Kansas City, Missouri: The Experience of a Major Midwestern City Under Council Manager Government

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Background

Kansas City, Missouri, a city of somewhat fewer than 500,000 inhabitants in a metropolitan area of nearly two million, adopted the council-manager form of government in 1925. On the 3rd of November that year, municipal elections determined the members of the new council who assumed their seats on 10 April 1926 (Ellis 65). It has been a council-manager city ever since. The city also has a colorful history of “boss” politics. The notorious Pendergast Machine dominated Kansas City politics for decades, and was a major factor in stimulating the reform efforts that led to the adoption of “non-partisan, professional” government.

Dashing the hopes of the reformers, Thomas J. Pendergast—“The Boss”—rose to the height of his power following the adoption of the new charter. Although reformers had hoped their success would ensure clean government, machine politics flourished for some thirteen years under the council-manager system. William M. Reddig, who wrote the classic study of boss politics in Kansas City, wrote that “as the system actually worked out, it strengthened the control of the bosses and the party organizations over the selection of officeholders” (Reddig 117). More recent studies of the machine concur (e.g. Dorsett; Larsen and Hulston). Reddig went on to note that the idea that independent citizens would run for office without the encouragement of an organization was a fantasy that never provoked anything except mirth among practical politicians. (Reddig 117-18)

Many observers regardless of their sentiments about machine politics would find it strange that a vigorous urban culture also thrived during those years. Along with notable corruption there was considerable civic progress.

Kansas City therefore presents a unique and especially interesting set of circumstances. These circumstances offer a fertile field of study to identify the strengths and weaknesses of “professional, non-partisan, government.” That form of government now has been on the American scene so long that it seems almost traditional, despite its rejection of many of the principles that constitute accepted American governmental practice.

Council-Manager Government

Council-manager government more closely resembles the structure of a modern corporation than it does the classic separation of powers arrangement with discrete legislative, executive, and judicial branches. This is deliberate, and is based on the assumption that running a city requires not “politics,” but skill at administration. “The business corporation and the corporate ways of doing business provided a major intellectual model” (Boynton 8). Unconsciously, the architects of the council-manager plan were motivated by a political ideology around which they constructed their new model, the ideology of managerialism.1

Under the Council-manager plan as in parliamentary democracy, the voters elect only the legislature, not the executive. Also as in a parliamentary system, the legislature selects the executive.

The city manager is the one public chief executive in the United States who is legally subordinate to the legislature, and who needs continuous legislative approval. (Protasel 810)

The parallel with parliamentary systems, though, is absent in the plan’s actual operation. A rudimentary sort of separation of powers does exist,
in that council-manager charters prohibit the elected legislature from interfering in the city's administration. The manager not only is the administrator, but functions with a high degree of autonomy. The details of administration are presumed to be irrelevant, so long as the manager carries out the legislature's policy.

Thus, the city's legislature takes the form of a small city council, which in turn employs a city manager to serve at its pleasure. The intention of the plan is that the manager be a trained professional administrator. The manager becomes the executive head of the city, and selects and discharges the heads of the city's administrative departments.

In the original model, the council members are the only elected municipal officials. The government will be non-partisan, with candidates running at large to eliminate or dilute sectional sentiment. In the majority of cases, however, there are variations on the classic pattern that early reformers recommended. Boynton wrote that

a council-manager city might be classified as a model city if its form permitted only the election of a small council in an at-large election, with the mayor selected by the council and with the election of no other municipal officials.

In over half the cases the voters elect a mayor directly, who therefore "has political and/or official functions that separate that officer from the rest of the council" (Boynton 8). Direct election "breaks the unified role imagined by the plan for the council," which is shattered still further by cities that incorporate other changes, such as providing for additional elected officials. Such cities "have politicized and fragmented both the policymaking and policy-implementing process" (Boynton 9).

Staunton, Virginia lays claim to being the first city to adopt council-manager government. In 1908, it appointed a "general manager," but also retained other elected officials. Sumter, South Carolina in 1912 was the first to adopt a full-fledged council-manager system. The first relatively large city to do so was Dayton, Ohio in 1914. During those years, Richard S. Childs, who argued that the number of elected officials be kept to a minimum while administration be placed in the hands of a professional administrator, came to be a power in the National Municipal League. The League was a strong proponent of the council-manager plan, and has continued to be a forceful advocate (Goodall 59-60).

