Under the council-manager system, the manager is the sole link between the elected council and the permanent municipal employees. All communications from council to officials or officials to council are conducted through and by the manager. This places a heavy dual responsibility on the man in the middle. To present an official's position or proposal to council, he must first thoroughly understand it, the problems involved, the reasoning behind it and the relation of the proposal to the balance of the municipality's affairs. He must then be able to explain the proposal to council and answer their questions in layman's language. The second side of his responsibility is to present the decisions of council to the officials and assist them in translating vague statements of policy into specific courses of action. This requires a thorough and accurate understanding of the intent of council and intimate familiarity with the branches of administration that will be affected and the channels through which the decision will be implemented. If the manager fails to properly represent his officials' side of the story to council, he greatly reduces the efficiency of the men working under him and that of the entire organization; if he fails to interpret properly or convey council's instructions to his officials, he undermines the democratic base of local government.

The manager is also responsible for the co-operation of municipal activities and departments. Little need be said of the waste of time, effort and money that can result if this function is not properly carried out. Before he can successfully draw together the departmentalized operations of the municipality, he must thoroughly understand

all the interrelated fragments of the municipality's operations. This requires constant attention and study.

Finally, because he is the only permanent employee in direct contact with council, the manager alone is in a position to moderate the shortcomings and fill in the gaps in knowledge that may exist on council. Although the tendency is often exaggerated, occasionally some councils adopt courses of action that are unwise from a long term point of view, but which will be profitable in the short run. Sometimes sheer lack of experience, insufficient background information or failure to thoroughly understand the issues and principles involved in a question will lead a council to make an ill-advised decision. The manager, having both experience and knowledge should be less susceptible to such pitfalls. It is his duty, as it is the duty of anyone in a senior executive position, to advise council of the probable consequences of its actions where it has failed to foresee them. As pointed out earlier, if the manager enjoys the confidence of council, its members will give serious consideration to his views.

The committee system

The clerk, or as is often the case, the clerk-treasurer, is generally the senior executive in the council-committee system. His function as an interpreter to council and its officials is not as great as that of the manager. The use of specialized committees of council in the administrative process permits more direct contact between department heads and members of council. As a result, the duties of the clerk, who generally acts as secretary of the committees, are less interpretative in nature and more involved with integrating the work of committees into the general framework of municipal policy.

The clerk's function as a co-ordinator also differs somewhat from that of the manager. He is, for instance, more concerned with promoting a flow of information between one committee and another than between one department head and another. Depending on the nature of council, he may have a more difficult task than the manager in encouraging the co-ordination of policy. Committees can become as one-service or one-purpose oriented as any department. If, in their capacity as councillors, committee members exaggerate the importance of the aspect of administration for which they are responsible, they lose the ability to view municipal activities in perspective. Such

an attitude may upset the balance of the entire organization. It is the duty of the clerk to avoid a situation of this kind when possible and to minimize the harmful effects produced when it cannot be prevented.

The most important but least specific responsibilities of the clerk and of the manager are identical. Both must bring to council their accrued knowledge and experience to assist elected representatives in the determination of sound policy. They must attempt to compensate for any deficiencies council may have as a result of inexperience or lack of familiarity with the overall problems and procedures of municipal government.

Board of control

Neither the council-manager, nor council-committee system leaves any doubt as to the identity of the senior executive. Both establish the holder of one position as the key man in the municipal administration and his staff or department as the hub of local government activity. The Board of Control system, however, does not have such a well defined pattern.

The Board deals directly with responsible civic officials, reducing the need for an intermediary, and itself assumes some responsibility for co-ordinating municipal activities. However, the lack of continuity in the Board's membership and the inherent weaknesses in any multi-headed decision-making body materially reduce its ability to act as the sole executive organ.

As a consequence, the secretary of the Board, the treasurer or some other official may emerge as the senior executive. Whoever succeeds in establishing himself in this role must provide the balanced, long-range, informed approach to municipal operations that is difficult for elected members to supply. In the Board of Control system, where any one of a number of men in the municipal service may be called on to perform the duties of the senior executive, all possible candidates should possess the extensive background and potential ability needed to fill the position.

QUALIFICATIONS OF THE SENIOR EXECUTIVE

The nature of the duties of the senior executive, as briefly outlined, requires a man of better than average intelligence and organizational ability and of broad outlook and interests. A specialist,

trained in one field, has little advantage over the man with a general education. Perhaps the danger of a one-approach, one-service outlook outweighs any initial advantage the specialist might enjoy. A treasurer or former treasurer, for instance, may consider the financial implications of a question to be paramount; a lawyer, the legal implications. Although these municipal employees are familiar with particular aspects of the operations of all departments, they may have only a fractional picture of any one. The use of a specialist in a position in which his technical knowledge will not be fully exploited, deprives the municipality of his technical experience and the official of the benefit of his years of training. If elected representatives are to be effectively assisted in their deliberations, they must be advised by an executive who is able to discuss accurately, in terms that are easily understood, a tremendous range of subjects which relate to the overall programme of council.

