

# Public Relation Officers For Cities?

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IN Canada and the United States the most important problem connected with local government is that of developing among the people a general interest in municipal affairs. At one time the favoured method in the United States was to generate a high degree of emotional excitement over new reforms. High pressure salesmanship was often the core of such a scheme; when the excitement died, so did the reforms. To-day, however, a less spectacular but more permanent program of educating the people in good government is promising much more in the way of concrete results.

One good example of how local citizens can be duped by a political boss is found in Kansas City, Missouri. Here, despite the early employment of a city manager, Boss Pendergast managed to keep complete control until 1939. Reformers could talk their heads off, telling how Pendergast supervised the perversion of election procedures and how he constantly employed corrupt practices. But what people saw was tangible evidence of Pendergast's consideration for them. They could regard the complaints against him as not being very important.

Here, then, is graphic illustration that no ideal *form* of civic organization will necessarily bring about *good* local government. That is an achievement to be brought about by the concerted action of the local citizens, who are well informed on the problems and aware of the possibilities.

## Creating a Demand

D. W. Hoan, one-time Mayor of Milwaukee, put this idea into practice many years ago and turned the city from one rendering mediocre services into

what is now claimed to be the best-governed city in the world. When he came into power, a corrupt political organization had been milking the city dry and a huge debt hindered the expansion of municipal services. Now Milwaukee has high administrative standards of city government, one of the best health records in the United States, great success in the prevention of crime and the apprehension of criminals, a well-developed system of adult education, recreational facilities for old and young, and a high standard of education in the public schools. All this has come about by Mayor Hoan's method of informing the people as to what efficient, citizen-controlled city government can do for them, and thus creating a general demand for such government.

The program of public education must continue, however, or the interest of the people will flag. Milwaukee's was developed over a thirty-year period.

## Reporting Helps

One phase of such a program is good periodical reporting to the citizens. Most Canadian cities have no general program of informing the public on civic affairs. Indeed most don't even issue a written annual report to the citizens. Halifax, for example, other than the annual financial statement, has no published report of any kind. Toronto issues a tiny handbook which—although handy for reference—would hardly make interesting bed-time reading.

Compare this situation with that in the best-governed American cities of Cincinnati and Milwaukee. They send out pamphlets each month with the water bills—just two or three page affairs, but they do inform the citizens on the current problems of the city. These pamphlets are clear and illuminating. Even more effective are their annual reports. These are carefully prepared, clearly phrased, and contain many charts,

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diagrams, and photographs to illustrate the contents. As one Milwaukee city official put it, "Our Reports are simple descriptions made up of common sense instead of rows of figures made up of dollars and cents."

It is only fair to note, however, that in 1947 less than 10 per cent of all American cities published annual reports of a general nature for distribution to citizens. The plan has been adopted in Canada by a few municipalities—as, for example, by Verdun, Outremont, Shawinigan Falls and La Tuque, all in the Province of Quebec. In Montreal, competent reports are published separately by the various departments, while the City Planning Department, like the planning bodies in other Canadian cities, has produced commendable studies which the non-specialist finds both attractive and understandable. But individual reports such as these can be no substitute for the short, over-all description of a city's annual program.

### Radio Comes Next

Although annual reports are the most widely used means of bringing civic information to the people, radio is rapidly becoming of almost equal importance. The mayors of Toronto, Edmonton and Montreal all have regular radio programs in which they explain civic affairs. But the most popular method is for various city officials to give talks or be interviewed on the operation of their respective departments. This is a good way of informing the public and has been used with much success in Halifax, Saint John and other cities.

Brantford, Ontario, recently began broadcasting actual city council meetings. As to the probable success of this venture, Halifax's Mayor Ahern pointed out that it is hard enough to get the city fathers to express opinions in regular council meetings, even without the presence of a radio microphone. There is also the question of just how many people listen to such programs. They are usual-

ly dry and often technical. They are also puzzling to the listener because the most interesting discussions have already taken place in committees. The Province of Saskatchewan, on the other hand, has adopted the practice of broadcasting only *important* meetings of its Legislature. Another plan is suggested by the experience of the United Nation's Department of Public Information at Lake Success and by the American networks' practice in bringing Congressional committee hearings to the nation; discussion at selected sessions is recorded, then edited with competent narration and commentary for broadcast at a suitable hour.

Another means of "selling" local government to the public is by means of time-tested visual techniques. Most people know little more about civic administration than what they see—the policeman on his beat, the garbage collector or the snow remover. If carefully prepared, easy-to-read charts were posted in public places, people would notice them and become interested. Civic vehicles of all kinds could also be used to carry posters. One particularly good place for such information would be tramcars and buses. Here the majority of the people could be reached, and it would be hard for them *not* to read such exhibits, as any "strap hanger" or ad man will tell us.

