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# The Story of the Short Ballot Cities

A Series of Articles on the New Commission Form of Municipal Government

By RICHARD S. CHILDS

A peaceful revolution! City after city sweeping away boards of aldermen, mayors and a host of minor officials and setting up new municipal governments on a brand new plan! A hundred cities have voted for the scheme; sixty-eight have obtained it. The whole nation looks on with amazed enthusiasm at towns that not only get good government, but keep it, election after election! There is probably not a single city which has not its group of men who are enthusiastically organizing some endeavor to secure the commission form of government for their town.

NO mere form of government will automatically produce good government. But forms can be devised that will automatically give popular government. The people's will can be battled or facilitated by the form of government. The people's work at the polls can be made obscure, complex and difficult, or it can be made clear, simple and easy. Under the commission plan, with its short ballot, the people's work is very clear, very simple, very easy. And that is all the secret there is to the success of the plan.

In theory citizenship is the business of every citizen. But in our old style city governments effective citizenship is one of the learned professions. To vote intelligently a citizen must "go into politics." That means work, and the average man can't afford to do much unpaid work. So politics becomes dominated by a few men, and the people at large helplessly leave the bulk of the ticket to the party politicians to do as they please with.

In our old fashioned city governments, we have committed two serious errors. First, we have scattered the powers of government among so many petty officials that it is quite impossible for the people to watch and control them all.

Second, we have subdivided the power in such small fragments that no single part is really worth watching. A member of the city council, for instance, under the old form of government, has so little power that it is really not worth while for the people of the town to become agitated over the question of who shall get the job.

The typical old style city government of this country consists of a mayor, with fairly large power, a string of minor administrative officials also chosen by popular vote, and a council which sometimes consists of two legislative bodies. The feature of this plan is the distribution of power, based on our ancient fear of kings. We have always had a superstitious dread of giving to any elected official power enough to do anything for us without getting the consent of several others. We have overlooked the fact that to make the former official obey our wishes we had also to exert simultaneous compulsion over the latter, whose consent he needed, and that popular control became thus anything but the simple matter it ought to be.

The politicians can always get their own way if they make the council large enough. A council of fifteen men might occasionally feel personally the pressure of public opinion, but triple the size of the council, and the individual members become so insignificant and publicity so subdivided that each member is safely "lost in the shuffle."

Those who promoted the idea of having a host of elective officials in the government have always taken it for granted that there was something democratic about this procedure. Democracy, however, does not consist in electing everybody, but in controlling everybody. The mayor's office boy, for instance, may be appointed by the mayor, or elected by popular vote. He is a public servant, but there is nothing democratic in electing him when he can just as well be appointed. The vital thing is that he shall be controlled by the people, and if he will be under better control through appointment than through election, it is more democratic to appoint him.

The commission plan of government is based on no false idea that the people want to elect everybody. It gives the power to five men, who thereby become conspicuously responsible before all the people of the city. Each one of them is important enough to make it worth while for the citizens to inquire concerning his record and character. Each candidate for the office can attract a crowd to hear him speak, whereas an old time councilman would have been utterly unable to get a hearing before the people. There are not so many of these officials but what every citizen can find out about all of them and vote intelligently on election day. There are not so many as to cause a citizen to depend upon tickets put together for him by political specialists. Each citizen can and does make up his own ticket, and the function of the professional ticket making machines is thereby entirely disposed of.

If the commission were composed of ten men instead of five the list of names would be longer than the average citizen would be likely to remember for himself, and we should see a natural grouping of candidates and their election by groups instead of singly. Some "good government association" or some party machine, even on a nonpartisan ballot, would be sure to advertise tickets for the guidance of the voters, and in accepting these tickets the people would be sharing their power with the ticket makers.

**The Short Ballot.** The commission plan succeeds therefore because it puts the power where the people can see it. The vital feature is not the method of organization, but the method of popular control. It is the ballot on election day which is

unique. It is so short that every citizen knows what he is doing and is not relying on a party label or on the guidance of a politician. The "average man," "the man in the street," or the "plain people," whatever you choose to call them, are in complete control of the government. The short ballot has left no work for the politician to do; the people arrange the whole matter directly with the candidates without the politician's help.

The politician is a specialist in citizenship, and in the commission governed cities citizenship is so simple that there is nothing to be a specialist in.

