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Out of Politics Means Out of Control

THE BUREAU OF MUNICIPAL RESEARCH is an organization devoted to the difficult task of turning a cold and analytical eye on the problems of local government. Although it is largely financed by the contributions of big business, it has managed to a remarkable degree to keep an objective arm's length from the narrower interests of its sponsors.

As early as 1951, for example, the Bureau of Municipal Research urged municipalities to broaden the right to vote to include citizens who do not own real estate—the kind of progressive attitude that is fought tooth-and-nail by most so-called "property-owner" associations.

The bureau was far from dreamy-eyed. Its research had indicated the unmistakable trend towards universal suffrage in local elections, particularly in Western Canada. And the bureau concluded that in a modern city everyone pays property taxes whether he owns property or not—in rent or in purchases from businesses which do pay taxes.

Toronto's final step to universal suffrage was taken on December 1, 1958.

For years, the Bureau of Municipal Research has voiced its opposition to an antiquated soldiers' bonus by-law in Toronto which gives partial tax exemption to houses assessed at less than \$4,400 and which (among many other objections) resulted in Toronto taxpayers handing subsidies worth thousands of dollars to the former Ingwer slum empire.

He Opposed Cutting His Own Taxes

(Interestingly enough, the director of the bureau, and an old campaigner for the elimination of this obsolescent tax concession, was himself a beneficiary of the system: He got a 10 per cent cut in the tax on his house for years. But he was against it anyway; in research you have to be cold, cold, cold.)

And this year the Ontario government is expected to wipe it out.

In these and other fields the bureau has been influential far beyond the limits of the public's knowledge of its existence; too, its services often are retained by cities and towns which have problems to solve. (Should a middle-size Ontario town form a little-Metro of its own? No, said the bureau.)

Recently, the Bureau of Municipal Research laid down some principles for its members on what it thought should be the limits placed on boards and commissions in local government—groups like the transit, licensing and police commissions in Metro Toronto which administer public business but whose members are appointed, not elected.

In the light of the current difficulties with the Toronto Transit commission, the bureau's views have particular pungency. A group like the bureau would never stoop to active meddling in local politics—so I've taken the liberty of adding my own bent to apply these principles to the current situation with the TTC and other non-elected public agencies:

Why Can't Politicians Run Buses?

"The establishment of an appointed separate body is a step that a municipality should take only with reluctance," the bureau said. "... One argument frequently resorted to—the desirability of keeping certain functions 'out of politics'—is untenable. Keeping a service 'out of politics' means keeping it out of public control."

Why, when you come to think of it, can't the Toronto Transit commission, be just another department of the Metropolitan government—like the roads, works and health departments? Why should publicly-owned transit be run by a commission so far removed from the public that it will not, as a matter of policy, even receive deputations from the public. Nor will it allow the public (but only the press) into its meetings. (And even then it does all its meaningful business after evicting the press). If commissioners of the TTC are expected to confine themselves to policy-making and not to meddle in management, why can't elected councillors hew the same line?

The bureau said that financial accountability and responsibility for policy in all public concerns should rest with elected representatives of the people.

When the elected representatives tried to get a look at TTC expense accounts for a party for Bob Hope, the TTC commissioners told the elected representatives to go climb a rope. When Controller William Dennison tried to get the licensing commission to outline its history of granting taxi licenses, the licensing commission said Controller Dennison had no right to such information—and they got away with it.

"There is no special reason to appoint to a board a person who is an expert in the board's field," the bureau said. "On balance, such an appointment may do more harm than good. An expert on the board could restrain himself from interference in administration only by the exercise of considerable self-denial."

Applied to the TTC, this clearly means there is no special reason for appointing, for example, J. B. Hollinger to the TTC just because Mr. Hollinger once ran his father's bus line.

The accomplishments recorded in this unsolicited statement are a direct result of the continuing support and encouragement of the Bureau's own members.

The Board extends its warmest appreciation to the business organizations and individuals concerned.

An independent fact-finding organization reporting to the public on civic affairs