Schools of public administration now recognize that the early assumption that "policy" and "administration" could be separated was unrealistic. When professors and practitioners alike admonished that administration was the manager's prerogative, policy that of the council, and that neither should encroach upon the responsibilities of the other, they were calling for the impossible. It now is clear that "the distinction between these two functions is at best a fuzzy one and that the two will often overlap" (Goodall 59-60). Nevertheless, such an assumption remains implicitly the fundamental rationale for council-manager government.

The plan has had considerable appeal because of the typical American animus toward "politics." Those "who have long wanted to remove 'politics' from municipal government and to place it on a 'businesslike' basis," Adrian wrote, are likely to find council-manager government attractive (Adrian 35). An editorial in the National Municipal Review stated it clearly in October of 1942. The plan, it said, "came into being as a result of a demand for business rather than political management of public affairs." Goodall made the same point, that there has been a "pervasive influence of the assumption that local government and politics should be separated. The council-manager plan," he said, "was advocated as a means for substituting businesslike management practices for political manipulation" (Goodall 73). One early theorist, in fact, Frank Goodnow, went so far as to argue that "self-administration" would replace local self-government. Still, politics is destined to continue, although it will be less in evidence (Goodall 73; Adrian 37).

The virtues of the council-manager plan appear so obvious to its adherents that they seem mystified by the criticisms that it engenders. Although "good government" groups tend to think highly of the plan and it clearly is popular among small and medium-sized cities, there continues to be a phenomenon that perplexes its proponents. Elections to abandon council-manager government are frequent among "reformed" cities. Most of these elections, to be sure, result in retaining the
plan but their frequency is a source of concern to
the reformers (Protasel 807).

A major reason advanced for unhappiness
with the plan, especially in larger and more diverse
cities, is a perceived need for stronger political
leadership. Council-manager government, so the
argument goes, makes policy leadership extraor-
dinarily difficult to achieve inasmuch as there is
no focal point for political responsibility. One
proponent—implicitly conceding the point—has
suggested that direct election of the mayor and
other revisions to the classic plan could provide
such leadership, thus adapting the plan "to the
increasing political demands on city government"
(Protasel 809).

This would fail to satisfy the critics, who tend
to view the council-manager system as inherently
less democratic than the typical forms of Amer-
ican government. One such critic wrote that

the evaluation of metropolitan and urban governance in
the twentieth century has shown a consistent turning
away from the basic democratic principle of a govern-
ment accountable to the people. (Harrigan 70)

One factor that the critics see as troublesome is
the multiplicity of independent boards and com-
missions that the plan values so highly; they con-
sist of appointed members, far from the reach of
the voters.

Some critics who compared "reform" cities
with those under the control of political machines
identified high costs from both systems. Using
public office for private gain was characteristic of
machine politics. Honesty in the traditional sense
was more likely to prevail in reform cities, but
there were other costs—perhaps more pernicious
costs, these critics contend, because they were
subtler and less obvious. Non-partisan council-
manager government often is more efficient cer-
tainly, but they argue that impersonality prevails,
as does middle-class and business domination,
and above all, less accountable and more remote
government. Douglas Yates has gone so far as to
say that "democratic control and participation
were sacrificed for efficient management" (Yates
170), or as James Q. Wilson—certainly no radical
gadfly—conceded, "nonpartisanship usually tends
to favor Republican—or more correctly, busi-
ness-oriented—political leaders" (Wilson 298).

There can be little doubt that many of the early
reformers, although genuinely seeking honest and
efficient government, found "businesslike gov-
ernment" to be indistinguishable from govern-
ment in the interest of business. Representatives
of business during the Progressive Period often
were at the forefront of the reform movement,
and worked to reduce or even deny a voice to
ethnic minorities and the poor. Some of the urban
reformers were "almost preoccupied with fear of
immigrant groups" (Lewis 75). Even if such
judgments are too harsh, Progressive reformers
certainly struck at the power of political machines.
Because the power of the political boss flowed
from the support of the voters, it followed that it
was necessary to restrict the power of the voters—
at least of those voters who would support the
boss.