Such qualifications require an executive whose practical experience and academic training enable him to understand the objectives of local government in its relation to the community and the means by which the municipality gives effect to its programmes and policies. It also requires that the senior executive be aware of the social and economic forces shaping urban life and be able to appreciate the needs of citizens for whom the municipality acts.

Prospects for securing senior executives with these qualifications

It is to the office of the present senior executive, the clerk, the manager or whoever it may be in the Board of Control system, that adequately qualified candidates should be attracted. Once in the employ of the municipality, such recruits should be placed in training programmes in which they serve for short periods of time in each of the major departments of the organization before taking up their duties in the office of the senior executive. The successful use of such programmes by private organizations suggests that experimentation in this regard by municipalities would be profitable, especially in view of the departmentalized nature of municipal organization. Though municipal authorities protest that they cannot afford to train recruits who will not immediately reach full productivity, municipalities with budgets ranging into the millions of dollars annually surely can justify, and soon recover, any costs that may be entailed.

However, there apparently is little immediate prospect that personnel of the necessary calibre

will be attracted to the municipal service. The surveys, previously referred to, establish that although the municipal recruiting practices with respect to technical personnel appear to have kept pace with the rest of the community, similar developments have not occurred and do not appear likely to occur with respect to the office of the senior executive. While business and industry have recognized the need to recruit from universities, municipalities have rarely done so.

The importance of this situation for municipalities is two-fold. First, due to today's greater availability of education, the qualifications and relative potential of those being trained for senior executive positions apparently will decline in relation to those of present office holders if the practice of securing recruits from high-school rather than universities is maintained. Second, it is unlikely that potential senior executives, recruited from technical departments or from other than universities will have the background which will enable them to develop the wide outlook and diversified understanding which are essential for senior municipal executives today.

Difficulties exist, however, which make it awkward for municipalities to employ college graduates having no specialized training. One of the major obstacles is caused by an imperfectly functioning merit system. The most reasonable place in the civil service hierarchy for the graduate to enter the municipal service is in a junior or assistant executive position. Here, working under direction, he can assume limited responsibilities while familiarizing himself with the procedures and operations of the municipality. Under the existing system, however, such openings are usually filled by in-service promotions, occasionally on the basis of written or oral examinations. Seldom do people outside the service learn of these openings, and often it is necessary to be employed by the city to even qualify as a candidate. With the most attractive and logical avenues into the service blocked, the individual who persists in his attempts to obtain municipal employment in the office of the senior executive, often must start in a clerical position far below his ability and potential earning capacity in order to get his foot in the door. Such a prospect is not encouraging and usually precludes university graduates with a general education from even considering municipal employment.

Objections are advanced by both employees and municipal corporations to changes in the system that would be necessary to attract university trained personnel. It is said that failure to adhere strictly to the existing pattern of promotions might

weaken the whole system and deny faithful, diligent employees the consideration they deserve. If, however, the basic ability of the municipal employee is equal to that of the university graduate, the employee's years of experience in the municipality should give him an advantage in competition for the position. And if the municipality hopes to attract recruits of high calibre, it must be prepared to start them at the level, and generally to meet the terms they are offered elsewhere.

Adopting a policy of recruiting men with university training could affect the morale of the service if not carefully handled. If those mid-way in their career feel that positions towards which they are striving will be closed to them because they lack formal, advanced education, a certain dissatisfaction may result. It is the responsibility of those in positions of authority to make clear that promotions to senior positions will be based on individual ability and that qualified men will not be held back because they do not have a university degree.

CONCLUSION

This review indicates that, in general, the Canadian Federation of Mayors and Municipalities

was justified in describing the inability of municipalities to recruit and develop personnel for senior executive positions as the "primary personnel problem" in modern local government. While municipalities have advanced their standards for professional and technical employees at a rate roughly corresponding to that of business and industry, they have fallen short in their standards for the positions of senior executives. The duties and responsibilities carried out by such officials require ability, together with broad education and experience. This mixture of qualifications can now most readily be found among those whose educational background has included university training in the social sciences and public administration. Of all university graduates, these appear to be the ones the municipalities are least interested in recruiting. They have failed to remove many of the barriers which discourage individuals with desirable qualifications from seeking employment in the local government service. Municipalities have provided no channels for bringing them into the system. Unless this situation is rectified, local governments will be forced either to raid their technical departments and retrain their specialists, which is wasteful of both the individual's and municipality's time, or to settle for less capable, less qualified men in senior executive positions. To employ "generalists" in the first place would seem the more sensible course.

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The Bureau has gained wide recognition as an effective proponent of good government through its bulletin *Civic Affairs*, through the publicity given its statements, through its information and advisory services, and through the participation of the staff in the public discussion of municipal issues.

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Your inquiries are invited

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