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ASSESSMENTS

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The Mayor-Manager Merger

Council-manager cities and strong-mayor cities aren't polar opposites anymore. Most cities have aspects of both systems.

It may sound bizarre to associate city managers with wild beasts, but I had a "lions' den" feeling a couple of weeks ago when I gave a speech to the annual conference of the International City/County Management Association.

It wasn't that the audience was hostile or scary. City managers are nice people. But I came to talk to them as the editor of a magazine that has, for the nearly 20 years of its existence, had a stormy relationship with ICMA and the city management profession.

Just about every time we have written about the city-manager system (or council-manager government, as it is technically known) at least a few ICMA members have concluded that we were out to discredit their professionalism and abandon urban America to the whims of partisan and corrupt strong-mayor rule.

Not all of them put it quite that way. Some of our critics have been thoughtful and polite, as when Robert O'Neill, ICMA's current executive director, warned us that the "quick fix of empowering the

mayor...will not solve the challenge of inadequate political and policy leadership." But others were just angry, as in the case of a veteran city manager complaining, "It is to be regretted that a magazine of Governing's caliber publishes drivel because one of its authors has to create a straw man to prove his point."

We have never been able to predict just how city managers would react to anything we said about them. The only thing we knew for sure was that they would react.

How this came about is a long story, but one that's worth telling. It might point to a few lessons about public-sector management in general, as well as the direction of local governance in the coming years.The first sign of tension showed up in 1990, when I went down to Texas to do a story on Camille Barnett, the dynamic and highly visible city manager of Austin. After a couple of days there, it seemed clear to me that Barnett was by far the most important political presence in Austin, and that Mayor Lee Cooke, who had no administrative authority of his own, played a largely ceremonial role. I wrote that, and made the further point that in the increasingly complex urban environment of the 1990s, this would happen in more and more places. City managers would have to adjust to a much more visible — and more overtly political — role than they were used to playing.

That story drew a heated response from a surprising source: Camille Barnett herself. She wrote in to say I had gotten it wrong, that Mayor Cooke, not she, was the real leader. My first reaction to her letter was to think that Camille was an even better politician than I had realized. My second reaction was that I had been reminded of an important truth: It is an article of faith among city managers that they are merely administrators and do not involve themselves in politics. To question that principle, even in what may seem obvious circumstances, was to upset a lot of people in the profession.

Then, in 1993, my colleague Rob Gurwitt wrote a long piece about the incontestable fact that many of the largest cities operating under a city-manager system were considering a change in their structure of government. Citizens were complaining that the problem was an absence of politically accountable leadership, and that only an elected mayor with full administrative authority could supply it.

There was nothing incendiary about that story: Rob even concluded with a warning that good leadership wasn't a matter of governmental structure at all — it was a matter of finding the right people. But it wasn't the conclusion of the story, or even the details, that set off a controversy. It was this headline: "The Lure of the Strong Mayor." Those words in big black type at the top of the page seemed to be an affront to city managers all around the country,

and to saddle Rob — and by implication Governing magazine — as the enemy.

A few years later, when Rob wrote a story about how Hartford seemed to be languishing under its city-manager system, that it needed "a stronger hand" than it had been able to muster, perhaps even a strong mayor, he and I got a spanking from Bill Hansell, ICMA's long-time executive director. "Hartford's problem," Hansell told us, was that its leaders didn't understand "how to make this highly successful model work for them."

That may very well have been true. But it set me to wondering what makes city managers as a group so sensitive to perceived slights. At some point over the years, Governing has said critical things about all kinds of public officials — from governors to drain commissioners. But we rarely get mail complaining that we have insulted their entire profession — except from city managers.

There's a reason for that, as I've gradually come to appreciate. Unlike all the other groups that speak for public officials, the ICMA represents not just an office but an idea: that municipal government can be made clean and efficient through the appointment of a non-political manager who makes administrative decisions on the basis of disinterested common sense and sound business principles. It's an idea that, over the past 90 years, has in fact lifted numerous cities out of the morass of partisanship, corruption and nepotism. It is the creed that generations of city managers have been taught in public administration school, and they have spent long, honorable careers defending it.

The heightened sensitivity of city managers might suggest that they feel they are under siege. But judged by raw numbers, they are doing pretty well. Two decades ago, 35 percent of all localities with more than 2,500 people used the council-manager system. Now, that figure is 48 percent. Every year, more communities switch to the system than away from it.

On the other hand, it's the bigger cities that people notice, and in the past decade, some of the biggest ones that used to have traditional city managers have moved toward stronger mayors. That list includes San Diego, Oakland, Cincinnati, Hartford and Spokane, among others. During that same period only one city of comparable size — El Paso — moved in the other direction. So it's understandable if city managers get a little touchy when they read headlines such "The Lure of the Strong Mayor." A lot is at stake for them.

But what's really going on? Is the city manager system holding its own, as the numbers seem to suggest? Or is it in trouble, as one might conclude by looking at the big cities. There's a simple answer to that question: It's the wrong question to ask.

Over the past decade, painstaking research by H. George Frederickson of the University of Kansas, along with other public administration scholars, has documented that traditional city-manager government — and old-fashioned strong-mayor government — are neither gaining nor losing. What they are doing is merging. Cities with managers are taking on many of the characteristics of political cities, such as directly elected mayors and councils chosen by district. Meanwhile, classic strong-mayor cities are adopting characteristics of the managerial system, such as non-partisan chief administrative officers, civil-service protection and carefully monitored purchasing procedures. Only a small fraction of cities can still be labeled "political" or "managerial" in any clear-cut sense. Most, according to Frederickson, are "adapted cities," leaning toward one form or the other but with significant aspects of both. An increasing number have jumbled the systems together so thoroughly that it's impossible to put them in any category at all.

In "The Adapted City," the 2004 book that summarizes this research, Frederickson, Gary A. Johnson and Curtis H. Wood argue that virtually all American cities are searching for the same three qualities: leadership, responsiveness and administrative effectiveness. As a result, they say, "American cities are increasingly like one another structurally." Placing them in strict categories is a game that becomes more meaningless all the time.

In the past few years, much of ICMA has come to accept this idea. Executive Director O'Neill talks about the need to move away from "either-or" distinctions, agrees that no job title has a monopoly on leadership, and says that anybody who runs a city according to sound professional practices is engaged in city management, regardless of how the local charter reads or elections work.

Still, it takes a long time for new ideas to permeate a profession, especially one as steeped ir traditional values as that of city managers. When Cincinnati voted in 1991 to change its charter, taking some powers away from the manager and giving them to the mayor, an angry dispute broke out within ICMA over whether the city should still be identified as practicing council-manager government. Some of the wounds from that dispute have not healed.

But as all the recent scholarly research shows, what matters in the end isn't how a city is governed but how well. That's a principle on which the city managers and the editors of Governing can finally — I hope — come to a happy truce.virtually all cities are searching for the same qualities: leadership, responsiveness and administrative effectiveness.

Jack Pardue illustration