The defenders of the plan remain unaffected
by such arguments. Fears that council-manager
government is undemocratic are simply nostalgia
and a failure to recognize that changing times
bring changing conditions. "There is no danger to
representative government from the council-man-
ger system," they say, advancing the argument
that somehow—because there are "sound reasons
for it"—reliance upon administrators for policy
guidance is no less democratic than the process
found in earlier systems. One study making these
arguments ably sums up the reform view:

When measured against the problems of the present and
the anticipated greater problems of the future, it is diffi-
cult to conceive of a better-balanced, more effective
system of local government than the one which has
found expression in the elected council and the appoint-
ted city manager. (Harrell and Weiford 101-107)

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**Council-Manager Government in Kansas City, Missouri**

When T. J. Pendergast studied the proposed
city charter adopting the council-manager form of
government, he threw his considerable support
behind the new plan, and it passed overwhel-
mingly. It replaced the old, two chamber alder-
manic council of thirty-two members with a new
unicameral one of nine including the mayor. The
mayor and four members were to be elected at
large. The remaining four were to be elected from
districts. Pendergast had remarked confidentially
to a reporter that "it ought to be as easy to get along
with nine men as thirty-two" (Reddig 117).
And so it was. The November election narrowly chose five Pendergast supporters to sit on the council, a majority. When they took office, they appointed the “country bookkeeper,” Henry F. McElroy, as city manager. McElroy was a Pendergast henchman who ran the city with an iron hand—and under the boss’s direction.

The new council-manager government brought Pendergast to the height of his power. He continued to provide the service to citizens that undergirded his authority. “What’s government for if it isn’t to help people?” he asked.

If they need coal or clothes, or their rent is overdue, we help them out—in and out of season. We never ask them about their politics. We know pretty well how they’ll vote after we help them. (Larsen and Hulston 72)

Although clearly he was not a social reformer, Pendergast did include black people in his organization, “and, from all accounts, he distributed welfare in color-blind fashion, even before the implementation of New Deal relief programs.” Moreover, he sought “the support and advice of Kansas City’s African American religious, political, and business leaders” (Larsen and Hulston 105).

When the Great Depression hit, Kansas City benefited from Pendergast’s close affiliation with Postmaster General James A. Farley, who also chaired the Democratic National Committee and as his patronage chief was one of FDR’s key aides. Lyle Dorsett wrote that “the skyline of Kansas City is a lasting legacy of New Deal programs.” Pendergast benefited personally as well. As the owner of the Ready-Mixed Concrete Company, he profited enormously from the “immense building program,” and from federal patronage. “It is clear,” Dorsett remarked, “that he controlled all of Kansas City’s share of the spoils, and it was a lion’s share” (Dorsett 74). Schirmer and McKinzie put it more colorfully:

When the Dust Bowl drought and Depression drained the region of economic vitality, night spots and play dates dried up, too. Except in Kansas City. There political boss Tom Pendergast’s machine kept the town wide open to gambling, bawdy houses, and smoky nightclubs that scoffed at midnight closings. Boss Tom managed to keep wallets from emptying, too, by cadging federal relief projects for western Missouri and launching a campaign of public buildings. Soon word spread that Kansas City had clubs to play in and some of the people had money to spend. A stream of jazz musicians joined the already considerable pool of local talent.

A couple out for a night on the town in those years might hop from one to another of the more than 50 clubs between 12th and 18th Streets. That simmering night life nurtured some of the greats of American jazz. Bennie Moten, Chauncey Downs, Count Basie, Charlie “Bird” Parker, Joe Turner, and Mary Lou Williams, among scores of others, developed their styles in Kansas City jam sessions and cabarets. Segregation barred them as guests from many of the clubs they played; they went hungry as often as they ate, but when they left town for the “big burgs” they had a style that ignited a jazz revolution called bebop. (Schirmer and McKinzie 160-61)

Unfortunately, there was more than thriving night life and economic activity. The Boss was unable to control criminal activities in his domain.... An ex-convict named John Lazia forcibly assumed political control of the growing Italian area on the Northside, and ultimately injected himself into Pendergast’s machine. (Schirmer and McKinzie 196)

The wide-open city became a haven for criminals from far and wide. In 1933 the infamous “Union Station Massacre” occurred, and City Manager McElroy’s daughter was kidnapped (later to be released unharmed). Lazia himself was assassinated a year later, and “even Boss Tom’s house fell victim to a $150,000 robbery” (Schirmer and McKinzie 196).

