

Long range plans envisage the publication in approximately five years of a series of four volumes. These volumes will cover the activities of the Canadian troops in Canada, England, Italy and North-West Europe; one volume is to

be devoted to each of these regions. When completed this work will, it is hoped, form a permanent and inspiring monument to the Canadian officers and men who fought in three continents the battle for human freedom.

Rural Local Government in The United States

By JOSEPH M. RAY

EDITOR'S NOTE: The problems of local government in rural areas of the United States are very similar to those existing in Canada as may be seen from Mr. Ray's article. The author, recently appointed head of the Political Science Department of the University of Maryland, has for a number of years been Assistant Director of the Alabama Bureau of Public Administration. While there he gave special attention to municipal government.

FOR many years the county has been considered the "dark continent" of American politics. Any well-formed person in those parts of the country where the county is the basic unit of local government knows that the level of performance of county government in general falls considerably below that of states, and cities. Why is this? Why cannot the county governments of a given state compare favorably with the state government? Why does the average city turn in a higher order of performance than does the county which includes it?

Decline in Relative Importance

There are many reasons for the sad plight of county government. Perhaps it should be noted at the outset that county government suffers by comparison because of the decline in its relative importance. It has remained largely unchanged while other governments have expanded in scope and function. Expansion of functions in such fields of activity as health, welfare, and highways has been implemented usually on the county level, but the county's part in such programs has been largely determined for it by statutory and administrative action on the federal state levels. The county has thus come down in its pristine form, with few adaptations to the exigencies of modern democratic government.

Archaic Governmental Structure and Machinery

One of the most serious burdens on county government has been its form of government. Almost invariably the county in America is governed by a board or commission. This board of several members is entrusted with the conduct of county government. Responsibility is thus diffused and impaired.

The chairman of the board may be elected as chairman, he may be chosen by the board, or the county judge may act in that capacity. The chairman, however selected, rarely is vested officially with superior powers. He is authorized merely as *primus inter pares*. Democratic responsibility works well only with responsible leadership. Leadership in county government is frequently non-existent. When it does exist, it is usually obscured by the governmental mechanism and is thus not responsible. And in too many instances it takes the form of boss or strong-man rule, with little or no popular responsibility.

The board usually performs all three of the basic governmental powers: it legislates, adjudicates, and administers. Its judicial functions are vestigial and minor, but, where the county judge acts as a member of the board, there is a clear overlapping of personnel exercising judicial and other powers. County boards do customarily exercise both legislative and administrative powers. The separation of powers is thus entirely ignored. Indeed, it might well be ignored if, in doing so, the basic objection to it were remedied by establishing clearer lines of responsibility to the people. As the

situation is now, however, county government is not truly responsible. Few people know what their county government is doing. Only rarely is a private person who is not seeking public office well informed on county affairs. Campaigns for county office are concerned almost exclusively with personalities rather than issues. The candidate who is more attractive personally or who has a wider acquaintance or more relatives usually wins. This situation is largely attributable to the archaic and confused governmental structure. In rare instances this problem has been resolved by the establishment of a county manager who answers to the board.

Limited Autonomy

Limitations on the county's sphere of competence also impair popular responsibility. If the county has no political latitude, then elections issues are absent. In earlier years, counties were severely restricted by statutory and constitutional requirements. Lately, with little relaxation of legal limitations, emphasis has been upon administrative controls. Health, welfare, highways, finance, and other functions are performed under state administrative supervision. In both situations, the county's freedom of action is definitely curtailed.

The county's vigor as a governmental unit is impaired most seriously by its lack of financial autonomy. The most common sources of county funds are the property tax and grants-in-aid. County property tax rates are usually fixed by constitution or statute. In many cases the county tax proceeds are earmarked for specific purposes. A large part of county funds come from grants-in-aid. Practically all grants are earmarked for designated uses. They are usually accompanied by elaborate statutory or administrative regulations. Thus neither is the case of property tax proceeds nor in that of grants-in-aid is political latitude left to the county itself. The county is rarely authorized to raise funds outside these two sources. And when such authorization is made,

it is strictly circumscribed, both to the rates to be levied and as to the purposes to which the proceeds may be devoted.

No government can achieve full development unless it has considerable autonomy in raising revenue. And, once funds are raised, the government cannot operate as a democratic entity unless it has latitude in disposing of its funds. The American county is thus hamstrung in both directions. It operates in the no-man's-land between policy and administration, wherein there is little of sufficient interest to engender democratic interest and participation.

Local legislation has likewise tended to sap the vigor of county government. In many states the legislative houses defer to the legislative delegation from the county in matters of local legislation. Constitutional restrictions on local legislation are ignored or evaded. The county is thus placed in a straitjacket that continually becomes tighter. Its legislators, frequently motivated by caprice or by desire to settle political scores, interfere unduly in its structure and affairs. Its officials find themselves powerless to remedy evils or to prevent harmful legislation, and they disclaim responsibility. The legislator can hide behind the legislature as a whole. He can frequently win re-election on the basis of statewide issues and in spite of a discreditable record in local matters. The process tends to withdraw local issues from the local democracy and obscure them in legislative legerdemain. And, in the process, the county loses its only approach to issues which might prove interesting and challenging to its voters.

