CHAPTER XI

MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION IN GREAT BRITAIN

THE cities, or boroughs, as they are called in Great Britain, are organized under the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, which swept away the privileged corporations that had existed for several centuries. Cities are still governed under this act and its subsequent amendments.

All of the powers and authority of the city are lodged in a large council elected by wards. The mayor is chosen by the council from its membership. The town clerk, who in many ways is the most important official of the city, is selected in the same way. Local education is administered by a council committee. This is the framework of the British city. It is the form of administration for all local authorities.

Cities are divided into wards, with three members from each, one of whom is elected every year. Immediately following the election the council selects the mayor, who serves for the ensuing year. It also appoints the committees. Most of the boroughs are divided into sixteen wards, which send 48 members to the council, although in some cities the council is a much larger body. The London county council,

which governs the metropolitan area of London, contains 118 members. In Manchester the council contains 103 members; in Liverpool, 134; and in Glasgow, 75. Women are eligible for membership, and in recent years a number have been selected. Non-residents, too, may be elected if they own property within the municipality or pay certain rents and live within fifteen miles of the borough. Councilmen need not live in the wards which they represent, and many members are elected who live in the suburbs but do business in the city. This enables the community to draw on talent wherever it may be found. It also introduces an element of permanency into administration.

Aldermen.

In addition to the councilmen, a number of aldermen, usually sixteen, are chosen by the council upon its organization, either from its own members or from distinguished citizens outside. The number of aldermen is usually one third of the council. Aldermen are chosen for six years, and one third of the number retires every two years. Defeated candidates for the council are not infrequently elected as aldermen. Re-elections are the rule, and it is common to find men in the council who have served in one capacity or another for a quarter of a century.

The aldermen are merely councilmen raised to a higher degree. They sit and vote with the councilmen on all questions, the only distinction between them being the method of election and the greater dignity which attaches to the aldermanic office. The

aldermen usually hold the important chairmanships by virtue of long service and sit as magistrates in the police courts.

Nominations and Elections.

Any qualified man or woman can be nominated for the council by the filing of a petition signed by two proposers and eight seconders. There are no conventions, caucuses, or primaries.

The municipal election is held in November, separate from parliamentary elections. The ballot is short and contains only the names of one or more candidates from the ward. There are no party designations, for the party is not recognized by law in municipal elections. Names are printed in alphabetical order and after each name is a blank in which the voter indicates his choice.

We would expect such a system to produce a large number of candidates. But the reverse is true. Quite frequently a ward will have no contest for years. When a councillor has been satisfactory or the party is overwhelmingly strong, the incumbent is left undisturbed in his seat. It has happened in some city elections that all the candidates for the council have been returned without contest, while in the election of 1899 less than one half the seats in 103 boroughs were opposed. In 13 boroughs there was not a single councilmanic contest.

Partisan voting is the rule, and candidates are selected by the local committee of the Conservative, Liberal, or Labor parties. The issues upon which elections turn are substantially the same as those

which divide candidates for Parliament. Conservative candidates usually represent the landed interests; Liberal candidates represent the business and commercial classes; while Labor candidates are put forward by socialist or labor groups. Politics plays a part in the organization of the council, in the selection of aldermen and clerk, and in determining the policies to be pursued.

Simplicity of Administration.

The simplicity of the city charter is one explanation of the success of the British city. There is but one official to be elected, which makes it easy for the voter to make a choice. In addition there is the most direct responsibility between the official and his constituents, while the organization of the council itself makes it easy to locate the praise or the blame. There is no conflict between the legislative and the executive departments, for there is but one department, the council. Its procedure, too, is very simple and the transactions are reported at great length in the daily newspapers. Municipal campaigns are often hotly contested, especially where industrial and social questions are involved, as they have been in recent years in the London county council. While the machinery encourages independence, voters adhere to their parties quite as tenaciously as they do in the United States. In fact, there is less independent voting than there is in this country.

The Committee System.

The actual administrative work of the council is performed by committees, each of which is a council

in miniature. The ranking member of the committee of the dominant party is usually the chairman, and if he is a man of power he exercises great influence. The mayor is ex-officio member of all committees, although he rarely takes part in their deliberations. In the larger cities there are from twelve to twenty standing committees, each of which may be divided into sub-committees to which are assigned special branches of the work.

