The Cincinnati Plan

For

American Cities

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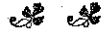

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The Cincinnati Plan For American Cities

THE Cincinnati plan of city organization merits attention in any American city, whether now under a city manager plan or not, where the city government is giving poor or mediocre results.

The Cincinnati plan is sometimes carelessly spoken of as the City Manager Plan. It is better than that; for, while it does establish the office of City Manager as many other American cities have already done, it provides noteworthy and still highly exceptional means for enhancing the quality, usefulness and prestige of the City Council. Since part of the duty of the City Council is to select the City Manager and supervise his work, the supreme importance of having a high grade City Council should be apparent; but strangely enough it still needs emphasis, particularly including an outline of how it can be and has been done.

Note—Portions of this paper are taken from an address by Professor Johnson before the League of Women Voters, Cambridge, Mass., which was published in local newspapers, American City, and Harvard Alumni Bulletin.

It is important accordingly to note that the city manager plan of city government exists in this country in two fundamentally differing forms.

The two forms are alike in their delegation of the people's legislative and administrative authority to a board of elected representatives, a commission or council, who determine policies and see that their policies and the bulk at least of the administrative affairs of the city are carried out through a single executive officer of their own choosing, called the city manager.

The earlier of the two forms, the commission-manager plan, is simply the old commission plan modified by adding the city manager as an official who takes over nearly all the administrative duties previously exercised by the commissioners. It fails to provide the change in the make-up or method of choosing the elective governing body called for by the radical change in the nature of that body's functions and duties.

The newer form—called, for reasons which will appear as we proceed, the P. R.-manager plan—corrects this fault by taking deliberate steps for bringing the superior body, the council, up to the

highest degree of fitness for its new type of task and at the same time for putting the voters as a whole in a more dignified, more powerful position than ever before.

The P.R.-manager plan is simply a consistently rounded-out plan turning fully to account the best methods known for enabling not merely the routine administrative but all departments of the city government, including the much neglected electorate itself, to do each its own proper work to the best advantage.

The sequence of considerations which led to the development of the P.R.-manager plan is briefly as follows. The provision of the manager relieves the commission, or council, of the great bulk of the administrative work previously lodged in that body. That body, thus relieved, becomes almost wholly deliberative in function. Its administrative acts, such as selection of the manager or of such other officers or boards as may be placed within its purview, though of critical importance, are very few in number and rare of occurrence. Moreover they are of such a character as to call for precisely the same type of body as is logically required for legislative work, i. e., a completely representative body.

Without the city manager, the commission or council was a largely routine executive body, and smoothness of working required that each member of the commission should be as nearly as possible *persona grata* to his colleagues. That resulted in each member being selected from the same single group in the city, *viz,* the majority—of those that vote at least —notwithstanding the fact that this necessarily denied great sections of the electorate any representation whatever—of their own choosing. Upon the advent of the city manager, this radical infraction of democracy no longer had to be endured. The way was then clear for the long overdue admission of representatives of all considerable groups of the electorate to an assured fair share in the government.

The way has thus been thrown open not only for majority representation in the city council but for equally systematic and certain representation of minorities, with prospects that even the majorities themselves can thus get representatives more to their liking than ever before. Thus automatically accompanying the appointive manager idea, there opens an opportunity for a strengthened council, a

council which should gradually if not immediately develop increasing usefulness and prestige with corresponding toning up of civic spirit and interest throughout the electorate.

It is clear that a satisfactory manager and satisfactory work on his part cannot be hoped for without a high-grade council to appoint and direct him and back him up. Manifestly essential as the manager is, the council is an even more critical factor in the organization. For if the council is able, loyal to the general welfare, and in enjoyment of the vigorous confidence of the public, the selection of a good manager, his wise direction and proper support and generally good results can hardly fail to take care of themselves. Without a council reasonably approximating this type, no city manager can be expected to save the day. To put it another way, a good city council can protect the city against a bad or incompetent city manager, for it can remove him and appoint a better; but an honest, capable city manager cannot get good results in the face of an incompetent or corrupt city council. Even in a city manager plan the city government cannot rise above the caliber and character of the

officials whom the voters must in any event elect and put in charge. The council is therefore a feature of a city manager plan which should be as carefully considered as the manager idea itself. By no means less so, of course, is the share the voters must take.

