CIVIC GOVERNMENT:

CORPORATE, CONSULTATIVE OR PARTICIPATORY ?

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Civic government in the years following World War II was modified in many cities to meet the demands of rapid population growth and the rise of a consumer society. In the process old forms of representative government and citizenship temporarily lapsed as calls for performance, particularly in services to residential property, brought about a form of civic management borrowed from corporations. As long as civic management goals corresponded with those of a majority of residents, the system worked well. However, in the 1960's changes in public attitudes, the scale of government, and the perception of roles of the governors and governed brought about perturbations in the civic scene with further modifications of civic government in many cities. When one considers the goals of civic managers and of the systems they create, the reasons for an incapacity to adopt the plural needs of the contemporary city becomes apparent. An analogy from the private sector is informative.

In *The New Industrial State*[1] John Kenneth Galbraith recounts how the family owners of the family firm and shareholders in the shareholder-controlled corporation have seen their influence decline at the expense of their managers. In large measure the goal of the managers, Galbraith claims, is "system maintenance" rather than profit maximization or any personal goal of the near-legendary capitalist of the last century. Galbraith goes on to argue that ownership is now sufficiently diffuse so that the managers go their own way as long as there is black ink in the ledger, that is, as long as some dividends come along--when performance exceeds an acceptable minimum. Only when there is "red ink" or conspicuous managerial bungling, is there an attack on the managers. Then the Directors move in and topple the existing management, with its President the focus of their wrath and lesser managers included in the *coup* only when mismanagement was extreme. A shareholder's revolt, or an external take-over, perhaps through the stock market, is attempted. But these rapid changes are not the rule, and for most companies today "system maintenance" is the operating principle.

This is a stunning contrast to the "Robber Barons" of half a century ago, or the "free enterprise" mythology perpetrated by the Chamber of Commerce members in most towns. Individual initiative rewarded by large profits, or that persistent search for productivity and efficiency seems somewhat distant within the multi-national corporate bureaucracy. But as Eric Trist[2] tells us, this is to be expected given the changing saliences of past decades and present, from small scale to large scale, from industrialist to professional, from competitive relations to collaborative relations, from central control to more generalized control--from relative independence to interdependence. The capitalist lumberman of 1900 in British Columbia was a very different man to the corporate president of a wood products conglomerate in 1974.

The trends set out by Galbraith and Trist give an excellent analogy for considering some of the changes in government, particularly municipal government, which, for the most part, are corporations.

In Vancouver, B.C., until recently, Mayors and Aldermen were drawn largely from the enterpreneurial group and saw themselves in the role of providing services to land and enterprise. They were blatantly boosterish with such slogans as "In 1910 we'll have 100,000 men" and for the first fifty years dependent upon a small-scale ward electorate.[3] Most politicians in that period were responsible for more than policy; they were often a recruiting agency for civic employees and the initiators of local projects that brought money to contractors, jobs to voters, and services to enhance property values. Although the ward system disappeared in Vancouver in 1936, it persisted in many cities, notably Daley's Chicago,[4] Newark, and in Quebec and Maritime politics.

The ward politics that reflected the "capitalistic" era was replaced in Vancouver by the non-partisan, city manager form of government in the corporate era. This paralleled the reform movement in the United States and was designed to take partisan politics out of city hall, for partisanship was believed to be at the root of patronage and bossism. It removed party labels and the influence of the political party at the municipal level. It permitted a professionalized civic government. The outcome was a Council/manager system in which a professional manager ran the city administration while an elected non-partisan, at-large, Council initiated policy. A model similar to a corporate management system was implemented. This was natural enough as it was similar to the businesses from which most of the politicians came. But as one authority notes, "All too often the professional manager in daily contact with the city systems, with more complete information than council, both administered and initiated policy while the council simply ratified it. Now expertise rather than political utility, reality or compromise could be used to justify decisions."[5] Thus political control moved in part from the elected to the professional civil servant. "If knowledge is power, compare the knowledge of someone who has spent 15 years building up a monopoly of expertise in expressway plans with a politician having 15 months to penetrate the decision making system."[6]

Supporting Galbraith's observation about the private or public business corporation Lupsha notes with regard to the public, civic or municipal corporation that "the goal of the professional administrative

bureaucracy is usually directed more towards system maintenance than system change or innovation." The technostructure during the past four decades has taken rein and guided the civic operation.