Organized Officials

In many states, county officials are organized in associations, such as a state association of county commissioners or a state association of tax assessors. These groups seek to further their professional interests before the legislature. More often than not, this special pleading results in even greater departures from better organization and practice. Whether organized or not, the body of county

officers in any state is a political group to be reckoned with. This is especially true in those all too numerous instances where there has been no reapportionment of legislative seats in recent decades and where rural minorities remain in control. The same general result accrues in those states where legislative representation from large cities is limited by the state constitution. Disproportionate representation for rural areas provides greater weight for organized county officials. Slight headway has been made in recent years in the correction of this evil, and the prospect is not encouraging. In its relation to reform in county government, this means a deeper entrenchment in the status quo.

Need for Consolidation

Most of the counties in America were established in the day when travel was difficult. Counties were created, at least in most instances, with a view to distances from the county seat. With better roads and freer travel, many counties now existing are unnecessary. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suggest that one-fourth of the present number of counties would be adequate. This could be effected by consolidation of present counties. The need for consolidation in some states is acute. Some counties have become depopulated or have lagged in growth so far behind other counties that they can ill afford to meet the growing demands upon them. Other counties have been swallowed up by metropolitan districts in such fashion as to destroy their usefulness as counties. Provincialism, local pride, and entrenched county officials have effectively prevented consolidation of counties. Of the three, organizations of county officials constitute the most serious obstacle. There is no appreciable movement in America in the direction of county consolidation.

Special Districts

The county's ineffectiveness and rigidity have led legislatures in most states to create special districts in ever greater numbers. There are park, police, water improvement, soil conservation, drainage,

housing, school, mosquito abatement, and other such districts. In some states they are numbered in the thousands. They are usually limited to a single function, but they do possess the character of autonomous governments, with power to raise and dispense funds.

In almost every instance, given good and responsible county government with some measure of county consolidation, the affairs entrusted to special districts could better be performed by the county. The county's failure as a government thus offers in and of itself a still further obstacle to the proper implementation of local governmental affairs. Certain it is that so long as county government follows along its present path, the device of the special district will continue in use.

Incompetent Personnel

The people who do the county's work are seldom as competent as those found elsewhere. Too many administrative officials, such as tax assessors, tax collectors, attorneys, sheriffs, constables, jailers, cotton-weighers in the south, and hides-inspectors in the west, are elected by popular vote. The merit system for county service is unknown to most jurisdictions. The spoils system is usually the order of the day, wherein the measure of availability is political importance rather than special competence. The three-finger typist is not a rarity. The untrained bookkeeper devises his system of records and hands it down to successors who have known no other instruction. The court-house gang, political hangers-on, insinuate themselves into positions which they are ill-equipped to fill and which interest them only as a source of income. Capable young people, both with political and administrative bents, use the county only as a stepping-stone to the state or national level.

Expanding Function on Higher Levels

A not inconsiderable element in the decline in the quality of the county's performance is the splintering effect which expanding federal and state programs have upon the county. Whatever

the degree of administrative integration on the national level, the functional translation of program to the state and thence to the local levels has a markedly disintegrating effect. The county faces a maze of federal and state agencies, each with its own complex set of procedures and regulations. The county has no choice but to conform in each instance as best it may. In some situations, counties strive to adopt higher-level programs to the local scene as they see it. In most cases, however, they resign all discretion to the super-imposed bureaucracy and do as they are told. Wherever the benefits to the locality from federal and state programs can be derived without county participation, the county readily withdraws from the field.

This comment is not directed as a criticism of upper-level bureaucracies. Rather it seeks to evaluate the effect of the impact of these bureaucracies upon the counties. That effect can best be characterized as disintegration, frustration, and frequently bewilderment.

The County's Place in the Governmental Pattern

The problem posed by the American county offers but another illustration of the characteristic American effort to dispose of matters of government geographically. The federal system has accustomed the citizenry to consider government too largely in terms of areas

of competence. The existence of the nation, the state, the county, and the city, all with constitutionally delimited spheres of authority, leads the citizen to an unnecessary emphasis on jurisdiction as such. In the American mind, the established area is justifiable *per se* and without regard to its ability to meet emerging problems. The complexity of modern society demands that emphasis be placed upon problems and their solutions rather than upon areas and boundary lines.

An examination of the governmental processes carried on in a given community reveals activities of all governmental levels, with intricate interrelationships and extensive overlapping. The county government, operating within this framework, should bear a great share of the governmental burden. It cannot do so without realistic and thoroughgoing revision of its structure and processes, a great improvement in the quality of the people who do its work, and a lessening of the restrictions of its political autonomy. If these changes do not come, and they are not in the immediate offing, then the county's effectiveness will not increase, and its relative importance in the pattern of government in the community will continue to decline. To those who hold to the view that the local democracy is the keystone of the political arch, this prospect is indeed not encouraging.