The committees are made up by the council, on its organization, after each annual election. Ordinarily the personnel of the committee remains but little changed from year to year. The committee employs the director and staff of the department under its control; it fixes the wages and salaries of its employees and prepares and spends its budget. All of its actions, however, are referred, from time to time, to the council for approval, and at the end of the year a voluminous report is made of the committee's work.

To be chairman of an important committee is a substantial honor. This is particularly true of committees which control the street-railways, gas and electric lighting undertakings, which offer opportunities for men of large constructive ability. To be a member of one of these committees is like being on the board of directors of a large railroad corporation and it is sought after for the same reason. While the committee is in form but a subdivision of the council, in actual practice it acts with great freedom in its designated field. For the activities of the city

have become so numerous that each committee has become a council in miniature.

The Permanent Expert.

Great Britain has not developed municipal administration into a science as have the cities of Germany. Neither the mayor, the aldermen, nor the councilmen are experts, as are the members of the magistrat, and none of them receive a salary. The permanent expert assistance is, however, secured through the city clerk and the managers of the various departments, who are trained men, frequently chosen by competition from other cities or advanced from one post to another, much as are the managers of a private corporation. They are paid good salaries and enjoy a good local position. The managers are responsible to the committee which supervises them and ultimately to the council. They, with the subordinate employees, enjoy permanent tenure and are rarely changed for political reasons.

The Mayor.

The mayor is chairman of the council and is often selected by reason of distinguished service in the council. The office is a titular rather than an executive one, for the mayor has no veto power, he makes no appointments, and is not held responsible for the success or failure of administration. The British system does not encourage a strong executive as does the German or American system, and in consequence there have been few distinguished mayors in Great Britain, almost the only exception being Mr. Joseph Chamberlain, who was mayor of Birmingham from 1873 to 1876.

The position of mayor, or provost, as the mayor is called in Scotland, is a social position. He is the representative of the city on all public occasions. It is his duty to entertain guests, preside at public functions, arbitrate labor disputes, and be the dignified representative of the city on all occasions. His real powers are not unlike those of the British King. He is a justice of the peace and sits as magistrate in the disposition of petty cases.

In spite of the lack of power, the office of mayor is the goal to which business men and councilmen aspire. In the larger cities a successful mayor is usually knighted as a recognition of his services. This of itself is sufficient return to justify years of service and a heavy personal sacrifice. For the mayor receives no salary. And in the larger cities he must be a man of wealth in order to accept the position, for his social expenses are very heavy. Some of the larger cities, like London, Liverpool, and Dublin, provide a mansion-house for the mayor, while others maintain a coach and pair for his use. Some cities make special appropriations for his expenses. Dublin appropriates $8,000 a year for this purpose, Bristol, $5,000, and Edinburgh, $5,000. But no matter what the appropriation may be, it is rarely sufficient to meet the expenses incident to the maintenance of the office, which sometimes entails a burden of from $20,000 to $50,000 a year.

The Town Clerk.

The most distinguished permanent position in the city is that of the town clerk, who receives a generous

salary and holds office usually for life. The office requires a high order of ability, for the clerk must be a lawyer and be trained for the post. The clerk of Glasgow receives $10,000 a year. Some years ago, when a vacancy occurred, the council of that city advertised for candidates just as the German city advertises for members of the magistrat.

The council looks to the clerk for advice upon all kinds of questions. He is the secretary of all committees and the custodian of the city records. He prepares the reports for the central authorities, is the parliamentary agent of the municipality in the promotion of legislation, and performs such other duties as the council may provide. In the larger towns he has a number of assistants trained like himself. He is the nearest approach to the burgomaster or the American mayor to be found in the British city.

Municipal Employees.

There are no municipal civil service laws in Great Britain as there are with us, but, despite this fact, tenure of office is on a permanent basis. Public opinion would not tolerate the use of public office for partisan or personal ends.

It was feared by some that the extension of municipal trading, with the thousands of employees which it added to the pay-roll, would weaken the traditions of public office. But this has not been the case. Rather it is claimed that municipal trading has strengthened the merit system by reason of the importance of the city's activities in the eyes of the

voters. Nor has the increase in the number of employees been followed by their activity in politics. The city pays a higher standard of wages than do private employers; it treats its employees better, so that public office is highly prized. When differences arise they are usually adjusted by arbitration.

Personnel of the Administration.

