

12 YEARS OF COMMISSION GOVERNMENT

(The following is the second of a series of articles on the commission form of government which will be published for the purpose of giving information on this important innovation in the management of American cities. This article was written by E. S. Bradford and appeared originally in Municipal Engineering Magazine.)

Mr. Ernest S. Bradford is the author of "Commission Government in American Cities," which is the standard book on this form of municipal administration. He is a member of the committee on commission government of the National Municipal League and one of the experts chosen by the city of Los Angeles to confer with its charter commission in preparing the proposed new form of government for that city. His history of the movement is, therefore, authoritative, and his criticisms of the defects in the commission plan and his comparisons of it with the city manager plan will have great weight on that account.)

Among students of municipal science and observers of existing civic conditions, there is general agreement as to the results secured under the commission charters. As might have been expected, placing five men in charge, each of about the same power, "standardized" the governing unit, as well as the candidate; centered public attention on the governing body and made it possible to select better men for office, on account of the small number of officials the voters had to pass upon, and their election by the whole city. City government was much simplified. Concentration of authority, coupled with the responsibility of the commissioners, which was enforceable by the recall and referendum, has led to prompt and effective action by the "small council." Reports from the cities, in their various fields of activity disclose pretty generally advances over the former municipal methods; nor has later and closer scrutiny changed materially the conclusions as to the progress already made, though it reveals further needed improvements. Care in handling the city's funds, attention to streets water supply and other public works, good policing and better fire and health protection, have been among the results of the establishment of the new form of governmental organization.

Floating debts or long outstanding bonds have been retired without the issue of new bonds, in Galveston, Houston, Leavenworth, Kansas and elsewhere; back taxes have been collected; municipal funds or deposit in banks have been made to yield revenue; operating expenses have been diminished, receipts enhanced, better methods of accounting introduced, in cities too numerous to mention. At the same time more honest and vigorous efforts to suppress crime and vice have been manifested. Health departments report improved sanitary conditions in Dallas, Cedar Rapids, Houston and many other cities. Fire departments, fairly efficient before show less change. Cleaner streets, better lighting and water service, more paving, better bridges, are engineering items noted in Huntington, Haverhill, San Diego, Kansas City, Kan., Austin, Des Moines and Berkeley. Partisanship in elections has been reduced; franchises guarded, city planning commenced. A great deal remains yet to be done in the way of efficiency accounting and in further planning for city growth and needs, but the work already accomplished has established the commission form as an improved type of municipal organization. "By 1911," says Henry Bruer, for example, in his book on "The New City Government," every student of American city government realized that the growing commission movement was not based upon vagaries, but on very definite satisfaction which commission cities have found in the new plan."

The question of present interest is no longer whether commission government has been successful or whether it should be adopted by our cities, but what modifications or improvements can be recommended to insure its best operation in our larger centers and what next steps these cities should take.

It will be well to recall briefly the steps through which the commission form has developed before proceeding to consider the modifications in the plan. The "Galveston plan" or so-called original commission form, adopted in 1901, provided for a small board (five), with large powers, each member in charge of a department. At first three members were appointed and two elected, but court decisions holding such appointment unconstitutional, forced the amendment of the charter in 1903, and the election thereafter of the entire number of commissioners. The referendum and the recall were not included in the Galveston charter, except that the state law provides for a referendum on bond issues. When Houston, the second city, adopted the plan in 1905, it accept-

ed the main principles, as just noted, but made the Mayor all-powerful by giving him a veto as Mayor after he had voted in the commission, and the power of removal of city appointees without the concurrence of the "council"—the other four commissioners. Houston also provided a referendum on franchises and bond issues and certain minor features.

Then came the Iowa cities under a state law, Des Moines and Cedar Rapids in 1907. The "Des Moines Plan," as the Iowa law was dubbed, made the referendum applicable to all ordinances and added the initiative, recall, non-partisan primaries and elections, a civil service commission and other provisions. This was regarded as a marked step in advance, and the Iowa law has been more generally followed as a model than perhaps any other one commission act.

The commission charters recently adopted have contained most of the provisions of the Des Moines law, but there seems to have been a rather perceptible tendency toward some plan of preferential voting—a method by which the voter expresses not only his first choice or such commission, but his second or even his third choice, thus insuring that the men elected are the choice of a majority of the voters.

The most marked development of the past twelve months, however, has been the advent and advocacy of various "city manager plans." Under most of these plans, a single manager is chosen for the entire city, with power to appoint subordinates and to take action as needed out subject to some elected legislative or general executive body. The "commission and "city manager" plans may all be grouped under several distinct heads.

I. "The Managing Commission" or "commission form" as it is generally known, under which a commission or small elected group direct and manage the affairs of the city. The commissioners are frequently of substantially equal authority, though the Mayor has usually supervisory powers over the acts of the other commissioners. A variation of the commission form is the next, or

II. "Mayor Manager" plan, under which the Mayor is clearly the most powerful member, as in Houston, Texas. This is accomplished by various means; in Houston the Mayor, as already seen, has both a veto as a member of the commission and a veto on its acts as a whole, as well as the power to remove city appointees (except the controller), with or without the consent of the rest of the commission. Where the Mayor is all-powerful, there is no lack of unity in the commission; he can override opposition, and control largely both the municipal policy and its execution.

III. The "Council-Manager" plan, in this type, in operation before the commission-manager plan, as at Staunton, Va., the old-time council appoints a manager and puts him in charge of the city's work, mainly or entirely. In Staunton, for example, the police and fire departments are under the control of the Mayor, though the general manager does the purchasing for these departments, and directs the street, lighting, waterworks, park and poor administration.

IV. The "Commission-Manager" plan provides that the commissioners, elected under the commission form, appoint a general city manager to whom they turn over the city's affairs to manage. They retain

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the policy-deciding (legislative) function, and may retain also the more important general direction authority (administrative power in the broader sense—municipal affairs are largely matters of administration) turning over the executive work in its name immediate direction to the city manager. If the commission does not retain definitely the general administrative oversight of the manager, we have a reversion to the old doctrine of "separation of powers," powers which we have come to believe it is impossible and unwise to attempt to separate sharply, but which should both be exercised, to some extent, by the same body (as in the commission form), to insure successful city government. We have come to believe legislative power should be accompanied by at least general administrative oversight, though the details of administration may well be intrusted to expert superintendents, familiar with waterworks, lighting and other fields of municipal business. Any attempt to deprive the city commission of general oversight of the executive departments must be regarded as a distinct step backward, and many advocates of the commission form have feared that this would result with the advent of the city manager.

The old aldermanic system, a fifth type, with Mayor, Council and unrelated departments, is not given classification. It is advocated today by few advanced thinkers along municipal lines, though a few still maintain that there is no necessary relation between forms of organization and efficiency. In the United States the Mayor and Council plan is being deserted every week for the commission form or some other system of more advanced governmental organization.



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