

CITIZEN CO-OPERATION IN TOWN MANAGEMENT AND TOWN PLANNING*

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THE problem of maintaining citizen interest in government is hoary with age, and an adequate solution of it has never been reached. Although we are told by Pliny that municipalities in Italy under the early Roman Empire maintained public schools and employed physicians at public expense, he also tells us that as the emperors, for their own ends, began to encroach on the self-government of the municipalities, public interest fell to so low an ebb that frequently sufficient candidates did not offer to fill the necessary civic offices.

It is a well-known principle that interest in any undertaking varies directly as the number of points of contact therewith, and particularly it is even more true that interest varies with the number and importance of opportunities afforded to take actual part in the undertaking. Many a bad boy has been cured by giving him a responsible job to perform—a job in which he could see possible tangible results. Many a church member has been raised above the margin of uneconomic returns by assigning him a definite function in the life of the church. Interest grows with information and exercise, and atrophies with ignorance and inactivity.

What is a Citizen?

Before we can discuss co-operation between citizen and government, we must have a clear idea of what these terms mean. What is a citizen? The ready answer is, "A citizen is a man or woman born in the country or naturalized."

But is a man who doesn't pay his taxes a citizen?; or one who doesn't vote?; or one who grouches about unsatisfactory candidates, but does nothing to bring out good candidates?

Judged by standard of work, there are many alien-born citizens and many native-born aliens. A man who does not exercise the duties and privileges of citizenship, even if his family dates back to 1700 on this continent, is essentially an alien. We have before us a mighty task in Canadianizing foreign-born residents, but an even more formidable one in building up a standard of citizenship among all home-grown Canadians in order that the work of assimilating our foreign-born population may become at once more worth while and more easy. A Canadian by choice is not necessarily inferior to a Canadian by accident of birth. Both are raw material when compared with the possible Canadian citizen.

A citizen may be defined, then, as one who bears his share of the community burdens and performs his part in the effective carrying on of community undertakings.

What is a City?

What is a city? According to Webster, a city is any large, important or noted town or inhabited place. This is, of course, a purely mechanical conception of a city.

A city can be better defined by what it does. A city, in a sense, is a living, growing or dying entity which performs certain functions and possesses certain organs to perform these functions. Can we not define a city as "a large group of people living in the same locality and organized to carry on collectively activities of community value which cannot better be performed individually"?

What is a city government? A city government is simply a committee of the citizens elected to carry on those community activities which have been determined on as legitimate collective undertakings.

If this conception of government were general and clearly understood, the work of selecting the governing committees would be greatly simplified. The city wants streets, pure water, effective transportation, protection of life, protection of property, opportunities for recreation, education,

etc. It needs a committee to provide these wants with the greatest effectiveness consistent with the amount of the revenues made available by the citizens. The committee necessarily must be made up of citizens at once in sympathy with the public policy of filling these community wants and capable of devising general methods and selecting men to carry out these policies. Are these the prime considerations which usually govern the selection of candidates and the election of members of the governing committee?

Information is First Essential

The first essential of citizen co-operation with government is information,—accurate, pertinent, understandable and timely. One cannot co-operate with a man who won't take one into his confidence. It is impossible for a citizen to co-operate with his civic government effectively unless he knows what policies the city has been operating under, where the city stands at present in putting these policies into practice, and what the city's plan of expenditure and work is for the current year.

The *sine qua non* of co-operation is understanding. The lack of co-operation at present is due to lack of interest, and this in turn is due to lack of knowledge. The majority of city departments in the majority of cities fall far short of their opportunities to report, not only to council, but to the citizens through council, at regular and frequent intervals in a language and form that the average citizen can understand. A description of the operations and results of any city department, if properly written, would be replete with human interest and might be made an effective weapon for securing citizen co-operation. The science of public reporting is in its infancy. No one knows how many tons of reports, full of obsolescent or valueless information at the time of their issue, and never opened, now repose in musty vaults, clutter up shelves which might be better occupied, or have been turned over to the junk man as waste paper. Too many reports benefit the printers alone. In such cases it would be better to pay the printer a bonus and save the officials' time wasted in getting out a report. It might pay a municipality to employ an official report writer to co-operate with departmental heads in getting out accurate, timely, readable official reports.

Governmental Action Without Investigation

(Unfortunately, governments are not always the best critics of their own actions. Some have been known to suppress unfavorable facts and to stress others they think to be favorable. Governments have even been known on occasion to misrepresent the facts in order to further their own as distinct from the community's interest. This will be so for a considerable number of years in the future. It is probably true that no one will misrepresent the facts to another he knows to be in possession of or likely to obtain the truth. So governments are always stimulated in right action and turned aside from wrong action by knowledge that citizens either know the facts or are in a position to get them.

The rise of citizen organizations, supported by private funds, has been in response to a real need for unbiased information from unofficial sources. The best guarantee we can have of the adequacy of official policies is the existence of vigorous associations for citizen research and publicity.

The greatest single cause of governmental failure is the tendency of governments to act without thorough-going inquiry or in opposition to the results of such inquiry when held.

In this scientific age, governments must get beyond the rule-of-thumb stage. Governments must develop the habit of employing specialists in financial, educational, health, fire and police work as well as in civil, mechanical and electrical engineering. Having employed such specialists, they must have the courage to act on their advice, entirely unmoved by ulterior considerations of political and sectional expediency.

The amount which can be raised by taxation and rates each year has an upper limit. Every dollar wasted in current operations, either by paying too much for necessary

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