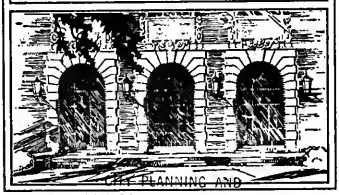

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RICHARD S. CHILDS: His Contribution to American Local and State Government in the 20th Century

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RICHARD S. CHILDS: HIS CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN LOCAL AND STATE GOVERNMENT IN THE 20TH CENTURY

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF REFERENCE SOURCES

By

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For assistance in the compilation of this bibliography I am especially indebted to John Porter East, professor of political science at East Carolina University, and to Richard J. Stillman II, author of The Rise of the City Manager: A Public Professional in Local Government. In this book Stillman objectively traces the growth of the municipal management profession in the context of American history and political thought and evaluates Richard Childs' contribution to this profession.

My profound gratitude is extended to the subject of the bibliography - a remarkable human being whose inexhaustible vitality and contagious enthusiasm for the council-manager plan and short ballot have truly been a source of inspiration during my research on this project.

Two women deserve special commendation for their tangible aid in making this bibliography a reality. First, my wife Barbara, who willingly took time from household duties to prepare numerous slips for the typist. Secondly, Irene Manning, who gladly volunteered her typing skill to prepare the manuscript for submission to the Council of Planning Librarians.

PREFACE

This bibliography contains more than 100 selected citations to books and articles by Richard Spencer Childs as well as monographs and articles relating to Childs and his contributions to American municipal, county, and state government.

Those references herein listed are not meant to be definitive; rather, they are intended to represent the principal ideas to which Mr. Childs has devoted his boundless energy during his long and extraordinarily constructive life and the practical application of those ideas in city halls, county courthouses, and state capitals across the nation.

By far the most frequently cited titles are the National Municipal Review, the official organ of the National Municipal League from 1912, when the journal was founded by Childs and several associates, to 1959, and its successor the National Civic Review.* Childs has been an active member of the Editorial Board of both journals for several decades.

The bibliography is divided into two sections. The first section contains a list of pamphlets, books, and periodical articles written by Childs during the period 1909-76; the second section is a listing of references about Childs and the concepts of government he has espoused during the past seven decades. My hope is that the bibliography will be of value to students of 20th century state and local government in the United States and will stimulate further research on the man and the movements he has championed.

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*Beginning with the January, 1959 issue, the National Municipal Review changed its title to National Civic Review.

RICHARD S. CHILDS: HIS SIGNIFICANCE

The intimate association of a man with a successful reform movement is not an unusual phenomenon in the annals of American government; however, the identification of one man with two successful reform movements is a notable achievement by any standard of measurement.

Such an achievement can be incontrovertibly claimed by Richard S. Childs, a nonagenarian who is still actively crusading for reforms in state and local government.

The two movements with which his name is inextricably linked are (1) the short ballot, and (2) the council-manager plan of government. However, his efforts have been directed toward several other reforms during his long and productive life. These include replacement of an elected county coroner with an appointed professional medical examiner, non-partisan elections at the city and county level, and a unicameral (single-house) state legislature. As one observer has aptly noted, "To a considerable extent, especially at the local and state levels, Childs has made modern public administration possible."[1]

Born in Manchester, Connecticut in 1882, Childs grew up in a prosperous New York City business family and embarked upon an advertising career during the administration of President Theodore Roosevelt. Subsequently he held high-level executive positions with the Bon Ami Company and Lederle Laboratories. When he retired from the business world in 1945, he converted his avocation of municipal reform into a vocation by accepting the chairmanship of the Executive Committee, National Municipal League, a position he held for 30 years in his words, "at a salary of nothing and well worth it."

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[1] Public Administration Review (editorial), Vol. 22, September 1962, p. 172.

His interest in good government, which Childs admits has been "the controlling factor in my life" since his 21st birthday, prompted him to promote the short ballot, an antidote to the long ballot which he describes as "the curse of the system of free elections" because it inevitably leads to blind voting. His first article enumerating the merits of the short ballot appeared in the periodical Outlook in 1909.

Believing that only those offices sufficiently important to attract and deserve public examination should be elective at any level of government, Childs was instrumental in founding the National Short Ballot Organization in 1909 and persuaded the late Woodrow Wilson, then president of Princeton University, to serve as the organization's president.

In his role as secretary and treasurer of the NSBO, Childs was the guiding hand in the publication of The Short Ballot Bulletin as well as leaflets and press releases which reported the successes of the short ballot movement. During the second decade of the 20th century, many local and state officials adopted the short ballot principle, which was enunciated in the platforms of the Progressive Party and Republican Party of New York State. When the NSBO merged with the National Municipal League in 1920, Childs shifted his energies to the League, a non-partisan citizens organization for better government established in 1894.

