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WHAT THE COMMISSION GOVERNMENT IS

How the Movement Started and What It Has Accomplished—Many Innovations Which Improve and Simplify the Municipal Machinery—Peaceful Revolution in Many Cities :

The following is the first of a series of three articles on the progress of the movement for better government of American cities, written by Richard S. Childs, and furnished by the Short Ballot Organization, Woodrow Wilson, President.

ARTICLE I.

The spread of this commission movement is all the more striking because it was begun entirely by accident. Galveston, Tex., after the great flood of 1900 was practically wiped out. So much progressive and constructive work was demanded of the city government that the old system of a Board of Aldermen and the usual string of independent elective officers broke down. A group of business men petitioned the state government to suspend the local government and replace it temporarily with a commission of five men, three of whom were appointees of the Governor. This was where the term "commission" originated, and the name for want of a better description has stuck to it ever since, although the board is no longer a "commission" in the true sense of the word at all.

This commission in Galveston was able to make decisions and get things accomplished in half the time that it took the old Board of Aldermen to get a resolution referred to a committee. The commission planned and built a sea wall to protect the city against further floods, raised the ground level of a large part of the town, got the city government running again at one-third less annual cost, made a running number of important improvements and at the same time reduced the debt and the tax rate.

After two years, during which the politicians were finding precious little to do, the commission was made entirely elective by popular vote, much to the dismay of many good persons in the town, who had been much pleased with the practical success of the Governor's commission. Their fears, however, proved groundless, for the people proceeded to elect the same commission and have continued to do it at every election since. Except by death there has been only one change in the personnel of the commission since the beginning.

Galveston's claim that it was the best governed city in the United States made Houston jealous, and after a few years this city petitioned for a similar government and was granted it. Dallas, El Paso, Denison, Waco and Austin have since then followed suit, leaving San Antonio, now the only important city in the state which has not adopted the plan.

A few years after Galveston first began to attract attention some civic workers in Des Moines began to study the subject of popular government in fundamental fashion. They devised what has since become known as the "Des Moines plan," which is simply the commission form of government, with certain interesting additions, known as the initiative, referendum, recall and nonpartisan primary. By the terms of the initiative provision a certain number of people are permitted to present a petition to the commission demanding the passage of certain ordinances, and if the commission sees fit to refuse the request the matter must be settled by popular vote. By the referendum provision certain matters, particularly the granting of franchises to public utility corporations, must be approved by popular vote before they become law. By the terms of the recall provision, the presentation of a petition containing a certain number of signatures may force any member of the commission to submit the question of his continuance in office to a new election immediately. The nonpartisan primary is simply an eliminating election. All candidates are nominated by petition, no party labels, and the leading 10 remain on the ballot for the final election.

The elimination of the party name, symbol and column from the ballot, is a highly significant and characteristic feature of the commission form of government. It excludes the political machines from a great strategic advantage and leaves independent candidates on an exact equality with those proposed by the organizations. The ballot is simply a list of names with a square opposite each, and the voter is instructed to "vote for five." Instead of having a ticket ready made for him, each voter makes up his own ticket. The fact that only five men are to be selected makes this task simple, and there has been found no difficulty about it in practice. This short ballot, which the voter can vote without the guidance of political experts, is the central and vital feature of the commission

plan.

The publicity attendant on the installation of the new government in Des Moines gave the movement new stimulus throughout the country, and it began to be known as the latest and most up-to-date thing in city government. Many towns adopted it from a mere desire to be abreast of the times and to show the world that they were progressive and enterprising. In some places the plan met with vigorous opposition, sometimes with a complete lack of interest, while in some cities it carried by an overwhelming vote. Colorado Springs and other cities made a few alterations in the Des Moines plan, such as having the members of the commission elected for terms arranged to expire in rotation, and forbidding party nominations, Grand Junction, Colo., added the preferential ballot, whereby the voter indicates on the ballot his first, second and third choice. There are various ways of counting the votes, and while the one adopted in Grand Junction is not the most scientific way, it results in a more accurate analysis of public opinion than the plan of straight plurality elections. The preferential ballot makes a primary election needless and thus saves expense.

