

Administration

The Challenge to DEMOCRACY

VII. Improving Public Administration



AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION—AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE, Cooperating
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The Challenge to Democracy

The democratic way of life is being challenged today all over the world. Its superiority is widely denied, and its security is seriously imperiled. The American people consequently are interested in understanding the dangers that confront them and in guarding against them. Democracy needs strengthening both internally and externally, and farm people can and must and will help do the job, both because of their numbers and because they know better than many other groups what it means.

It is the purpose of this series of bulletins to show what produced the present situation and suggest some of the things that need to be done about it—not by farm people alone but by rural America and urban America working together. Eight bulletins are included in the series:

1. John A. Vieg—Democracy on Trial.
2. John H. Powell—The Citizen and the Power to Govern.
3. L. B. Schmidt—The Family Farm in the Machine Age.
4. V. Alton Moody—The Test of Citizenship.
5. C. H. Matterson—Democracy and Nationalism.
6. Earle D. Ross—Toward a New Rural Statesmanship.
7. H. C. Cook—Improving Public Administration.
8. Charles H. Norby—The Machine and Democracy.

The Challenge to Democracy

VII. Improving Public Administration¹

By H. C. Cook²

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION—A DEFINITION

At the time our political institutions were taking shape attention was given chiefly to the purely political problems of securing a form of government under which the wishes of the people regarding the conduct of public affairs would find adequate expression; to reducing to a minimum the danger of the assumption by any officer or branch of government of undue powers; and to protection of the individual in the possession and exercise of what were regarded as his inherent and natural rights and liberties. The basic idea was that the sphere of governmental action should be kept as limited as possible. Wholly different are conditions today. The performance of the so-called essential functions of government, though much more expansive than then, now constitutes but a relatively small part of its business. The realm of government is now held to include all forms of activities which contribute to the welfare of the people. In quest of this end there is scarcely a field of activity into which government has not entered.

The welfare and service functions have come largely to take the place of the maintenance of the law-and-order concept of government. This places large emphasis upon the doing of things. In fact, we may recognize two general realms of action: first, that of politics, which consists of the whole range of activities and processes through which ideas crystallize into policies and policies are translated into law; and second, that which comes after politics in point of time though now not at all in point of its significance, namely, administration. In pub-

¹ This bulletin is the seventh in a series entitled "The Challenge to Democracy" written by members of the Department of History and Government at Iowa State College.

² Associate professor of government.

lic administration is included the whole set of national, state and local agencies whose duty it is to put the laws in actual effect and perform the business operations which government as a going concern must do. Even a half-century ago Woodrow Wilson remarked that "administration is the most obvious part of government; it is government in action."

GETTING THINGS DONE

In America government rests on the truth that the general interest is superior to and has priority over any special or private interest and that final decision in matters of common interest should be made by free choice of the people in their representative capacity. Our goal is the constant raising of the level of happiness and dignity of human life. We are too practical a people, however, to be satisfied with merely looking forward to glittering goals, or with mere plans, talk and pledges. By democracy we mean *getting things done* that people want done in the general interest. To what purpose, one may ask, are democratic political institutions without results? Without results democracy means nothing and ceases to be alive in the minds and hearts of men. With us the people's will is not merely an empty phrase; it denotes a grave and stern determination in the major affairs of our nation—a determination which it is proposed should be made good as promptly and firmly as may be necessary and appropriate—a determination which does not intend to be baffled in its basic plans and purposes by any cluttering or confusion in the machinery for doing what it has been deliberately decided to do. To this principle all will agree! Then, one may ask, do our national, state and local governments have well-ordered systems of administration where responsibility is clearly located and from whence direct orders may flow to accomplish what is the expressed desire of the people? To what avail is an expression of opinion at the ballot box which in turn is translated and declared as policy by the legislature, if the executive is left powerless in the enforcement of that policy? What state administrative officials respond to the direction of policies made known at elections? The effectiveness of government rests upon two factors: the consent of the governed and good management. Management in a democracy is a factor of peculiar

significance. In the organization or reorganization of administration, national, state or local, there "is but one grand purpose, namely, to make democracy work." It is for this purpose that our governments, national, state or local, need thoroughly modern tools of management. To secure proper arrangement and functioning of these tools of management in a well-ordered system, constitutes technical problems of public administration.