The P.R.-manager plan recognizes and responds to these considerations. It turns fully to account the best methods human thought and experience have thus far developed for better ensuring that these popularly elected officials themselves shall continuously be of a type acceptable to the whole electorate. It does it by the simple step of democratizing the council, by making that body closely representative of the whole voting population, by making it a condensation of the whole electorate into a small body consisting of the most trusted leaders and spokesmen of all the groups in the city large enough to be entitled to a share in the representation. This means complete representation in the government in place of representation of one group only, as was practically necessary, as above stated, for smooth working on the part of the old commission. Such a completely representative council is secured by the adop-

tion of a method of voting which gives automatically to each group of like-minded voters a number of representatives closely proportioned to the numerical size of the group. It therefore goes by the name of proportional representation, or P.R., for short. Hence the type of manager plan based upon a council broadened and strengthened by P.R. may conveniently be called, as was done above, the P.R.-manager plan.

The commission-manager plan, though a highly important step forward in American city government, falls short by inadequate attention to that vitally important factor, the representative governing body,—not to mention the electorate itself, the supreme body. This defect the P.R.-manager plan corrects up to the limit of present day possibilities and without sacrifice of any of the meritorious features of the manager idea—quite the contrary.

The P.R.-manager plan in its best form has been in force in Cincinnati since 1925, and Hamilton, Ohio, since 1927. The P.R.-manager Plan is the preferred plan embodied in the model city charter advocated by the National Municipal League. Kalamazoo and Sacramento have had it in

effect, and were forced to give it up by court decisions holding that P.R. did not conform to the election requirements in their respective State constitutions. In Ohio the constitutionality of P.R. has been established by the Ohio Supreme Court and sustained by the U. S. Supreme Court. And there are States enough where there is no doubt of its constitutionality to justify its most serious consideration.

In the P.R.-Manager Plan, as in any other piece of mechanism, attention to details is essential. Cincinnati, avoiding the pioneering mistakes revealed in its chief forerunner, the charter in force in Cleveland from 1921 to 1931, seems to have adequately met even this requirement. The Cincinnati plan is hence being taken as the model of the new charter now being advocated in Philadelphia; and seems likely to be taken equally seriously in other cities, among them New York.

Cincinnati, it may here be noted, has reduced its net bonded indebtedness in the last six years by $1,740,000, although in that time the city has been "rebuilt with new streets, boulevards, sewers, viaducts, public buildings and playgrounds." Its tax rate for 1932 is 7%

less than the rate for 1926. Its budget is balanced.

P.R. is still unfamiliar enough, even to voters who understand the manager idea, to call for a brief explanation.

P.R. is at once a method of constituting and a method of electing the representative council. Nominations under P.R. are made by petition of a small number of voters precisely as in the double election system prevalent under the commission-manager plan. Instead, however, of putting a cross after as many names as there are offices to be filled, first in a primary and again three weeks or so later in a so-called final or run-off election, the voter, in the one single election which is all P.R. requires for doing the work of these two elections and doing it better, marks a number 1 in the space opposite the name of his first choice candidate, a 2 opposite his second, and 3 opposite his third, and so on until he has thus voted for as many of the candidates as he wishes, regardless of how many are to be elected. He may vote a first choice only, if he is so disposed—and is so short sighted, because bulleting in this system gives him no advantage, but quite the contrary. Having marked his ballot,

he puts it in the box. Here the voter's part in the balloting ends. He then has only to await the final returns, for by this system, let it be clearly understood, the primary and final election are consolidated into a single election; in other words, the primary is eliminated, but in a manner netting a substantial gain for people's rule, not a loss.

Each ballot under P.R. will finally help elect the voter's first-choice candidate unless that candidate is either so strong that he does not need that vote for his election or is proved by the returns to be out of the running. And in that case, the ballot is prevented from being wasted by being transferred to the voter's second preference if it will help that candidate; if not, it goes to the voter's third choice in the same way. And so on throughout the count so long as there remains a preference expressed on that ballot in favor of a candidate whom it can help.