The minor variations of the commission plan are endless. Except where a state has adopted a general law covering all cities of a certain class, it may be said that no two cities have charters that are not alike. Each charter revision committee has reviewed the work done in other cities and has sagely made a few pet alterations in it. In Galveston, for instance, the Mayor was the chairman of the commission; otherwise he had no special duties. None of the members of the Galveston commission has specific control over any one department, although there has grown up the custom of allowing each member to specialize in a certain department, and before election it is generally understood which departments the candidates expect to interest themselves in. The members of the commission are paid nominal salaries and are not expected to give all their time to the city and, in fact, simply devote an hour or two a day to it.

Houston gave the Mayor veto power over the vote of his four associates on the commission, he has never used it, and allowed the Mayor to make certain appointments, paid the members good salaries and demanded that the commissioners devote all their time to the city. Each member of the Houston commission becomes the active superintendent of one of the five departments. This feature has been rather generally followed in other commission-governed cities.

An exact definition of the commission plan of government is thus seen to be impossible. The only feature wherein all these "commissions" governments coincide with the concentration of all the powers of the city, both legislative and executive, in a single small board.

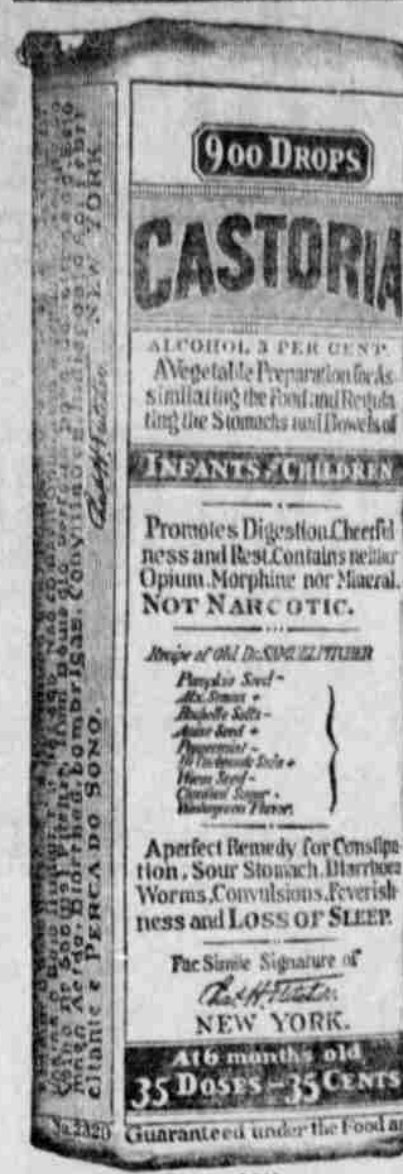
Never in our political history has any phenomenon of this nature been examined with such minuteness or by so many investigators.

Ex-President Charles W. Eliot, of Harvard, made a tour of the commission governed cities, or "short ballot cities," as he prefers to call them, and returned to Boston so enthusiastic that he was able to wig over the town to acceptance of some of the fundamental features of the plan. Another elaborate inquiry was made by a committee of the State Legislature of Illinois, from which everybody expected a hostile report. The committee, however, reported strongly in favor of the plan, stating that every where they found that it had won the approval of the people who lived under it.

There have been many explanations offered for the undoubted relative successes of the commission plan. The abolition of wards, for example, is frequently quoted as an ample reason for the relative success of the new plan. But there are many cities in the United States in which there are no wards. Galveston itself had none before the flood, her City Council being elected at large. Commission government is a very common way of governing counties throughout the United States, and the plan there has been a conspicuous success. There have been many other elected commissions, such as the trustees of the sanitary district of Illinois, and they likewise have never attracted attention by their superior efficiency.

Another loosely reasoned argument frequently used to promote the adoption of the commission plan has been

Continued on page 6



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