THE PROPER AREA FOR ADMINISTRATION

A significant feature of administration is the area or region of administration. Particularly is it important for the unit of government clothed with the task of administration to be in accord with the problem or problems to be administered. The early New England town could well be and was very much the center of civic life. Indeed there seems to have been a restless anxiety in these little democracies to bring every possible subject within the purview of the town meeting. There civic life was approximately coincidental with the economic and cultural life of the community. The town meeting could well decide upon the political questions of the day; for complicated streams of commerce and trade, the size and nature of business and industrial institutions and the methods of transportation and communication had not yet challenged the competency of the community to govern. The community area which was to perform the daily routine problems was then quite adequate in power and competent in authority to determine the policies to be carried out and at the same time appropriate as a region for their administration.

All this has since undergone change. The transformation in occupations, the trend toward centralization in the industrial and business world and the concentration of economic power have necessitated a transfer of policy determination concerning many problems from local units to larger units of government. In other words, realization of the principle of the adequacy of power to govern has necessitated the transplanting of responsibility for handling a number of functions. This apparent abandonment of democratic processes by pulling away from local self-government may, paradoxically enough, only serve to strengthen democracy. For the people of the

locality will be a part of the larger community which is more adequate to determine policies and to govern the problem at hand; and as such, they may have some assurance, yes, and some part, in the actual determination of the policy concerning the problem. To refuse to make the transfer is simply to force the local authority to recognize its inadequacy to govern either through inability to determine upon a policy or through incompetence to carry out the policy once it is decided upon, and therefore to be the very cause of the defeat of democracy. Furthermore, simply to transfer the determination of policy from a local to a central authority does not necessitate the taking away of all consideration by the local community. Centralization in general policy determination may give the very assurance of democratic control, and then decentralization in carrying out the problem may make more realistically for democracy. What could better serve to illustrate this than the agricultural problem? The local community found itself unable to cope with the problem in agriculture, but the American farmers acting together have established policies as an action of national democracy. Then in turn large features of the general policy are returned to the community for its administration. Again, the establishment of a national policy on rural electrification has made it possible for a community to enjoy benefits which the community alone would have found difficult if not impossible to obtain. In turn the Rural Electrification unit offers excellent opportunity for local administration. In these and other instances we have centralization in power but with democratic control and decentralization in administration.

May not then the real concern today be that we assure ourselves of the proper selection of the areas or districts which will make for local discretion and flexibility, in the conduct of policies selected? Law is not administered in a vacuum, but in an environment composed of all those who have an interest in the application or non-enforcement of the statute. To secure the more nearly correct region, effort should be made first of all to avoid fixity of boundary lines for administrative areas. Second, proper consideration should be given to economic, cultural and social interests of the people in the area. And, third, in arranging the boundaries of the administrative area, the

convenience both to those administering the work and to the public should be considered.

THOSE WHO WORK FOR THE GOVERNMENT

America's greatest business is that of its government. Our governments, national, state and local, constitute a cooperative enterprise through which we endeavor to maintain freedom; sustain law and order and protect property; protect the individual against exploitation; cooperate with private individuals and private enterprise for the advancement of economic welfare; guard, promote and conserve public morality, education and welfare and our human and natural resources. During emergencies certain of these responsibilities and services are greatly expanded varying with the nature of the emergency, whether that of a natural disaster, economic collapse or national defense. Such in general, are the responsibilities and work of our national, state and local governments today. Government is a cooperative enterprise exceedingly complicated and difficult and supremely important to every one of us whatever we do and wherever we live.

In the more than 175,000 governmental units—national, state and local—in the United States approximately 4½ million persons serve as officers or employees of government with wage and salary expenditures comprising one-sixth of the nation's non-agricultural wage payments. The success or failure of our government, and the kind of service which it renders, will in the last analysis rest upon the capacity and character of these men and women who constitute its personnel. In the modern nation the real government effectuates itself neither in legislative debates nor in executive proclamations, but in the exercise of administration in daily life, necessarily and unavoidably in the hands of the civil service. For the trades and professions people expect to train themselves for service. But what attitude prevails relative to training for employment with government? For far too long a time, and even today, the attitude prevails that was expressed by the sage, Socrates: "No man undertakes a trade he has not learned, even the meanest; yet every one thinks himself sufficiently qualified for the hardest of all trades—that of government."

