Fundamentals and History of Municipal Government

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Dr. H. L. Brittain in an address delivered at McGill University, Montreal, on November 4, traced the history of municipal government and laid down certain fundamentals that cannot help but be helpful to our readers. Space will not allow for the full text of the address, but the following synopsis indicates the ideas expounded by Dr. Brittain.

After explaining that Municipium—the Latin word from which municipality is derived—is made up of two words: "Munus"—a duty or service or privilege; and "Capere"—to take, Dr. Brittain went on to say, that the original meaning of "municipium" was evidently a community upon which had been imposed certain duties or services, not a community to which had been granted certain privileges. After the Lex Julia of 90 B.C., the municipia were granted full rights of home rule, with the exception that the legal officers remained subordinate to the legal officers of Rome. In the time of Pliny, municipia conducted public schools and maintained physicians at public expense, as well as performing many of the ordinary functions of a modern municipality. There was no direct taxation, the income of the municipia coming from the ownership of lands and quarries, import and export duties on goods, and the benefactions of public-spirited citizens when funds were running short. In some cases the Emperor granted subsidies.

As the Empire came to be established, the Emperor began to use the municipia to further his own ends, with the result that people began to lose interest in their own affairs and it became increasingly difficult to get candidates for public office. In many of the municipia, industry became highly organized. The organizations then formed were the forerunners of the Guilds of the Middle Ages. Their Unions were not Trade Unions, but rather Industrial Unions.

The development of the English municipalities is sufficiently well known, in broad terms, to make it unnecessary to go into details here, particularly as our Canadian system has been perhaps more directly affected by American practice, which was at first practically the same as the English practice at the same period. The first American City Charter was that of New York, granted by Governor Dongan in 1686. The New England colonies did not need charters for cities or boroughs as they had all the privileges needed under their town form of Government. The charters granted to 20 or 30 boroughs and cities previous to the Revolution, followed no single model, but, in general, conformed to the English tradition, the governing body being styled "the Mayor, Aldermen and Commonalty"—the single Council being made up of the Mayor, a small number of Aldermen and a larger number of Councilmen. The Mayor was usually named by the Governor of the Colony.

Three of the boroughs were close corporations. After 1776, the close corporation idea was given up to a great extent. In the Philadelphia Charter of 1789, 15 aldermen were selected by the freeholders, 30 councillors by the free men, and the Mayor was chosen by the aldermen.

During the first part of the 19th century, municipal administration tended to develop along the same lines as the Federal Government, even to the extent of electing a Mayor in Baltimore by an electoral college. In this city there was a two-chambered city council—one branch made up of two representatives from each ward, the other representing the citizens at large. City governments were based on the theory of checks and balances and the principle of "separation of powers."

After 1825—as shown by the new charter of the City of New York in 1830—the principle of the Federation government was still further developed in municipal administration and the direct administration of the public services came to be entrusted to administrative officials appointed for the purpose by Council. The same period saw the widening of the basis of municipal suffrage. The period from 1860 to 1890 was marked by the development of the spoils system.

The oldest incorporated Canadian city is St. John, N. B., whose charter dates from 1784. Quebec and Montreal, much older and more important settlements, were incorporated in 1832. Toronto was incorporated in 1834.

The most striking contrast between municipal administration in Canada and the United States is in the much freer development of Canadian cities. This, however, was more true previous to fifteen years ago. Since that time there have been tremendous changes in American municipal governments and the Americans have sloughed off the federal tradition in municipal government."

After describing the meaning of Commission Government, Commission-Manager or City-Manager Government, Dr. Britain took up the Fundamentals of Municipal Government as follows:—

"In essentials the problems of all forms of municipalities are the same, but, in practice, conditions are so widely different that the forms of government must vary widely.

What is a city?
  A collection of human beings?
  A collection of houses?
  A collection of homes?
A city is a large group of human beings, in homes, organized to carry an collectively certain undertakings of community value.

What is a citizen?
  One who lives in a city?
  One who votes?
  One who pays taxes?
A citizen is a resident of a city, who bears his share of the burden of the community undertakings and works at being a citizen 365 days in the year.

What is a government?
  A typic government is a committee of the citizens chosen to manage, for the citizens, those undertakings of community value which can be carried on by collective effort better than by individual effort.

What are the cief functions of a city government?
  Policy-forming and legislative, administrative and executive.

How should the policy-forming and legislative branch be chosen?
  They should be elected by all citizens.

How should the administrative and executive branch be chosen?
  They should be appointed by the policy-forming and legislative branch.

The administrative branch should, therefore, be responsible to the legislative, and this to the electors.

An effective city government therefore requires
  Efficint citizens electors,
  Efficient city councils,
  Efficient administrative departments.

What constitutes an efficient citizen?
  A high conception of duty,
  Tax-paying,
  Voting,
  Information as to the city government:
    Schools and city departments.
    Annual budget,
    Records of aldermen,
    Qualifications of candidates.

What constitutes an efficient Council:
  A clear demarcation between legislative and executive functions,
  Current information as to the operations of the departments,
  Current information as to the operations of m.:il..:
  Current information as to appropriations and expenditures,
  Continuity of policy,
  Devotion to public service.

What constitutes efficient departmental administration?
  Permanent department heads
  Trained department heads
  Fearless department heads
  Responsibility of department heads
  Adequate departmental and central accounts
  Centralized purchasing
  Centralized accounting
  Efficient reporting
Scientific organization of civil service
  Adequate remuneration for civic employees.