

CITY GOVERNMENT BY COMMISSION

(Continued from page 9.)

five men, the Mayor and four others, for expert service, and for the whole time of the commission in the public service. The idea of the last-named clause and provision was that immediate attention would be given to the duties of the hour by the members of the commission. In addition there were the devices which were declared to be for the protection of the people, namely, the Initiative, the Referendum, and the Recall. (The meaning and effect of these in government by commission need not be explained.)

Summary of the Arguments.

THERE are arguments for and against the Commission. The advantages may be briefly summarized. They have been presented by various public bodies, but by no one so concisely as the joint committee of the Commercial Club and the City Council of the city of Duluth. This committee made an examination of the conditions which prevailed in several cities, under commission rule, and their conclusions were as follows:

1. That the people's business was attended to without delay and on its merits.
2. The power of the government was concentrated.
3. There was economy of management.
4. The public service appeared to be the very best.
5. The devices (the Initiative, the Referendum and the Recall), interested the people more strongly in the work of the government.
6. Ward lines, or limitations, had been abolished.
7. Government by commission cost something, unusually, and this cost varied according to the time required from the Commission. In odd cases the commissioners act or serve gratuitously.
8. The testimony of the cities visited—Galveston, Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Leavenworth—showed that the investment paid.

The strongest arguments against government by commission have been presented by Ansley Wilcox, of Buffalo, and during the campaign in which the amendment of the city's charter was under consideration. He held that the system of government by commission was not suited to the larger cities. He did not, when he spoke, have the information which came to hand later. He insisted that there had not been sufficient time in any case to permit of a safe judgment upon the subject.

There were two radical defects in the Commission: (1) It divided responsibility, five commissioners directing the civic affairs like five generals directing the movements of an army, and (2) the five men were too few for legislative purposes, and too many for administrative purposes. In effect the Commission initiated everything, passed everything, carried through everything, and certified to everything. Mr. Wilcox objected to the devices which were heralded as the safeguards of the people, thus:

The Initiative had been seldom tried in America, and when tried had not been found successful. Nor was it necessary. It was not called for. Civic legislators had no difficulty in understanding what the people desired and in crystallizing it into law.

The Referendum had not always secured the fullest expression of public opinion. Many people who had votes did not use them. In Buffalo, on a certain occasion, only one-seventh of the ratepayers exercised the franchise. In other words, six-sevenths of them did not manifest any interest in the case, and of the one-seventh who did vote one-quarter of them were against the proposition.

The Recall Mr. Wilcox regarded as destructive of good government. It was a restraint upon men's independence. Only twice had it been effectually used. It led to the candidature of volatile and demagogic

persons. That there is something popular in the movement, however, has been attested by the manner in which it has spread.

In Woodruff's "City Governed by Commission" there is a record of 156 cities which have adopted in whole or in part this commission government. In 50 cities it was defeated because of prejudice or misunderstanding. At the present time there are 270 towns and cities which have it under consideration. St. Johns, N.B., has it in Canada. In January Vancouver and Winnipeg vote upon it, and there has been some agitation for it in London, Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa.

Continuity of Policy.

THE great benefit of government by commission is the continuity of its policy. Its members, after the first election, retire usually one at a time, and if this one be a good man and has proven his capacity as an administrator, he will be re-elected. The result is that there are always continued in office the majority who, having decided upon a certain line of action with regard to any public question, pursue it to a finish. The desirability of this is quite apparent to any one who has served in the council and become acquainted with its changeable plans.

The writer has in his mind many incidents in illustration of this fact. He remembers a certain Water Committee which decided that it would have an appraisal of its plant to date. There had not been such a valuation in about twenty years. When the work was finished many thousands of dollars, representing depreciation, were written off the assets. It was agreed that henceforth there should be a Depreciation Fund and that to it there should be devoted, from the earnings, not less than \$3,000 per annum.

When this fund had grown to some proportion the Council appropriated \$10,000 of it on two occasions for general expenses rather than increase the tax rate. Would this have happened under government by commission? Would any public body, holding service for a reasonable time, and following a continued and sound policy, permit of such a misuse of its Depreciation Fund?

Again, this Water Department, under committee rule, put meters in hotels, livery stables, and other places in order to keep down the manifest waste of water. In the following year these meters were taken out by a committee, and largely composed of the same members, but without any definite policy and one which they felt called upon to defend.

The one great grievance against management by Council Committee is that it is not devoted to its task, and that it does not direct the people's business as the members of it would direct their own business, and for the reason that they are continually subject to outside influences. The Commission is more independent, and it certainly has a record for business acumen and business ability which is not to be found in the average Council.

Progress of the Movement.

THAT Mr. Wilcox was wrong in his assumption, and to the effect that the commission is not suitable for the government of larger cities, was made manifest by the statistics which Horace E. Deming collected, with infinite pains, and presented in his work on the "Government of American Cities." According to his record Commission government has been adopted in the last ten years as follows:

In six cities, with a population between 25,000 and 30,000.

In seven cities, with a population between 30,000 and 40,000.

In four cities, with a population between 40,000 and 50,000.

In seven cities, with a population between 50,000 and 75,000.

In six cities, with a population between 75,000 and 100,000.

In five cities, with a population of

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Yours gratefully, E. J. DRAYCOTT.

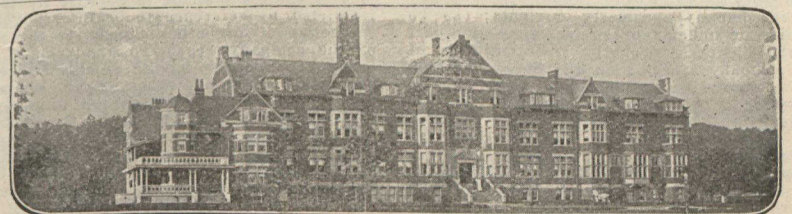
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