To put matters in perspective, wide-open, crime-ridden cities, large and small, were common in the era, but Kansas City had the reputation of being in a class by itself. Larsen and Hulston say that between the two world wars, Tom’s Town arguably ranked as the most wide open city in the United States. Edward R. Murrow, during a visit, compared Kansas City to such notorious world sin centers as Singapore and Port Said, which may have been stretching matters, but not by very much. (Larsen and Hulston 100).

No less an icon than J. Edgar Hoover blasted Kansas City’s “gory scenes of multiple crimes” and “armed fury of entrenched interests,” and he made it a point to bring Pendergast down (Larsen and...
The *Kansas City Star* had itself been seeking that end for years.

By 1939, it had happened. Hoover and Attorney General Frank Murphy had flown to Kansas City to confer with U. S. Attorney Maurice Milligan and a sizeable FBI staff assembled there. Three days later a grand jury indicted Pendergast for income tax evasion. Soon, he was on his way to federal prison and City Manager McElroy had tendered his resignation. Audits then revealed enormous deficits in the city budget that had been completely hidden (Reddig 325-31).

After thirteen years under the council-manager charter had failed to bring clean government, the reformers tried once more. They were victorious in elections in April of 1940, and the new council brought in a city manager from outside, L. Perry Cookingham, who had been manager of Saginaw, Michigan. “Cookingham's appointment fulfilled a cherished *Star* dream of bringing in an out-of-towner to administer Kansas City,” but member of Congress and former mayor Henry Jost believed the *Star*’s objective “had sinister overtones.” He thought the *Star* simply wanted a figure it could control. He also blasted the council-manager charter itself. “The *Star* used Mr. Pendergast and his machine to get it adopted,” he charged, “and then Mr. Pendergast used it for his own purposes” (Larsen and Hulston 171).

Jost was decidedly out of step with the community’s new leaders, and with the reformers. The *Reader’s Digest* saw fit to praise Kansas City for throwing the rascals out. “The red light district and the gambling joints have been shut tight,” it reported exuberantly. “Robberies have been reduced 75 percent, burglaries 78 percent, auto thefts from an average of 186 to 18 a month. Kansas City has its chin up!” (High 102). Cookingham ran an efficient operation, and “actually managed, helped by federal write-offs of relief money, to retire the city's astronomical debt in only six years” (Larsen and Hulston 176). He continues to be revered by the remnants of “reform government” who remember him. A street at Kansas City International Airport bears his name, as does the Cookingham Institute in the Bloch School of Business and Public Administration at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Regardless of the spirited reforms, however, the spirit of the city appeared to dwindle. It did expand its boundaries and there were extensive commercial developments, but progressive policies seemed to give way to apathy. The magnificent Union Station was a decaying hulk for nearly half of the century, until almost at its end advocates finally secured a bi-state tax and the station re-emerged as “Science City.”

Many “progressive leaders” rejoiced when the city permitted light rail to be destroyed in 1957. Ironically, L. P. Cookingham, then retired, on the 23rd of June took over the controls of the last tram to run in Kansas City (Schirmer and McKinzie 258). Until then, there had been an extensive, and—despite its persistent difficulties in making a profit—quite effective network of trolleys and trolley busses. Time after time in recent decades there have been attempts to restore adequate mass transit instead of the minimal bus service currently available.

By the middle of May 2001, observers who were inclined to be optimistic thought they were able to discern a slim chance of success. Missouri’s new and progressive governor, Bob Holden, had proposed an innovative statewide transportation plan that would assist in the restoration of light rail in Kansas City, and the *Kansas City Star* was strongly supporting the idea. The City Council on May 16th “moved a step closer to an August election on light rail,” when its finance committee issued a favorable recommendation.

But the hopes were dashed; the governor’s plan fell victim to the conservative majority in the state’s Senate that killed it at the end of a contentious session. Moreover, as could have been predicted given the resistance to change of much of the metropolitan area’s business leadership, the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce moved to halt the momentum toward approval of light rail (Spivak and Horsley A1). The Chamber, “which helped jettison previous light-rail transit plans,” argued that the proposal was “not ready,” and that the issue needed more study. The co-chair of Kansas City’s light-rail steering committee responded that “we have studied light rail to death.” Giving credence to the belief that despite its denial the Chamber was determined to prevent the city from ever adopting light rail, its board chairman, Richard Hastings, conceded that even if the city accommodated all the Chamber’s concerns, he could not “say we’d definitely recommend it” (Spivak and Horsley A10).
The co-chair of the light-rail steering committee continued to urge the City Council to bring the question to the voters. The governor considered calling the legislature back into a special session in September. Strong support for light rail emerged even within the Chamber of Commerce.