Until quite recently little or no attention was given to any

other feature of the personnel problem than that of recruitment to service. Other features of the problem such as classification, pay, morale, promotion, demotion, retirement and pension are now also regarded and are dealt with as essential to good public service. Though the need has been real the way has not been easy or the progress rapid. Some of the retarding forces are so involved in American traditions of democracy that to launch a program of public education to counterbalance them has been anything but simple. Fallacies in our thinking on government service have been very damaging. They need to be corrected. For instance we may recognize the force and see the need for correction in the following presented in substance by the Commission of Inquiry on Public Service Personnel: (1) "The false notion that to the victor belong the spoils." (2) President Jackson's view that the duties of governmental employees are "so plain and simple that men of intelligence can readily qualify themselves for their performance." (3) That for reasons of charity persons should be placed on the public payroll. (4) The erroneous belief that "patronage is the price of democracy," and that parties which are essential in democracy cannot exist without spoils. (5) That tenure alone is the cure of spoils. (6) The shallow thought that nothing much need be done at the top positions. (7) The idea that "A thoroughly first-rate man in public service is corrosive. He eats holes in our liberties. The better he is and the longer he stays, the greater is the danger." (8) Vilification of public employees as "tax-eaters and payrollers." (9) The notion that "The public service is always less capable and less efficient than private enterprise." Such bogey-phobia as we have in this regard deserves our earnest attention.

Employees in government are not to be thought of simply as "government clerks" engaged in dull routine. They are scientists, technicians, economists, professional people, executives engaged in research problems and actual operation of industrial establishments. They build ships, submarines and airplanes. They manufacture power, torpedoes, artillery and small arms. They construct roads and buildings, sanitary drainage and power projects. They make maps, predict weather, treat disease, determine standards and chemical con-

tent of foods and drugs, inspect meat, analyze soil, aid in navigation and transportation, instruct the youth, represent our interests abroad and discharge an endless number of technical tasks. Certainly Jackson's view that the duties of all public offices were or could be brought within the capacity of any person of intelligence can hardly be held as valid today. Does not the general welfare in our democracy demand that public servants shall perform as efficiently and effectively as possible those services needed and desired to bring about that welfare?

SPENDING THE PEOPLE'S MONEY

The public purse furnishes the very life blood of government operation. It is essential that the arteries through which this carrier of nourishment to governmental agencies flows shall in no way suffer loss or that this life blood shall be diluted or go to useless or selfish purposes. The agencies of administration, clothed as they are with the task of carrying out the problems which it had been decided that government should do, are dependent upon this sustenance for their very operation.

PLANNING AND CONTROL OF FINANCES

When our forefathers provided that no money was to be paid out by the public treasury, unless the expenditure had been authorized by law, they conferred upon the legislature a very important responsibility and a difficult task. But this, like most other tasks, was much simpler 300 or 100 years ago than now. Then the executive or legislator could well see the connection between the money appropriated and the performance of the service for which the appropriation was made. This is no longer true. Governments are not only spending much larger sums, but the public monies go to finance a multiplicity and a complexity of services. Not only the legislator, but the executive as well, is overwhelmed with his responsibility for using and supervising the use of the people's money. The citizen and taxpayer can hardly expect to be less confused in these matters. From the viewpoint of his interests, whose money is being used and for whom service is being performed, it is essential that his servants in government, i.e., the executive and the legislator shall, by the establishment of

modern financial agencies and practices, be the better enabled to serve him.

For both of these representatives there is first of all the essential practice that all functions and services for which public money is spent shall openly compete with every other function, and decision should be made in accordance with the relative merits of the several functions in public welfare. The basic principle of democratic government is that there shall be no favored interests. This principle includes the feature that, generally speaking, all public monies should go into the common treasury and there should lose their identity of source, and, all expenditures of necessity must then be drawn from the treasury. The executive, whether national, state or local, may be looked upon as being the responsible head of the community's greatest business—the business of government. As such he is, no doubt, in the best position to know what it costs to operate the services of government, and, too, he is in the best position to introduce economy and efficiency into their administration. He, and he only, can function effectively as the nerve center for the reception of collected information, the processing of departmental askings, the coordination of policies and the organization and management of surveys, from which he may form judgments of the relation of the various programs of the government to the public interest and transmit them to the legislative body for criticism and enactment into law.

That he might do this competently and with dispatch he must have a modern budgetary system. The purpose of such a system is to provide in governmental finance for planning information and control. Through the budget system the service agencies spending public money are required to translate their work programs in advance into fiscal terms so that each activity may be brought into balance and proportion with all other activities and with all revenues and resources of the government. Sound fiscal management is a prime requisite of good administration. The responsibility of the executive for the preparation of a financial program in the form of a budget for submission to the legislative authority and for the direction and control of expenditures under the appropriation acts must be carried on faithfully, effectively and under clear-cut authority.