The town council draws its membership largely from shopkeeping tradesmen, with a sprinkling of professional men and working-class representatives. And the cities usually reflect their point of view. The aristocracy does not mix in city politics, for its interests are in the country. The British city is honestly administered, although there have been occasional instances where members of the council were interested in city contracts; but these have been very rare, and where the fact has been disclosed councilmen have resigned or have been retired from office at the next election. Generally speaking, there is no graft, no machine, no spoils system. The very simplicity of the organization precludes this, as does the audit by the central authority and the scrutiny of the press and citizens.

The British city is also efficient. Its outlook is less generous than that of the American city and less scientific than that of Germany. Extreme economy is the prevailing note in administration and the community is very resentful of any activity which increases the burdens of taxation. This is traceable to the method of collecting local revenues from tenants rather than from property, as Great Britain

still has the mediæval system of local taxation by which all local rates or taxes are assessed against the occupier rather than the owner. And as all local revenues come from this single source, any new undertakings or non-profitable activities are jealously watched by the community.

Membership in the council carries considerable local distinction, which attracts capable and competent men. For the traditions of public service in Great Britain affect all classes. The work of a councillor is very exacting. There are many committee meetings to be attended and inspections to be made. And if the councilman is a magistrate he sits in the local courts. If he is chairman of a committee his duties are greatly increased.

The Suffrage.

Municipal suffrage is a tax or ratepayer's privilege, and it is limited to those who own property or pay a certain minimum sum in rent and have lived in the community the requisite time. There are a number of other limitations which restrict it still further. In Great Britain local taxes are paid by the tenant rather than by the owner. They are computed on the rent actually paid rather than on the selling value of the property. In consequence, as almost everybody is a tenant, the voter thinks in terms of the taxes he pays. This is an underlying explanation of the British city. It more than anything else influences men's minds when they go to the polls. People talk "rates" in the British city as nowhere else in Europe. Taxes form an absorbing topic of

conversation. Every project, every expenditure, every activity is discussed from the point of view of its effect on the local rates, and men are frequently defeated for the council because of their advocacy of some measure involving an increase in the burden of taxes, who in Germany or America would be approved for their public spirit. In consequence, officials are slow to approve of needed measures for the health or comfort of the community because of their fear of the ratepayers. By reason of this fear, too, the British city is far less generous than either the German or the American city in its expenditure for schools, libraries, and playgrounds. For the local rates are very heavy and are consciously felt by the voter.

The Powers of the British City.

The powers of the British city, and the things it may do and the way it may do them, are specifically enumerated by Parliament much as in the United States. For the British city has none of the large freedom of the German city. Powers are sometimes conferred by general, sometimes by special acts. The city cannot frame its own charter or amend it, for, as has been stated, all charters are alike. Nor can it determine what undertakings it will carry on or what activities it will assume. In many respects it has less freedom than have the cities of America. If a city desires to acquire a water plant, it must go to Parliament for approval of its plan. If it decides to take over a street-railway, gas, or electric-lighting plant, it promotes a special bill

for this purpose which is first investigated by the local government board and by a committee of Parliament, and then, if the reports are favorable, an act is passed for this purpose. The city can only acquire a market or a slaughter-house, raze a slum, build model tenements, or plan suburban territory with the approval of the central authorities. It cannot change its tram lines from horse to electric traction; it cannot alter the lighting power of gas; it cannot condemn property for public uses; it cannot perform any one of a hundred activities on its own initiative as can the German and in many instances the American city. For the British city enjoys only those powers that are specifically granted to it, while the German city enjoys all powers that are not specifically denied to it. The British city is in chains to Parliament much as are our own.

Central Administrative Control.

In addition to this parliamentary control the local government board, which is a cabinet portfolio, supervises many of the city's acts. The board has control of poor-law administration and health. It audits the accounts of local authorities in England and Wales by deputies who go from city to city and see whether any irregularity has occurred. Under the Town Planning Act of 1909 the board passes on all proposals for the development of suburban areas and the promotion of health and sanitary arrangements.

There are no constitutional or statutory debt limits on the cities as in America, and the city can

borrow to any amount that the central authorities permit. But it cannot borrow a penny without this assent. And it has to secure a special act or order for this purpose. Orders sanctioning the loans prescribe the rate of interest to be paid, the sinking-fund requirements, and other details relating to the loans. Nor do cities grant franchises to public service corporations—such grants are made by Parliament after investigation of local conditions and after the community itself has had an opportunity to be heard. Generally speaking, the city is preferred to a private corporation if it is willing to undertake the project.