The most marked phenomenon of commission government has been the increased interest of the people in their city government. All eyes have been focused on the city hall month after month without interruption. The acts of the commission are the topic of conversation for the street car and the business men's luncheon. Criticism is plentiful, and—better yet—knowledge of the facts is widespread. The people of the city oversee the government.

The force of public opinion has been repeatedly illustrated in the commission governed cities. Few men, good or bad, would have the strength to resist popular demand when it is so intently concentrated upon them. Each commissioner knows his responsibility for what is done, and knows that everybody else in town knows it too. Politicians of the average sort have been elected to office many times in commission governed cities, but their conspicuous responsibility has brought about a remarkable responsiveness to the opinion of the people.

The initiative, referendum and recall are considered important features of the plan by many people, but Galveston and Houston made a success of the commission plan before any of these features were thought of and their charters to this day do not provide for them. Furthermore, these cities do not feel the need of these devices and there is no demand for their introduction.

**A Chance For Mistakes.**

A few suggestions for the improvement of the plan have been made rather persistently, based not upon any disaster that has happened in the past, but rather on the fear that there might be trouble in the future. It has been noted, for example, that the city clerk in Des Moines, who passes upon the correctness of petitions for the recall of commissioners, is himself a creature of the commission and that in this work he ought to be independent. It is also pointed out that there is no independent auditing of the city's accounts. The commission audits its own books. In both cases it has been suggested that these offices be filled by popular vote. In the language of those who propose these changes, "have them independently elected by the people and responsible to the people." This familiar argument involves an error, the avoidance of which constitutes the great value of the commission plan. It is easy enough to create a new office and make it elective by popular vote, but it is not so easy to "have" such an officer "responsible to the people." He will not be responsible to the people if he is elected in obscurity with no limelight directed on his office. To be sure, he may be legally responsible and the responsibility in law may be very clearly established, but the people cannot and will not hold him to account unless he stands out conspicuously before them. An officer whose functions are purely executive and not of great importance cannot possibly be conspicuous. If the city clerk or city auditor were made elective in Des Moines it would be a little office, overshadowed by the rest of the ticket, down at the bottom of the ballot. There would be very little publicity regarding the candidates, very little of the purifying limelight which is responsible for the present good political sanitation in the higher offices, and any group of schemers might put through a successful conspiracy to capture the job.

The desirability of an independent audit and an independent judgment on recall petitions is nevertheless obvious. It should, however, be secured in some other way than by attempting to make the people choose the officers. The same effect can be obtained by having the state assume these duties. Let an appointee of the governor be charged with the duty of auditing the books of all the cities in the state, with the right to prescribe a uniform method of keeping them. There is no difficulty in letting some state officer, such as the secretary of state, pass upon the genuineness and validity of recall petitions. The remoteness of such an officer from the disputants makes it reasonably certain that his position will be fair.

If all false "improvements" can be avoided the future of the commission plan will continue to be full of success, and its fundamental principle, when once understood, will be extended to states and counties. Already a national association, called the Short Ballot Organization, with Woodrow Wilson at its head, is in the field.

We are on the eve of vast and whole some change!

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## NOTICE FOR PUBLICATION

Department of the Interior,  
U. S. Land Office at The Dalles, Oregon,  
July 18th, 1911.  
Notice is hereby given that Theresa D. Jones, whose post-office address is Bend, Oregon, did, on the 21st day of January, 1911, file in this office sworn statement, and application, No. 3000, to purchase the NW 1/4, NW 1/4, section 27, township 19 south, range 13 east, Willamette Meridian, and the timber thereon, under the provisions of the act of June 1, 1898, and acts amendatory, known as the "Timber and Stone Law," at such value as might be fixed by appraisal, and that, pursuant to such application, the land and timber thereon have been appraised, at \$1400 the timber estimated, 250,000 board feet at 50 cents per M, and the land \$20.00; that said applicant will offer final proof in support of his application and sworn statement on the 30 day of September, 1911, before H. C. Ellis, U. S. Commissioner at his office, at Bend, Oregon.  
Any person is at liberty to protest this purchase before entry or initiate a contest at any time before patent issues, by filing a corroborated affidavit in this office, alleging facts which would defeat the entry.  
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