In a rebuke of the Greater Kansas City Chamber of Commerce’s leadership, one of the chamber’s own committees voted Friday [18 May] to support putting light rail on Kansas City’s August ballot, said the Kansas City Star, noting that the opposition to light rail for Kansas City, Missouri tended to come primarily from the Chamber’s members who lived in Kansas, rather than from its Missourians (Spivak and Horsley Bl). The voters in August, bombarded by negative propaganda, which included allegations that light rail would involve condemnation of huge segments of residential areas, turned down the proposal in an election marked by very low turnout.

Nevertheless, the controversy regarding light rail reflects the same dissatisfaction with the status quo in Kansas City that is undermining support for the council-manager system. “Efficiency” was a major argument both for the destruction of Kansas City’s old transportation system—the one that relied heavily upon trams and electrically-powered vehicles rather than the more “modern” busses with internal-combustion engines—and for the introduction of “professional, non-partisan, reform government.” In neither case is that efficiency now in evidence, and in both cases the deleterious effects upon the city and its working population are clear. Other reasons for dissatisfaction with the city’s current structure are manifest.

Many shortcomings continue. For example, although there has been some improvement, the waterfront still lies largely ignored and decayed. There is virtually no crime downtown at night, because it essentially is deserted. There are no crowded streets there during the daytime, because so little activity remains in the once thriving area.

When shortcomings are corrected, the process tends to be painfully drawn out. Union Station is only one case. In the mid-1980s, to cite another, traffic flow improved downtown when the city completed repairs on a bridge over extensive railroad tracks. Despite its location on a major artery, the repairs took the bridge out of service until they were completed—a period of nine years.

The Kansas City Public School District is the only one in Missouri not to be accredited by the state. White flight took most middle-class pupils out of the schools—sometimes to other Missouri districts in the metropolitan area, sometimes to private schools, and often to a district in affluent Johnson County, across the state line in Kansas. After years of virtual receivership under the auspices of the U. S. District Court of Western Missouri—eight years of which during the governorship of John Ashcroft the state wasted millions of its scarce dollars in waging a futile battle against federal officials—the Court withdrew.

The district continued to fire one superintendent after another while test scores remained unsatisfactory, and rumors of nepotism and improper contracts with relatives and friends of Board members circulated widely. At last, in the year 2000 the state stepped in and withdrew its accreditation. In 2001, the School Board expressed anger at Superintendent Benjamin Demps—who appeared to be providing effective (and unaccustomed) leadership to the district—for unspecified reasons. Demps then suggested that the state dissolve the Board of Education and take over the district. The Board abruptly fired him, again without any public announcement of a rationale. A U.S. District Judge set aside the Board’s action and ordered Demps reinstated, but shortly thereafter, he resigned. The new acting superintendent, as one of his first moves, demoted a district executive who had written a memo charging a Board member with improperly influencing personnel and fiscal matters. Nevertheless, it took little time for the Board to become critical of the acting superintendent as well.

One should note that the Kansas City School District is not a part of the government of the city, and that city officials have no direct responsibility for education. The school district is a separate governmental entity. The long period of deterioration of the schools nonetheless represents a failure of political leadership in the metropolitan area.

There have been numerous changes to the city charter since first adoption of the council-manager plan in 1925. The council now consists of thirteen members, for example, rather than nine. They include the mayor, six elected at large,
and the remaining elected one from each of six districts. Until recently, though, no change touched the basic principle of the council-manager plan as the voters approved it originally.

This was no accident. The Kansas City Star—always a most potent force in the city—fiercely protected what it consistently called “professional, non-partisan, government.” Any hint of support for a charter change that would provide even a modicum of authority to the mayor brought immediate editorial rumbles from Kansas City’s single daily paper that any change would lead to “bully government,” and a “boss mayor.” Consistently it associated mayoral authority with the Pendergast machine, and suggested that providing the mayor with more power would lead to a return to “bossism.” Such allegations must have seemed odd to any reader with a knowledge of local history, since it was no “bully mayor,” but rather the implementation of council-manager government that provided Pendergast with the ability to seize virtually complete control of Kansas City, which made him the most influential power in Missouri as well.

