

WEAKNESS OF COMMISSION GOVERNMENT.—Cont.

Amateurs are not fitted for such work and this is one of the failures of commission form government. We have notoriously failed to elect experts as public officials, even in the rare cases where experts were available. Yet we must elect the officials who represent the people in fixing our governmental policies. Any other course would be a subversion of the democratic ideal upon which our government is founded. But we must cease to attempt to elect experts in the great business of administrative government. Yet we must find trained men, appoint them and pay them adequate compensation.

Political and Administrative Functions Combined.

An argument used in favor of commission form government at its inception was that it would be a decided advantage to have the active heads of departments sit as a city council to pass the ordinances; that the men who did the city's work would be best qualified to make the city's laws. This is no more nearly correct than the obverse—that the men who make the laws are best fitted to do the work.

It is probably true that five heads of departments would do better as a legislative body than the old style city council, but serious objections have developed to giving both legislative and executive functions to the same men. Their first legislative act is to organize after each election and distribute among themselves the various departments of the city's administrative functions. Say that two or three want to be mayor, or that all wish to escape the police department, or that strong rivalry exists for the control of the water department. A combination of three members decides, and incidentally develops hard feeling from the start.

This is obviated by the custom in some commission cities of electing men for the specific departments, but it has been my observation that in such circumstances the hard feelings, while not generated so early, continue longer. Instead of being dependent upon his associates for his assignment, the commissioner of public works feels his independence and is quite likely to frequently assert it in the council meetings. The result is a continuous wrangle.

Appropriating money for specific use is a legislative function. One commissioner has been allowed an appropriation for an auto truck and proposes to buy it from a certain dealer who has helped him at election time. Other commissioners know that this particular truck is a poorly built vehicle and unfit for the purpose for which it is intended, but, aware that a like occasion may arise in their own departments, they are not likely to interfere with the purchase, and the city suffers. Dependents upon each other for the administrative positions they hold, accustomed to the work in their departments and not desiring to be transferred, they are likely to act favorable upon the recommendation of one of their associates, even though they know it is against the city's interest. The location of a bridge and raising the money for it are legislative acts; building the bridge is an expert job which cannot be safely intrusted to the elected department head, who can and should represent his constituents in locating and financing it.

In Spokane, and I believe in many other commission cities, there has been a gradual but decided deterioration in the quality of the government following every election since the first. Candidates are fewer in number, and men of proven competence are conspicuously absent from the lists. Men who are successful in their own business have been replaced by graduates from the bankruptcy courts. In the commission which started the year 1920 there were four members who had held city or county office under the old regime. Men who have served the city at a personal sacrifice have been replaced by others who never in their lives have earned as much as the salaries they are now receiving.

The first commission did much real constructive work. It eliminated many dangerous railway grade crossings, broke the contractors' ring by daring to do city work by day labor, funded the floating indebtedness at lower interest rates, reduced the tax rates, secured better terms from privately owned public utilities, and generally improved physical and moral conditions in the city. A standard was set which has held weaker councils up to a higher mark of service, but initiative, resourcefulness and vision, these and the other qualities of leadership have been re-

MOTOR TRAFFIC AND ROAD UPKEEP.

It is very doubtful whether we shall ever have government on strictly logical lines, but the question raised by a correspondent of the "Commercial Motor" as to who should pay for the upkeep of the roads suggests that there are people who consider that logic should enter more into the management of our civil affairs than it would seem to under existing circumstances. Noting a contention on the part of our contemporary that in this country we have for a long time past recognised the principle that the proceeds of motor taxation should be devoted to road improvement, this gentleman enters a "caveat" against the practice. He thinks that the time has come when the roads should be recognised as being as vital to every member of the community as, say, the Navy was in pre-war days—that is to say, he sees no reason whatever why, at the present time, road users alone of any class should be specially taxed for the purpose either of road improvement or road maintenance. The reference to the Navy by the correspondent is not quite a happy one for there was a period in the history of this country when the cost of that Service was not universally applied as it is now. As a matter of fact, the logic of national responsibility in this matter was of somewhat slow growth. The plea that roads and motor vehicles are equally for the protection and building-up of our complex modern civilisation, and that all who live within it should contribute their quota is a very just one, but according to our present mental outlook it is not unjust to add the qualification that this contributable quota should bear some ratio to the special use that is made of the roads by the users. After all, it is only a contribution in part which motor taxation makes to the upkeep of the highways, and this in special circumstances of emergency, which is sufficient justification for the taxation. Who knows what the future may have in store for us in the matter of the logical distribution of this and other forms of taxation?—Surveyor (England).

placed largely by the unproductive impulse to "get by" and to "hang on."

The struggle seems to have narrowed down to an effort to avoid criticism, for which the excellent recipe given by Elbert Hubbard is to "say nothing, do nothing, be nothing." Credit has been sought for "cutting down expense" by dismissing a useful and valuable employe, whose service to the city was worth many times his salary. With this feeling at the top the spirit of inaction goes down to the bottom of every department. Every city has some faithful and efficient employes but, when these find that their chiefs are always trimming and will not support them when they take an honest and firm position, they soon lose heart and begin to contribute to the general decay.

Conclusion.

I am an optimist. I know that great progress has been made in municipal government in the past twenty years, and that there is strong hope for the future. But the way to bring about the fruition of that hope is to look our present deficiencies squarely in the face and plan our remedy only after careful study of the symptoms.

Commission form is admittedly an improvement over the old system; it has demonstrated that a charter is a vital force for better government even in the hands of the same old personnel. Like all human productions every charter has its weak spots, but the old fallacy that government is entirely dependent upon good men in office has gone into the discard and we know now that we want not only the best men we can find in our public offices, but we want the best tools we can invent for them to work with.

The greatest hindrance to good government is the negligence of, and indifference to, the duties of citizenship on the part of the individual voter; it may be that we can correct this evil, to some extent at least, by the introduction of a system of voting which will make his ballot more effective. Our failure to elect competent men for executive officials suggests the separation of legislative and executive functions, electing for the former and appointing for the latter, making the duties of the legislator so light that strong and public-spirited men can undertake them without abandoning their private business, and requiring trained men for our administrative officials. Expert city executives, trained and experienced men, brought from any section of the country and paid a proper salary, will soon be as common in our cities as are now expert superintendents of schools or expert managers of private business undertakings.—National Municipal Review.