The most serious of all these limitations upon the British city is the state control of the system of local taxation. For the city has none of the latitude of the German city; it cannot experiment, cannot try out new forms or methods of raising local revenues. It is compelled to collect its rates by a uniform system of assessing them against the tenant, as has been done since the eighteenth century. And no matter what the value of property may be, if it has no tenant from whom the rents can be collected, it is free from taxation. Suburban land used for market-gardening is taxed on the rental received from the market-garden, while unimproved land in the heart of a city worth millions of dollars is practically free from taxation. If business property is occupied by a residence, it is taxed on the rental received from the house. This throws all the local taxes onto the producing classes; it discourages im-

provements and encourages land speculation. This is the heaviest burden upon the British city.

More than five hundred corporations have organized to protest against this injustice. Year after year they have petitioned Parliament to permit them to assess land values at their selling value, as is done in the United States. But the landowning interests in Parliament are so powerful that they have refused to permit this change to be made.

The American, German, and English Systems Compared.

In all European countries there is but one official to be elected by the people, and that is the town-councillor, and he is chosen from the ward. All others are either appointed or selected by the council. The ballot contains not more than two or three names representing the different parties which make the nominations. National and municipal elections are usually held on different days, so that the municipality is not sacrificed to some issue of overshadowing national importance. In England the method of nomination is as simple as the election. Candidates are placed before the voters by a petition signed by two proposers and eight seconders. This is the only formality required.

All other city officials are chosen by the council and are responsible to it. There is no confusion between the executive and legislative departments and no independent boards or commissions to confuse the voter. The simplicity of the charter is one explanation of the efficiency of the European city.

In recent years municipalities have greatly ex-

tended their activities. They own the public service corporations which use the streets, while docks, markets, slaughter-houses, and other activities are generally under municipal control. By reason of its importance the city attracts men of commanding talent to the administration. In addition there is no conflict of interest within the community such as prevails in most American cities. Men are free to enter the council, for their patriotism is not confused with their private interests. This and the commanding importance of the city explain the attitude of mind of the citizen and the psychology of the voter. This is the background of the European city, especially those of Germany and Great Britain.

Summary.

The governing agency of the British city is the town council. Members of the council are the only officials elected by the people. The mayor is chosen by the council for one year and the town clerk and other officials are selected in the same way. Members of the council are elected by wards rather than at large.

This is the framework of the British city. It is very simple. Local elections are held in different years from those of the nation, and in consequence municipal questions are not confused with those of the state. Nominations are equally simple. There are no caucuses or conventions, nominations being made by petition.

The administrative work of the city is performed by committees, which take the place of the directors of departments in this country and the members of

the magistrat in Germany. The chairman of each committee is in a sense an expert by reason of his long service. The only analogy to the German expert is the town clerk and the salaried heads of the various departments, who are trained men, advanced from post to post or called from city to city by reason of their recognized efficiency.

The mayor is a titular rather than an executive official. He holds office for one year, receives no salary, has no offices or appointments to bestow, and is little more than the city's chief dignitary, to represent it on all public occasions.

Tenure of office among the subordinate employees is permanent, although there are no civil-service laws in the cities.

The town council is recruited from tradesmen and shopkeepers and the city reflects their point of view. The suffrage is a taxpayers' privilege and is extended to women as well as men. Local rates are collected from tenants, and by reason of this fact the city is economical, even parsimonious, in its outlay. It is not as generous as the American city or as big-visioned in its outlook and activities as the German city. This is largely due to the system of taxation, which falls very heavily upon the poorer classes and leads to the closest scrutiny of municipal expenditures.

The British city has little of the freedom of the German city. Its powers are covered by general and special acts and are specifically enumerated by Parliament. The city can only do the things it is authorized to do. New powers are granted by Parliament upon application of the town council. Even the right to issue bonds to acquire a street-railway or other public service corporation, to raze a slum or carry on any new activity, must be first indorsed

by the city council and then approved by Parliament before it can be entered upon. As in Germany, cities are also subject to administrative control by parliamentary bodies, which audit accounts, supervise the administration of health and the Town Planning Act, and in many other ways oversee the actual administration of local officials.