Wards were abolished in Vancouver in 1935 and an at-large election system was instituted. Its consequence was depolitization of the individual citizen. The voter was unable to know who was responsible for actions taken. In the process the voter began to see himself more as a *consumer* of government services than a *citizen* with citizen rights and obligations. The years after World War II saw government preoccupation with curbs and gutters, street lights, sewers, arterial highways and other engineering and material structures that coincided with the material aspirations of the majority of voters. Both citizen and politician were making up for the deprivation of Depression and Wartime.

A full corporate model of government was adopted during this period. The senior administrators, by necessity in part, adopted a dual role of administrator and policy initiator and advisor. City Council in turn acted as if they were the owner, the directors of a company, or the trustees of the public wealth. The senior administrators drew their information and values about the urban scene from the bureaucracy, and, when necessary, from experts outside the system, usually experts from the engineering or financial sector. Given the preoccupation of the population at large with the material up-grading of the city and a common wisdom that growth was "good" the system worked remarkably well. The major opposition came from those few at odds ideologically with government priorities.

By the mid 1960's it was clear that the corporate model of nonpartisan/city manager civic administration was feeling the stress of changing public attitudes, and that the model was too inflexible to incorporate changing attitudes, for its ethic was solidly bureaucratic. This reflected several threads of social change now being explored by social commentators. In Vancouver this shift was sensed by the senior administration and a bureaucratic *Distant Early Warning* system was instituted. The vehicle, the Social Planning Department would, among other responsibilities, keep the administration aware of pressure points in the community and permit it to forewarn Council of community change. This procedure was consistent with their model of civic government.

Galbraith's analogy suggests that the corporate/manager system would only be altered when the management team failed to deliver in a fashion expected of them by a substantial number of shareholders (voters). That happened most dramatically in Vancouver in the Chinatown Freeway debate of 1967. Hundreds of people who individually and separately had become dissatisfied with the goals of the city government, became aware of each other and formed political coalitions to change the direction of civic government. Competing political organizations emerged which held in common a belief that the views of the corporate/trusteeship model did not fit the needs of the day, and that citizenship, as well as consumership, was essential to civic government. The form of government to replace the *status quo* adopted by the challengers differed. One group advocated a *representative/consultative* model while another supported a *participatory* model. Both agreed that citizens and lay people had a right to be involved

in the determination of civic policy and that it should not be reserved for the "experts." Most would agree with Clarkson "But there is no such thing as professional neutrality. . . . While the professional does command certain techniques for analyzing and resolving particular problems his expertise must always be based on certain assumptions or related to particular parameters. When these guidelines are not defined for him, the expert is forced to make political choices on his own."[7]

To many, the demise of the old system was related to the fact that Aldermen were reactive to initiatives of the bureaucracy and private sector,[8] making decisions in an *ad hoc* fashion within some *assumed*, but not articulated, policy frameworks. Further, as no council member was elected on any clear platform and as shifting allegiances and responsibilities were the rule, on issue after issue no one in City Hall could be pinned down, no policy enunciated or determined; thus there was little accountability of elected officials.[9] This analysis suggested that the necessary reforms included the election of candidates who stood for office under at least a generalized programme, and who would collectively take responsibility for the direction of civic policy--in short a civic political party. Secondly it was stated that the various interest groups and territorial neighbourhoods had important inputs to the decision-making process. To assure that these inputs were secured a variety of innovations would be needed including that at least part of the council be elected on an area or ward basis, rather than at-large.

In Vancouver three reform parties emerged in the 1960's: TEAM, The Electors' Action Movement, COPE, The Committee of Progressive Electors, and a civic arm of the New Democratic Party. To TEAM and COPE, elected members of Council were seen as representatives of the people who were elected to give leadership and make decisions. The buck would stop and would be seen to stop at the elected Council. Aldermen would amass as much evidence as possible on an issue, from the bureaucracy, from the community, from other levels of government perhaps, and on the basis of such inputs, no matter how incomplete, make policy decisions and be accountable for them. This was in response to criticism of the non-partisan tradition where consultation had stopped at the bureaucracy and businessmen.