In any case, the voter's desire, so far as he expresses it, is thus accurately carried out and every ballot is finally counted for the candidate with the highest choice thereon indicated whose election it can help. Under P.R. in Cincinnati in 1925,

in 1927, in 1929 and in 1931, ninety per cent of the votes cast helped to elect councilmen, as against only about fifty-six per cent under the old ward-plan which preceded it. This is one result of this election method's reduction of the waste of ballots actually cast.

Demonstration elections, feasible in any meeting of sufficiently moderate size, make clear just how the ballots are counted. The actual process is found to be readily within the comprehension of upper-grade grammar school pupils. Voters learn to understand the counting system just as they learn the rules of baseball by seeing the game played, rather than by reading printed directions. Experience in this country and elsewhere, especially in the Irish Free State where P.R. is used for selecting the representatives in the national parliament, proves its workability, even where used on a nationwide scale.

Among the chief reasons for P.R. are its fairness; the confidence and interest in the government which it engenders; the completeness with which it promotes order and decorum in elections; the increased attractiveness it lends to standing for the city council from the viewpoint

of those of proven fitness to frame large policies and direct large affairs; the improved prospect it opens and holds open for honest, able, farseeing leadership in public affairs; the encouragement it offers to progress by reasonably prompt recognition of growing minorities; the safeguard it provides against premature change by the more effective entrenchment it establishes for majority rule,—not merely rule by a majority of the representatives of one possible majority of all the electorate, but rule by a majority of the representatives of the aggregate of all the considerable groups in the city—i. e., a majority, the personnel of which is by no means fixed but varies according to the question under discussion. That this real majority may have its rightful power is one reason sufficient in itself for systematic minority representation. P.R. retains all the advantages of preferential voting. In fact the P.R. ballot is itself a type of preferential ballot, and the type that experience has shown to be the best suited for securing representation of minorities.

Space does not permit fuller description here of P.R. nor does the topic of this paper require it. Hoag and Hallett's

"Proportional Representation," published in 1926, covers the case as fully as any reader may wish. Pamphlets of the City Charter Committee, 311 South Juniper street, Philadelphia, will prove to be informative.

Doubts as to the feasibility of popularizing P.R. in an American city have been dispelled by experience; the practicability of its use even in the highly mixed populations of our great cities has by the same means been demonstrated. And the modern preference for small responsible city councils, elected without ward or district restrictions (either upon the candidate or upon the voter) and without national party designations, opens the fairest of fields for getting the advantages of P.R.

Moreover, even though the most antiquated of election systems may occasionally produce an acceptable city council, it would seem nevertheless only ordinary common sense for a city to go to the limit of present day possibilities to insure having a council which will continuously command the confidence of the electorate and of a worth-while city manager.

Hence, except where local constitu-

tional difficulties may for the time be insuperable, P.R. should be insisted upon as the basis of the city manager plan by all who wish to see that plan fully democratized and to see it give its best results.

But even if that is done, as enthusiasts should be warned and as critics should make an effort to remember, no results can come out of even the P.R.-manager plan superior to the intelligence which the voters and their representatives put into its use.

The supreme and sufficient merit of P.R., the highest merit any political device can have, is that it gives the best means known for turning to account such intelligence and public spirit as exists.

It thereby offers the strongest inducement known for the development of civic comprehension and enduring civic zeal on the part of the whole electorate,—both those in office and those not in office.

Thanks to P.R. and to correct attending charter provisions, Cincinnati enjoys invaluable service from those not in office through an unofficial but strongly organized City Charter Association. The importance to government BY the people of such a volunteer, non-spoils-hunting municipal body was clear to the fram-

ers of the charter. Accordingly they saw to it that their charter should leave open a workable opportunity for such an organization. Hence when their charter went into force it had them, its friends, behind it as a strong continuing Charter Association. And what is more important, that body has ever since effectively backed up the Council and Manager in the service of the public, particularly by seeing at each election that candidates adequate in number and of the right caliber and character are on the ballot.

A similar organization of citizens in Hamilton has from the first been turning P.R. to account in that city—some twenty miles north of Cincinnati—with similarly gatifying results.

Cincinnati and Hamilton succeed because they have developed a plan of city government well suited to the requirements of cities for carrying on government BY the people. This is precisely what American cities have not generally done, whether under a city manager plan or not.