Ironically, the Star was a persistent critic of the performance of city government. Editorials decried the persistent corruption, the inefficiency, the tendency toward inaction, and what it saw as the council’s subservience to the firefighters (at one time the firefighters effectively brought the city to its knees by going out on strike when fires “mysteriously” sprang up throughout their jurisdiction). The Star shifted its tone only when anyone suggested charter revision shifting any power toward the mayor. Then, the charter became one that should not be revised, because it had served the city so well for so many decades.

So strongly was the Star’s ideological support for “professional government” under the council-manager plan that it once condemned the council of neighboring Independence for dismissing its city manager—implying that it was inappropriate for a city council to take such an action. The editorial said that it was clear that the manager failed to “fit into the plans of the council majority that voted to oust him,” because he had been “an adherent of professional, merit-system government as outlined in the Independence home-rule charter.” It thundered that the action sent a clear message to any subsequent manager: “Do the bidding of the council majority or face discharge” (“Charter” B1).

Well, yes, the plan does function that way. The Star had gone even beyond the early theorists of council-manager government by arguing implicitly that the autonomy of a manager should be complete. It should be beyond even the reach of a city council! Small wonder, then, that Star editorials routinely condemned any call for change in Kansas City’s charter.

As the century drew to a close, the inadequacies of Kansas City’s government became too obvious to continue ignoring. Moreover, corruption had made the council a laughing stock. In 1996 a front-page Star article reported that last year an anguished Mayor Emanuel Cleaver pleaded in public for a swift housecleaning at City Hall. The day before, he’d seen Michael B. Hernandez resign his council seat and then plead guilty to accepting $70,000 in bribes.... Seventeen months later, Cleaver’s appeals for a quick wrap-up are long dead, and the end of the corruption investigation at 12th and Oak Streets is not in sight. With the indictment Wednesday of Councilwoman D. Jeanne Robinson, a full one-third of the council members elected with Cleaver in 1991 have been charged with or pleaded guilty to crimes related to their public lives. (Morris A1)

As befitting the Star’s editorial stance, the article had to point to considerably more widespread corruption during the Pendergast days. The reporter did concede, though, that with regard to public corruption, Kansas City was worse than ever. While FBI investigations of such cases nationally remained about 1,300 since 1993, “public corruption and government fraud investigations in Kansas City have about doubled over that same period, from 15 in 1993 to 26” in 1996.

Quoting Lawrence Larsen of the University of Missouri-Kansas City who specializes in urban history, the article admitted that there was no precedent for such a wave of criminal activity among elected officials.

Though no one disputes that more corruption occurred during the Pendergast era, it rarely touched elected officials, Larsen said. As far as City Council members go (in the Pendergast era) they may have been lackeys, but (the machine) generally picked honest people. (Morris A1)

Of course, today’s crimes in terms of magnitude or extent pale into insignificance by contrast with
the past—as has much else in Kansas City—and they hardly are confined to Kansas City, but have sprung up elsewhere in the metropolitan area as well.

One troublesome aspect of the situation is that reform efforts have rarely, if ever, fulfilled the hopes of their backers. Consider these examples:

(1) The implementation of the council-manager plan not only failed to deter the Pendergast machine, but enhanced it. The hoped-for efficiency failed to materialize—at least as indicated by the quality of municipal leadership—and it presented no bar to public corruption.

(2) A Municipal Ethics Commission created in 1991 has had no effect and has been the target of charges that it has “whitewashed” wrongdoing. In fact, it contributed on its own to Kansas City’s corruption. In 1995, one of its members, the Rev. Clifford A. Jackson, resigned after being “charged with selling stolen cars to his parishioners.” He “pleaded guilty to one count each of tampering and selling a car with altered identification numbers” (Morris Al).

(3) The 1990 addition of term limits for council members, if anything, backfired. A reform group, the Citizens Association, backed the limit in an effort to rid the council of two long-time, and questionable, members, Robert Hernandez and Charles Hazley. The notion of term limits was faddish at the time, and contributed to the Association’s successful drive. The change prevented Hernandez and Hazley from running the next year, but three members who were elected then, “Michael Hernandez, Robinson and Carol Coe...were charged with crimes allegedly committed in their first terms” (Morris A1).