Childs' major contribution to municipal reform, one for which he has campaigned diligently during the past 65 years, is the council-manager plan. The essence of this plan, which has been adopted by more than 2,500 towns and cities since its inauguration in Sumter, South Carolina in 1912, is appointment by an elected council of a chief administrative officer called the city manager, who serves at the pleasure of the council and is responsible for overall management of municipal affairs. A key concept of the plan, in Childs' opinion, is that the manager should administer, not govern.

In his book The First 50 Years of the Council-Manager Plan of Municipal Government (New York, 1965), Childs cites three principal merits of the plan:

(1) Better city councils - It widens the field of council-manic candidates by permitting persons of modest incomes to serve without extended absences from their jobs and individuals of large private interests to serve without sacrifice of valuable time.

(2) Better administrations - It opens the choice of chief administrative officers to professional managers of demonstrated competence hired from anywhere in the nation.

(3) Better political terrain - Through non-partisan election of council members, the plan excludes self-serving, corruptible political machines from participation in municipal elections.

Philosophically, Childs' appeal for council-manager government is based upon the belief that man is good, but community institutions are corrupt; therefore, he argues, the institutions should be reformed with the technique of manager government in order that the "good" can govern. Rousseau and Jefferson would undoubtedly feel a close intellectual kinship with Childs and his faith in the rationality of man, the virtue of humanity, and the benefits of local autonomy. Unquestionably the most thorough critical analysis of Childs' idealogy is found in John Porter East's Council-Manager Government: The Political Thought of its Founder, Richard S. Childs.

Although he has frequently been called the father of the council-manager plan, Childs prefers to think of himself as "the minister who performed the marriage ceremony between the general manager plan as first conceived in Staunton, Virginia (in 1908) and the commission plan in Des Moines." The genius of the council-manager plan was a simple city charter drafted by Childs for the Lockport, New York Board of Trade in 1910. Although the New York Legislature rejected the charter and the plan of government it embodied, Childs generated considerable national press coverage in the process.

In 1912 Sumter, South Carolina adopted the plan; the next year Dayton, Ohio followed Sumter's lead. Childs is fond of saying that politics went out the window when Dayton's first city manager blew in.

The approval of its revised Model City Charter incorporating the council-manager plan by the National Municipal League in 1915, coupled with the support of eminent scholars like Charles A. Beard, Columbia University historian, and prominent political figures like Charles Evans Hughes and Hiram Johnson in the second decade of this century gave the manager concept a dramatic national appeal. By 1918 exactly 100 municipalities had adopted the plan.

The plan experienced phenomenal growth during two periods - the post-World War I decade, when the number of manager municipalities quadrupled - 100 to 400 - and the three post-World War II decades, when the increase in manager cities averaged 65 per year. By January 1, 1976, no less than 2,540 municipalities, including approximately 50 percent of those over 10,000 population, were counted as manager cities and counties. By the year 2,000 Childs confidently predicts that an additional 1,500 municipalities, or an average of 60 per year during the next 24 years, will be operating under this plan.

Since the first decade of this century Childs has been actively associated with the National Municipal League. From 1927-31 he directed League affairs as its eighth president. For more than half a century he served as a member of the Council, the League's governing body. Even today, at 95, Childs commutes from his Brooklyn apartment to the League's Manhattan office two days a week and serves as an unpaid consultant.

In Childs' view, democratic government is one which "caters to the sovereign people" and is free of bossism and self-serving cliques of politicians. The form of local government most likely to produce such government, he believes, is the council-manager plan with non-partisan elections and the short ballot.

Childs has consistently recognized the significant role played by American women in shaping municipal reform. As early as 1921 he paid tribute to the National League of Women Voters as a valiant ally of the National Municipal League in its support of the manager plan, describing NLWV members as a "fresh new civic army of women, armed abundantly with enthusiasm and well aware of the enemy." He perceives of League members as being "always on the side of the angels." In his own household, he was happily married to his wife Grace for 49 years (she died in 1961) and reared three daughters (one is now deceased).

Don Marquis, an observer of the urban scene, has commented that "municipal government in America is honeycombed with honesty." One major factor accounting for this commendable state of affairs is the adoption of the council-manager plan by hundreds of American cities. In turn, a paramount reason for these adoptions is the unrelenting vigor and initiative of a single individual - Richard S. Childs.

In 1927 Childs defined a reformer as "one who sets forth cheerfully toward sure defeat." Fifty years ago, only a small minority of American municipalities had adopted the council-manager plan, the short ballot was ridiculed by most politicians, and the idea of an appointed county medical examiner had not been conceived. Then Childs may have felt with some justification that his innovative ideas to reform local and state government were doomed to failure. Today, still the reformer at heart, he recognizes that persistence has its rewards and embodies the truth that victory will ultimately come to supporters of a meritorious cause.

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