

HOW PLAN OF CITY MANAGER WORKS

A Look at the Latest Wrinkle in Municipal Government.

(By H. W. Dodds, Secretary National Municipal League, editor National Municipal Review.)

On May 29, 1921, there were 233 towns and cities in the United States under city manager government. Of these, 169 adopted the plan in charter form, i. e., by charter amendment or adoption, and sixty-four by simple ordinance of the city council. About four out of five new charters adopted by vote of the people under home rule powers are city manager charters. The population of man-

ager plan cities ranges from 358 (Osborne, Pa.) to 208,000 (Akron, Ohio). These figures are changing constantly because of the accelerated momentum the plan is attaining. Nashville, Sacramento, Long Beach, Pontiac, Bay City and Dubuque are recent additions. Omaha, Des Moines, St. Paul, Spokane, and other cities under commission government are seriously considering a change to manager government. New Haven and New London, Conn., vote on it in June. Within the next three weeks fourteen Indiana cities will vote on the question, under authorization of an optional charter law passed by the last Legislature. In Cleveland a committee of 100 is working for a city manager and the question will probably come to vote this fall. In more than 200 other cities city manager government is a public issue. Six Canadian cities have adopted it, and English papers are beginning to speculate on its applicability there. Lord Bryce has said that it is the last word in municipal reform.

The first city to adopt the manager principle in its charter was Sumter, S. C., in 1912. It was quickly followed in 1913

by Dayton, O., which had been through a long siege of inefficient administration under spoils politicians. The large majority in favor of the new charter was due in a measure to the Dayton flood and the demonstrated incapacity of the old government to rehabilitate the city.

City Manager vs. Commission.

City manager government is quite distinct from commission government, which began in New Orleans in 1901. The former is designed to cure certain defects which time and experience have demonstrated in the latter. It involves a small elected Council composed of members who serve for nominal salaries and who constitute the city's lawmaking authority. They hire and have power at any time to "fire" the city manager, who is the non-political manager of the city's administration. The manager appoints and dismisses his subordinate department heads at will. The minor officials and employees are usually chosen under civil service regulations.

The essence of the plan is the non-political manager, who when appointed need not be, and often is not, a resident of the city. Note that the members of the council do not themselves become the heads of departments and active administrators as under commission government. In commission government the elected commission acts as both the legislative and administrative departments. Each commissioner becomes an active head of a department under the supervision of all the others as a body. The weakness of commission government is largely due to the fact that the commissioners are almost invariably amateurs in the work. The people elect them as representatives, which is proper, and not on a basis of administrative skill or technical ability to manage a department. The people at large are unable to know the candidates so intimately as to appraise their executive capacity or special fitness to manage a technical city department. Furthermore, commission government means administration by a group rather than by a single executive head. All our experience in business organization shows the futility of entrusting to a committee re-

sponsibility for administrative leadership and effectiveness. Dr. Johnson so advised Boswell a good many years ago regarding the appointment of guardians for his children, "Sirs, do not appoint a number of guardians. When there are many they trust one another, and the business is neglected. I would advise you to

choose only one; let him be a man of respectable character, who for his own credit will do what is right."

Not Like a Mayor.

This is the basis of the city manager plan. Emphasis is placed on the non-political character of the manager. He is paid a respectable salary. His chances for distinction and promotion depend on his ability to operate the city well at low cost. He cannot succeed and play politics.

Right here is the point at which he diverges from the modern mayor. The mayor, having been elected after a political fight, is bound to reward his friends and punish his enemies. He cannot divorce politics from administration. Yet nothing is clearer than that politics should not figure in street paving or the purchase of fire hose. Irrespective of this political pressure, most mayors are not fitted by training or temperament to administer the highly technical business of a modern city. Our best mayors are elected because they are generally liked and trusted, because the people approve of the politics they advocate. The proper place for such a person is in the policy-making body which will reflect the people's wishes.

Unlike the mayoralty, the city manager is a profession. The city council, under which the manager works, selects him on the basis of peculiar fitness. Successful managers are promoted to larger cities and bigger salaries. The manager idea is in a way a break with the past in political theory. It rejects the spoils system and rotation in administrative office, and it accepts public administration as a profession for which a man must be specially fitted and in which he can look forward to a life of distinguished public service. If we have a chimney to build we don't call a plumber; but heretofore any amiable citizen was considered worthy to manage the enormous work of municipal administration.

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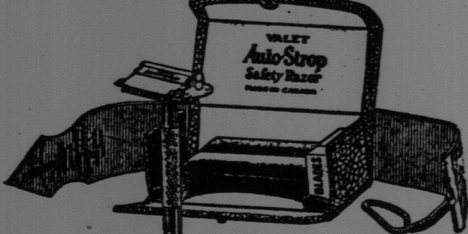
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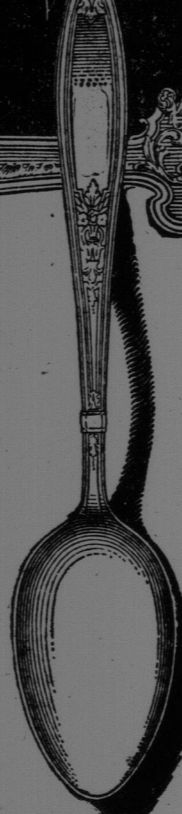
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