Three decades ago neither our national nor a single state government had a budget system. Comprehensive planning of expenditures and revenues was generally unknown. There was no way of telling whether a fiscal year would end with a surplus or a deficit, nor was there any way of doing much about the matter should it have been known. Fortunately, recent years have witnessed considerable change in fiscal procedure. Every state and the national government now has a budget system or something that goes by that name. Some of these are models of careful planning, but many of them need much systemization and correction in procedure, and many a one needs to be given budgetary powers over all agencies in its government.

FURNISHING SUPPLIES FOR GOVERNMENT

Like financial control and the management of personnel in government, the problem of purchasing and providing supplies and materials is not an end in itself but is simply an incidental in the securing of governmental services. Similarly also is it axiomatic that in handling this task the real interest of the public is fulfilled when the function is performed with dispatch and in a businesslike way.

The relative significance of this problem may be realized when it is noted that varying from one-fourth to one-half of all governmental costs are incurred through the purchase of supplies, equipment, materials, land and buildings, and the contracting for structures and permanent improvements, and the servicing of public buildings with heat, light, power and repairs.

That every stenographer, clerk and official shall purchase the supplies and materials for his use, on a retail market and without adequate attention to the quality or service of the commodity, cannot be cited as a good instance of democracy! There may be but one general solution to this problem: There should be established by each governmental unit of proper need and size a central purchasing and supply office, properly organized and staffed with specialists technically qualified to handle this very important problem.

ADMINISTRATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

Democracy, if it knows its business, has no reason to fear bureaucracy. In this principle it is implied that both the public and the public servant shall understand each other. Though we have in the past been largely preoccupied with manipulating the elective and legislative aspects of government and have sought to gain responsibility through the recall, the initiative and the referendum, the election of representatives and the framing of laws by them are but the initial phases in the process of popular control. It is in the carrying out of the laws that government assumes direct and concrete meaning for the citizen. There can be no responsibility of the mass of the officials to the mass of the people. The impact of service demands upon modern government implores us to establish a chief of administration responsible for directing and supervising the carrying out of all policies that have been decided upon. The very first and obvious principle relating to administration in a democracy is that the administration shall be responsive to the interests of the public. The chief executive who is *chief of administration* is perhaps the only figure who can be thought of and visualized as holding a general mandate in this respect from the people. The quest for responsibility does not preclude, but rather includes, a responsible administration. If the administration is left in the hands of a bureaucracy that is not accountable for its actions, democratic institutions become a farce. The servant who becomes calloused to the people's interests is no longer a public servant.

In this matter we need seek no new principles. We already have them established in the city and county managerships, in the governorship in a few of our states and in the presidency, and clear gains have been made with the "new management." Particularly on three counts may our administration be made more democratic. First of all the *chief of administration*, as we may call him, must have the assistance of such agencies as will enable him to coordinate all agencies and resources and translate them into responsible action. He must have the equipment of such managerial agencies as those dealing with the budget, efficiency research, personnel management and planning to strengthen his position as manager. These agencies must apprise him of developing public opinion as well as assist

him in obtaining promptly such information as will guide him in making responsible decisions. On the other hand, the departments and agencies administering functions under his supervision must be so coordinated and consolidated as *not to be beyond the span of control* of the responsible chief. This should and can be within the imagination of the public. The chief of administration must be no mere bearer of water and hewer of wood. In narrowing the concentration of administration to come within this span of control of the chief of administration there must be gained for him enough time from the routine of his office to enable him, figuratively speaking, to take excursions into Utopia that he may enlarge his powers of imagination and see more clearly into the broad implications and future of his work.

REPORTING TO THE PEOPLE

In the second place, there is in democracy the very important function of keeping the public informed of the activities in the administration of its government. No citizen can participate intelligently and actively in government without a knowledge of the basic facts concerning its operations. Governmental reporting includes two general types of reporting: (1) those reports made by a public official to his superior, and (2) those made by officials for public information. The first of these is to better enable the supervising official to direct and supervise the work of the various branches of his department. Many of these reports are of interest to the citizen as well; the latter, however, are of most concern to the public and should be prepared with public interest and understanding in mind. The chief purposes of these are to present a record of the accomplishments of the administration; to analyze the current problems; to describe how the government is related to the lives of the people; to outline the plans for future problems; to provide information upon which the public may judge the action of the officials; and, to supply news material through the press and the radio. Many department heads, mayors, governors and our President in "weekly reports," "Saturday reports" or "fireside chats" are doing much to provide a basis for mutual understanding between citizens and administrator and to introduce democracy into administration.