### The Total Approach

Reporting, alone, is not enough, however. If citizen participation is to be assured, the program of public education must be all inclusive. Down to earth civics courses in the schools are needed. If the people are taught the fundamentals of democratic government while they are young, they will have a natural interest when they become full fledged citizens. Not only that, but an interest will be aroused in the parents from listening to their children talk at home. In some cities a start has already been made. Halifax, for example, has a "youth

government." The schools annually elect a mayor, alderman and city officials, who sit in with Council once a year and learn by helping to run the city. An expansion of such a program would no doubt be enthusiastically received by the energetic teen-ager of to day. In New York, Mayor La Guardia established a plan of choosing promising students from local high schools and colleges and offering them summer apprenticeships in the city's government. Such a plan will probably produce many future civic leaders.

At the adult level, too, the coldness of print must be bolstered with the warmth of human contact. Following Mayor Hoan's example, top city administrators could be encouraged to address clubs and social organizations on the nature and extent of their work. This inexpensive means of educating the public should appeal even to pennywise aldermen on finance committees. Another useful idea is that of tours through the city and its works, conducted by civic employees. The more obvious appeal of this plan to visitors and school children might be extended to arouse the interest of the community's adult taxpayers in the activities financed by their money.

Adult education must also play its part. Both Des Moines and Milwaukee have successfully organized adult classes to study municipal government. Milwaukee recently took the unprecedented step of holding a "school for politicians" open to all 356 candidates in the 1948 city and county election. Sponsored by the public library, five seminars in municipal affairs were conducted by nationally known authorities.

In Canada, various civic organizations could be called upon to help organize discussion groups on local government. Civic Improvement Associations and Junior Boards of Trade have already done useful work. In some localities, the Home and School organizations have taken steps in this direction—and logi-

cally so, since their special interest is in improved relations between a vital municipal activity and an important section of the community. And a carefully planned program of public discussion should reach beyond the adult population. Many centres have organized teen-age clubs, for example, which might be persuaded to co-operate in a community-wide program of this type.

It is obvious that the newspapers already play an important part in informing the public about municipal affairs. But if the city itself can create a public interest in local government then the circle is complete, since the newspapers cater to their subscribers' interests.

These, then, are the means by which citizens have been and can be educated in civic affairs. Once they are used, the people will, as Mayor Hoan has proved, demand and get better local government.

### Someone to Do It

The big problem, however, is: who should organize and run such a program. To leave its development to a single elected official like a mayor is too uncertain. It may even be dangerous. A city might start with a Hoan and end with a Pendergast. Instead, Canadian cities would be better advised to entrust responsibility to their permanent, non-partisan officers, who would act of course under the guidance of the elected Councilors.

Various forms of organization may be used in a Town or City Hall for purposes of public relations activity. One plan is for each Department to have its own Public Relations Section. The disadvantage here is the absence of concerted action. A second is for one of the present officials to be handed the job of co-ordination. This would be feasible in the smaller cities and towns, but would not work for large cities. To do a job properly, the responsible official must not only be interested in it and believe in it; he must also have time for it. For cities, then, the logical step is the ap-

pointment of a Public Information Officer. It may be noted that the British Government's Committee on Publicity for Local Government have recently reached the same conclusion.

Such an officer would act as the "information booth" of City Hall, the medium through which all information is funnelled to the public. His would be the job of managing tours, giving speeches, supervising exhibits, writing pamphlets, arranging radio talks, organizing adult education forums, taking opinion polls, etc., and, last but not least, planning and editing an annual report on civic affairs. He would, of course, require assistants, and would need the full co-operation of each Department.

The qualifications for such an officer would naturally have to be very high. The first one would be imaginative organizing and executive ability. A second would be a wide knowledge of educational and publicity methods, including the techniques of direct contact as well as the use of radio and the press.

To organize and edit the annual report, publishing experience would be invaluable but not essential provided he had competent assistance. His main job would be to stimulate the public rather than to produce technically "slick" publications. An officer with these responsibilities would have to be paid a good salary, and a certain amount of authority should accompany his position.

That some such guiding hand in public education is needed for most municipal governments is proved by the high incidence of non-voting in elections. In most civic elections less than half of those listed vote. Studies in the United States show that lack of interest and general indifference account for almost a third of non-voting. Hence a system of public education and reporting is needed to stimulate not only *interest* in civic government but also *active participation*. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the cure for a sleepy public is a wide awake program of public education.

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## The New Synthesis

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CONSIDER for a moment the trend in Europe to-day in respect to labour-management relations. The democratic countries seem to be reaching for a new synthesis, a new principle for contact and co-operation. It has been reported that Norway has hundreds of labour-management committees. It is apparent also that this trend is prompted by a stern economic condition that demands ever-increasing production to secure an ever-increasing standard of living.

War is a great leveller. It reduces economies to simple elementary conditions. Europe is turning to production as the key to European recovery. All the countries of western Europe have

increased production beyond the 1938 levels. This is not enough to take up the backlog of capital needs and not enough to give the standard of living which the populations desire. It is apparent also that these nations realize that unsound relations between labour and management are a costly tax on the economy of each country. Nations with a small margin cannot afford the luxury of a constant war between labour and management. Just such a conclusion as this was reached in the United States during the depression and during the World War. More than four thousand labour-management committees were set up during the war and earnestly tried to reduce to a minimum strikes resulting