

# The Municipal Clerk and the Office He Fills

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It befits the office of the municipal clerk that he should but rarely make his voice heard in public. His motto, like that of the British Navy, should be "Silent Service."

But it so happens that there are some things known to the municipal clerk which, apparently, are not known to anyone else: that is, from his place in the interior of the municipal machine he has an outlook over the field of local government not obtainable from any other viewpoint; and therefore, while silence may in general be a convenient and necessary condition of his office, it is, perhaps, not unfitting that an exception to the rule should be made on such an occasion as the present, when we are met together for the purpose of studying the theory and practice of municipal government; and that those who, while themselves an indispensable part of the administrative machine, are still—if I may be permitted to say so—as it were, an exterior part, should for a brief space listen to a voice from within.

In taking up the subject of "The Municipal Clerk and the Office He Fills," it is not my intention, primarily, to speak on behalf of municipal clerks as a class. We are all here as representatives of the public—a Municipal Parliament, and therefore constitutionally entitled to give attention to public matters only; and class interests can only enter into discussion in so far as they are involved in, or form part of, that larger interest—the welfare of the State, which is the *raison d'être* of our existence as a public body.

Municipal government, in common with other forms of government, rests on a philosophical basis; therefore, in order to obtain the right perspective on our subject, I must ask you to bear with me for a few moments while I briefly summarize that underlying philosophy.

It is true that all great things—that is, fundamental things, elemental principles—are simple; but man has lost sight of first principles, and through disorder, aggravated by half-hearted or ignorant attempts to deal with it, or consciously or unconsciously to work in spite of it, life has become so intricate and artificial that now, as Ruskin says: "It is far more difficult to be simple than to be complicated; far more difficult to sacrifice skill and cease exertion in the proper place than to expend both lavishly."

As the result of this ever-growing evil, there has arisen, during the last fifty or sixty years, a small and peculiar class of people—specialists, or experts; men who, taking some one small part of the domain of life, devote themselves exclusively to it; in order, by exhaustive research and concentration of effort, to clear away the obstructing accretions of false thought, and arrive at—what? Simplicity: basic facts and elemental principles. As I remarked in an address delivered before this convention some ten or twelve years ago: "It is the art of the true expert . . . to throw light on what is dark, to make hard things easy, and to reduce complexity and confusion to the simplicity of law and order."

Here, then, we arrive at the point from which we can view through the right perspective the subject of municipal government. But few people realize that there is a science, and an art, of public administration; that it is based on natural law, on the principles of being; and that by orderly evolution of thought an administrative machine could be built up, true to nature, perfect in its parts, symmetrical and beautiful, a joy to those who operated it, an inspiration to those whom it was designed to serve.

Now, in the exercise of this mission of ours, where and how are we to begin our practical work—where is the point of commencement? If we have learned our lesson, we can be in no doubt. We must go straight to the heart of anything which we wish to understand or to work for. The office is the heart of the administrative machine; and, as the heart is, so will the machine be. If all is right at the heart of the municipal system, there will radiate from it in all directions an impulse of brightness and efficiency.

The office system must be designed on broad, definite lines, and must be capable of taking care of all the various kinds of business to be put through it; but it must have the minimum number of parts. It must be constructed according to the analogy of the visible-writing typewriter—that is, its work must at all stages be cap-

able of observation, open to inspection; and its every operation must be so conducted that the whole process can at any length of time afterwards be plainly traced by any qualified person, even in the absence of the operator. There must be neither redundancy, lack, nor error, but in every point sufficiency, order, accuracy. To secure the exactness and uniformity thus demanded, recourse must be had to carefully constructed, printed forms. In no other way can the work be standardized. Without standardization there will inevitably be variation, and consequent error and obscurity, causing uncertainty, hesitation and lack of confidence on the part of the clerk; and efficient inspection will be practically impossible. But with standardization the clerk will at all times be able to keep a mental grasp of the work, to avoid errors, proceed with confidence and speak with authority; and inspection will be expedited and facilitated.

In the working of the system a method of segregation and aggregation must be followed; that is, transactions, as far as possible, must not be put through singly, but in groups, and at regular intervals; and the various operations must follow each other in logical sequence. The office must be open to the public during certain well-understood hours; it is desirable that they be fixed by by-law; these hours need not be long—in fact, short public hours lend themselves to a better routine, condensing the work of waiting on callers, and leaving more time after hours for other work. The public hours, whatever they are, must be strictly adhered to by the clerk, so that the public can always be sure of transacting their business when they come to the office. On the other hand, business should never be transacted with the public after public hours. If one is favoured in this way all must be, for the clerk can be no respecter of persons; and then there is an end of all order and routine.

It should be made clear to the public that the whole object of office routine, standardization, grouping of transactions, orderly sequence of operations, the fixing of a time-table, and so forth, is the simplification and efficient conduct of the people's business. Efficient work can only be done by a clear mind; a clear mind can only be maintained in a clear, orderly office, and with a clear logical routine. I would ask you gentlemen who are members of councils, then, to support your clerk in the maintenance of all reasonable rules and regulations, designed to aid him in his work and help him the better to give good service to the community. Without such support on the part of the council, the people, perceiving that the work of the office follows a set course, will soon raise the cry of "red tape"; they will then speedily come to the conclusion that they are being taxed to pay for "a whole lot of unnecessary work," and at the next election a candidate will come out pledged to do away with this "abuse." I need not follow the result out in detail; the likely outcome will be that the clerk, who had loved his work and given the best that was in him to the service of the people, will resign and seek another position—perhaps give up municipal work altogether, completely disheartened, throw away the good of all the years he had spent in the study and practice of public service; and, at a disadvantage to himself and the real, though unacknowledged, loss of the public, take to some other way of earning his daily bread.

Now, gentlemen, I have, as I said, no appeal to make to you primarily on behalf of municipal clerks as a class. But if you think that the public interest requires competent municipal service; that the welfare of the state demands that the municipal offices of Canada be conducted by qualified men, in a clear-cut, definite, efficient manner; then I ask you to initiate, now, at this convention, some movement for the organization and regulation of the municipal civil service.

If the right kind of men are to be induced to enter this service, there are a few reasonable conditions which must be assured to them. There must be security of tenure of office; a fair, progressive scale of salaries such as exists in other branches of the civil service; such hours of attendance at the office as will leave adequate, daily leisure for relaxation; such regular vacations as will assist in keeping the bodily health braced up and the mind fresh

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