PLANNING

A natural twin to budgeting is that of planning. Long-range plans are essential to budget making. The budget will take care of the more immediate problems in terms of finances, but there are other implications such as reference to social purpose, economic functioning, conservation of resources, education, health and human resources and the human hopes and fears of the people that do not readily appear on a balance sheet. Our executive and legislative bodies charged with making decisions should have proposed policies examined and interpreted in those other terms as well as in those of the budget and the balance sheet. In no society do we find more planning in all phases of life than in a democratic society. Planning is done in the home; on the farm; in the business, large and small; and in government, local, state and national. In recent years we have become more planning conscious, and we have realized the inherent relationship of governmental planning and the democratic process. We are attempting to make up for some of the lag in planning by government. This union of technical knowledge with popular decision has always been recognized as essential to the survival of democracy, but only recently have we realized that the putting together of features of a problem into a plan is more difficult than analysis of the problems and that we need planning and a general sense of direction.

In response to this need we now have established formal planning agencies in the national government, in 42 states, in more than 400 counties and more than 1,100 cities. There are as well a score of interstate and a number of regional planning agencies all doing governmental planning. Also there are numerous instances of planning in special fields. It is especially in the local, county or city government that the citizen may find some immediate realization of the democratic process by his part in planning. This may return him real dividends in education facilities, water supply, land use, power resources, housing conditions, health, governmental services in general.

THE PROSPECTS

To recount the gains made in the number of county or city managerships, the number of governmental purchasing or

budgeting systems or planning agencies, the adoption of the principles of career service, the extensions upward and outward and downward of civil service principles, the realignment of administrative services with appropriate areas, the general reorganization of state or local administrations or even such more specific gains as those whereby the federal classified service has risen in 25 years from 61 to 72 percent of the total service—all this would still not adequately present the picture of progress in public administration.

In no other like period in American history have we had such a concerted drive in either national or local governments to improve the effectiveness of the organs and processes of public administration as that of the last 25 years. This drive has come from the various governments themselves, from the many professional and civic leagues and associations and from interested citizens and taxpayers. And the many institutes and schools of public administration for the training of leadership in administration which have been established in this period give evidence of the public recognition of the professional character of this field of work and bear indication of brighter prospects in the future.

In private business, profit and loss statements serve as simple guides of satisfaction to the stockholders, but in public business, that is to say government, benefits come in the form not of profits, but of services, which are far less easily interpreted as measurements of satisfaction or specific gains. While we must consider the real gains in government to be those in services, we must also continually be alert to progress in the working tools of administration such as budgeting, administrative management and the many other problems. It is all too likely that we may be thinking of progress in public administration in the crude terms of whether more or less money is being spent than was formerly. Perhaps far too often snap judgment is used to appraise the success or failure of public administration, whether local or national. If one feels he has been treated shabbily at the courthouse or feels that his tax bill is too high, he is likely to express general condemnation. If, on the other hand, the clerk with whom he deals is courteous, or the assessor places a low valuation on his property, or the board of supervisors give extraordinary attention to the high-

way passing his property, he concludes, equally without justification, that the local administration is a very good one.

Aside from the technical measurement of efficiency and progress in public administration, which must be left to the experts themselves, there are several general yardsticks which may be used by the intelligent layman. Among them are these: The extent of public satisfaction, the tax rate, per capita costs, the kinds and amount of public service and an informed citizenry. Criticism by the citizen for the sake of measurement of progress is desirable; indeed, it is essential, but it too must be objective.

Any recital of the gains made or any presentation of the preparation for professionalizing public service may not be half so indicative of what we may expect in the future in the way of a better public administration as that which may be represented in the hopes, fears and aspirations of our citizens. Finally, in seeking the realization of true democracy much depends on the wisdom and virtue of the electorate. May not the citizen see a lesson in the admonition of William Penn given in 1682 in his *Frame of Government for Pennsylvania*. Thus he admonishes Pennsylvania: "Governments, like clocks, go from the motion men give them; and as governments are made and moved by men, so by them they are ruined too. Wherefore governments rather depend upon men, than men upon governments. Let men be good, and the government cannot be bad: if it be ill, they will cure it. But, if men be bad, let the government be never so good, they will endeavor to warp and spoil it to their turn."

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