(4) A former Assistant U.S. Attorney who prosecuted some of the council members suggested that harsh reform measures would be counterproductive. “Draconian ethics reform,” he said, “will only encourage an exceptionally hardy strain of corrupt official to run for office.” Good people “don’t want the aggravation. That drives good candidates away.” Moreover salaries for public office generally are so low that they fail “to attract the city’s best and brightest” (Morris A1).

Two of the more charismatic of Kansas City’s recent mayors found council-manager government to be frustrating. Charles Wheeler, who served eight years in the late 1970s and early 1980s, campaigned against the system, but was unable to effect changes. He found it especially difficult to represent Kansas City effectively when he was in competition with other Missouri mayors who had party affiliations, and true authority. He lamented, for example, that the Mayor of St. Louis could command attention from state and national officials that he, as the holder of a non-partisan and virtually powerless office, could not. Accordingly, the city suffered (Wheeler interview).

In the 1990s, Emanuel Cleaver, an inspiring Kansas City leader, served two terms as the city’s first black mayor—an impressive feat in an area in which fewer than one-third of the voters are African American. Before his term-limited time in office ended, he successfully advocated a series of changes that provided somewhat more authority to the mayor, while still retaining the basic outlines of the council-manager plan. In what could only have been an astonishing development to citizens familiar with its background, the Kansas City Star editorials on the issue were thoughtful, devoid of scare words, and expressed no fear that Pendergast would be resuscitated. On the contrary, it endorsed the proposals, completely reversing some three-quarters of a century of adamant editorial policy.

The voters accepted the changes in 1998. Cleaver’s administration, of course, did not benefit from them. They took effect with the inauguration of his successor, Kay Barnes. The mayor remains a member of the council, but now has a veto. Eight members can override that veto. The city manager now must submit proposed budgets first to the mayor, who in contrast to past practice can review them prior to council consideration, and then present official recommendations.

Cleaver argued at the time of these changes that the new mayor would have ample authority. “If the voters don’t notice a change in the next administration, it means they’ve elected the wrong person,” he said, “because the mayor ought to be able to make things happen, without any excuse” (Horsley A1). Barnes has discovered that, on the contrary, “it only makes sense that the mayor be held accountable...if the mayor has the power to direct the manager” (Horsley A1). Barnes, therefore, proposed a dramatic shift in the principles of Kansas City’s urban government, one that would overtly eliminate the council-manager plan.
Citing city government’s recent blunders with snow removal and restaurant inspections, Barnes said she had become convinced that the blame for poor performance and lackluster service to residents rests with the system. (Horsley A1)

Experience with that system caused her to agree with the most severe critics of council-manager government that accountability gets “lost in the abyss of an increasingly sluggish bureaucracy, and responsiveness suffers as a result.” She presented her suggestions to a charter review commission, with the hope that they would be on the ballot in November of 2001 (Horsley A1, A10).

Under her plan, the mayor would have been an independently-elected executive, and no longer a member of the council. The mayor would have retained the veto power, would have appointed the city manager, and would have had a role in appointing department heads. It would have been the mayor, rather than the manager, who submits budgets to the council. The city’s government would have continued to be non-partisan.

Cleaver said that he found the idea of a strong mayor attractive at first, but ultimately came to the conclusion that it would lead to discontinuity in city government because it would bring changes in professional staff (Horsley A10). Wheeler strongly supported Barnes’s proposals, and suggested that Cleaver’s opposition results from ego-involvement in having engineered the 1998 changes—as well as resentment at charges that they are inadequate (Wheeler interview). It should also be noted that Cleaver became quite close to certain Kansas City business interests. When they opposed a light-rail plan that appeared to have some possibility of success, Cleaver killed it—and scuttled “several years of planning and effort” ("Chamber’s" B6)—with a comment that, although he favored light rail, the proposal—which he previously appeared to support—was “touristy frou frou.” Those interests also have benefited considerably from the business orientation inherent in the diffused political leadership of council-manager government.

Those who were optimistic regarding a change in the form of government saw the stance that the Kansas City Star adopted as the final nail in the coffin of Kansas City’s council-manager plan. Going beyond even their precedent-shattering support of the 1998 charter changes, the Star titled its editorial on the Barnes proposal: “Welcome Push for Stronger KC Mayor.”