This shift in emphasis of civic government did not satisfy those who believe that the community should be intricately and continually involved in the decision-making process. The local New Democrats advocated a form of participatory democracy, one which would see each alderman elected from a specific ward and accountable to a citizen advisory group in the ward. This reflects a movement which had its roots in the United States, where ghetto residents had been disenfranchised for decades, and in the writings of various socialist theorists. A system embracing many elements of the participatory model has been instituted with the establishment of Unicity in Winnipeg. There, an Act of Legislature established the formal structure for a continuing participatory process.

Thus, in reaction to a system of civic government which had become isolated from the changing views of a majority of its citizens,one in which elected officials were dependent on a professional bureaucracy and a cadre of experts and businessmen, making decisions on an assumed but

not clearly articulated policy base, a participatory model was enunciated by the New Democrats. Here the elected official is seen as directly accountable to the wishes of constituents, continuously interacting with them, and presenting their views in council debate. This goal has not been reached in Winnipeg in part because of defects in the legislation.[10] The advocates of a participatory model have had little electoral success in Vancouver.

Neither a corporate nor a participatory model is sufficiently adaptable to deal with changes in a rapidly growing and rapidly changing civic scene. The really profound issues regarding effective government are neglected in changes from corporate to participatory models. Policy-making must rest with a representative council, prepared to draw advice from both the professionals and the public, and then transform it into plans and policies. They must then stand or fall on those policies. The elected council must give active leadership, not only in pointing out directions that the majority might endorse, but also in devising financial programmes and intergovernmental strategies for achieving these goals. This of course is a restatement of the theory of representative democracy where decisions concerning the public good are made by men and women chosen by popular suffrage in periodic elections.

This idyll however is not easy to achieve. The technostructure of the civic corporation is reluctant to capitulate to the elected official, while the elected official frequently does not understand fully his role in government. As telling in its impact, the public exhibits apathy regarding these issues and is essentially unaware of the presence of lacklustre governance, unless it is sufficiently ineffectual to require the extreme solution--a change of government. Let us examine these relationships further.

First, it is no secret to those elected to office that they are considered by the civic management to be transients. The elected individual sits for a short term, usually two years, in a position that has little long-term implication for his own fiscal or personal development--a fact obvious to the civic bureaucrat but less obvious to the politician himself who has a grander opinion of his role in society. The civic bureaucrat on the other hand is a career administrator. This is his profession and his agenda includes personal career development as well as civic management, the vehicle for this personal development. This difference in goals is most sharply in focus with the most senior managers. They know who actually is in charge of civic governance and are prepared to explicitly make their case. One of us (W.G.H.) was told early as an elected councillor, by a senior manager, "You're only here as a two-year transient. This is my career for the long haul. Don't mess it up."

To be sure this happens at other levels of government. An executive assistant to an elected official in the Diefenbaker era has related to us the dilemma of his own administration: "We were had by the Mandarins; we were over the hill within two weeks of the election." The problem of bureaucratic bias exists at all levels of government. The civic corporation is no exception.

Second, regarding the role of an elected official, the subtleties of acting as a 'surrogate for many' in the democratic process escapes many

who are elected to office. This hindrance to good governance is compounded by the inability of many who are elected to reject personal projects and biases and in turn to act for community needs and declared objectives. Both of these shortcomings are also compromised by the demand for leadership placed upon the elected councillor. Often new thrusts in civic development are not perceived by the electorate as appropriate or acceptable, or by the councillor himself as being in his own interest or in the interest of his constituency. There is no simple answer to this dilemma short of electing saints to office. It is certain, however, that rules and regulations for election to civic office, and fiscal barriers to serving in office, need to be minimized so that all may be elected and serve should their personal presentation be acceptable to the electorate.