Kansas City Mayor Kay Barnes has introduced the most radical—and welcome—suggestions for changes in the City Charger since the document went into effect 75 years ago,

the editorial began, exploding a bombshell over the tomb of the late Star mogul William Rockhill Nelson. “Barnes wants the mayor’s office to have much more power to run the day-to-day operations of City Hall,” said the Editorial Board.

She wants the mayor to be the city’s chief executive officer, while the City Council members would become a legislative body that sets policies for local government.

The Star said that it strongly agreed. “Local government needs to be more accountable to the people of Kansas City,” it said.

With new powers in the office of mayor, a single person would have the duty and the ability to make major changes at 12th and Oak. Bureaucracy could be reduced. Government reactions to problems—such as poor restaurant inspections or pitifully inadequate snow removal—could come more quickly.

The Star noted that the mayor was doubtful that improvement in Kansas City government would be possible under the council-manager plan, and said that it agreed that her criticisms are on target. We have watched for years as one mayor after another—and one City Council after another—have come up with good ideas on how to improve government services, only to run into a morass of outdated regulations, lame excuses and walls of resistance within the entrenchment of the city staff. Having a stronger mayor would be good for all Kansas Citians who want that kind of bureaucratic sludge removed at City Hall. ("Welcome Push" B8)

Despite apparent support for change, it proved impossible to overcome the strength of the vested interests behind the scenes. A measure did make it to the ballot where it went down to defeat, but this says little regarding voter satisfaction with the status quo. What the voters saw on their ballots had little to do with the mayor’s original pro-
proposal. That proposal had been so weakened as to accomplish virtually nothing in the way of providing authority to the mayor, effectiveness to the government, or any threat to those with vested interests in maintaining the fragmentation of municipal power.

Conclusion

Regardless of the outcome, for a time there must have been whirling within the graves of long-time Starsmen, just as there were cries of objection from long-time council-manager advocates and supporters of “reform” government. Whatever the virtues of “professional, non-partisan government” may be, Kansas City’s experience demonstrates that they do not guarantee clean and efficient municipal services. That experience also demonstrates that many of the objections to the plan of its critics—inhibited democracy, lessened responsiveness, enhanced position of economic elites, and the like—certainly are valid, at least under circumstances such as those in Kansas City.

The experience of another significant Midwestern river community is evidence that unhappy experience with council-manager government does not require the unique set of conditions that characterize Kansas City. In 2001 Cincinnati’s governmental failures became prominent in national headlines. The one in the Christian Science Monitor read “Cincinnati’s Woes Rooted in 1920s Reforms” (Belsie 3).

Cincinnati adopted the council-manager plan 75 years previously, and “critics say the city’s once-revolutionary system of governing has generated mistrust and a lack of leadership.” The political machinery has grown unwieldy and, critics say, unresponsive. That creakiness—along with a series of blunders by city leaders—has led to charges of police brutality and arrogant leadership.

In the last six years, “at least 15 black males (and no whites) have died at the hands of city police,” but as a merit appointee, the police chief is beyond the reach of the voters.

Political observers lay the blame at the feet of several mayors and city councils. But one of the biggest problems, they add, stems from the structure of local government. (Belsie 3)

That government, under which there has not even been a directly-elected mayor, perhaps has placed even more barriers in the way of political leadership than has the plan in Kansas City.

For the first time in three-quarters of a century, what had long since been the city’s orthodoxy had been open to serious and public question. The conventional wisdom in Kansas City—that commitment to the council-manager plan is, beyond question, the prerequisite to good government—was for the first time subjected to public scrutiny. Despite its failure, that scrutiny did lead to doubts. Advocates of change, however, underestimated the force of those who benefit from the status quo. It was the planning commission that emasculated the mayor’s proposals, but as though that were not enough, the City Council—with its members protecting their own positions—gutted them still further. The end was clear when the mayor acquiesced. Thus, at least for the time being, council-manager government remains secure in Kansas City. It is clear that the city’s commitment to the council-manager plan, regardless of its justification, is as much a clear reflection of political ideology as it is a necessary dictate of logic or of administrative philosophy.

Notes

1On managerialism as an ideology, and for a more extensive discussion of the council-manager plan, see Max J. Skidmore, Ideologies: Politics in Action.


4The definitive work on the Union Station Massacre is Robert Unger, The Union Station Massacre: The Original Sin of J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI.

Works Cited


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