The electorate, as the raison d'être of the civic corporation, has ill perceived goals for its representatives and an even fuzzier perception of the diametrically positioned roles of the elected councillor or board member and career civic manager. This is especially true in the case of the subsidiary boards. How many separate, precisely, the role of the elected school board members and the school management? As long as minimum acceptable performance is maintained few know and fewer care. This apathy is based on a motivational problem. There is not much point in trying to become informed when the operation in question seems to be working well. Unfortunately such a lack of definition serves as an insubstantial basis for public elective decisions when possible mismanagement is suggested. The evaluation of performance of elected councillor and manager is thus extraordinarily difficult for the citizenry. Finally, apathy on the part of the citizenry is all too common. For example, for a plebiscite in October 1973 in which the electorate was polled on basic changes in the mechanism of government, a choice between at-large, partial, or full ward systems, only 21 per cent of Vancouver's voters bothered to turn out and cast ballots.

Such a complex social process has unresolvable problems. Nevertheless the success of the democratic process at the civic level and, by extension, at other levels of governance as well devolves upon those being governed. Ideally the citizenry would demand excellence of service of those who serve as elected officials. They would demand the right to make advisory input both individually and collectively to elected representatives. They would demand in turn open consultation between those elected, the citizens, and the civic managers.

To make such a triumvirate operational, the various community groups, both territorially-based and interest group-based must have access to knowledge and information. This is often resisted by the technocracy. Citizens must also have access to the decision-makers, a public access at that, to guarantee full accountability.

At the base of the proposal for an advisory and consultative model of government lies the work of Tyhurst, Williams and others.[11] They have shown that citizens or individuals who have no access to decision-makers and no control over the options or *faits accomplis* presented to them develop anxieties and the spectrum of symptoms identified as alienation; clearly access to decision-making input is essential to avoid this set of problems. However, it is essential that the consulter

does not indicate willingness to accept advice in its entirety, for then the individual consulted expects total compliance. The citizen must be shown that there are a series of legitimately conflicting alternates of which his is only one competing position.

An optimistic note upon which to conclude is the record that governments do change from time to time and that policies do shift, often radically. In a democratic system when the government gets out of phase with the electorate, or mismanages affairs, new men with new ideas do emerge, redefine goals and redirect managers. This is followed by a period of stability in which the citizenry retreats and assumes their leaders and public servants are carrying out the public interest. And all this without bloodshed!

NOTES

[1] John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967.

[2] Eric Trist, "Urban Canada: The Next Thirty Years," *PLAN* 10:2 (1970).

[3] Norbert MacDonald, "A Critical Growth Cycle for Vancouver: 1900-1914," *B.C. Studies* 14 (Spring 1973), pp. 26-42.

[4] Mike Royko, *Boss*. London: Paladin, 1971.

[5] Peter A. Lupsha, "The Politics of Urban Change," *Current History*. (Dec. 1968).

[6] Stephen Clarkson, "Private Politics, Citizen Politics and the Public" in Alan Powell (ed.) *The City: Attacking Modern Myths*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972, p. 227.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] James Lorimer, *A Citizen's Guide to City Politics*. Toronto: James Lewis and Samuel, 1971.

[9] George Peloquin comments in the Page 6 Council review in the *Vancouver Sun*, "The experienced members of Council have not formed any blocks . . . they have not a united front." April 1, 1967.

[10] James Lorimer, "Protecting city government from its citizens: an analysis of proposals for urban reorganization in Greater Winnipeg." (Unpublished manuscript, Feb. 1971). The Winnipeg system has its boosters and detractors. One commentator, Earle Levin, writes, "It's interesting that so much concern should have been focused upon this relatively marginal issue [citizen participation]--particularly interesting in the light of the fact that the historic problem in the Winnipeg situation was political fragmentation and parochialism." (Unpublished manuscript, June 1973).

[11] For a clinical analysis, see J. Tyhurst, "The role of transition states--including disasters--in mental illness," in D. Wooldridge (ed.) *Symposium on Preventative and Social Psychiatry*. Washington, D.C.: Walter Reed Medical Centre, 1957; for a political analysis, see O. Williams, *Metropolitan Analysis: A Social Access Approach*. New York: The Free Press, 1971.