

How North Carolina Cut Down 'Running Expenses'

Noted Writer Gives Some Facts Regarding North Carolina Government

Not a day goes by in the State of North Carolina without some one writing about the government.

In spite of wide-spread criticism, the American municipal government during the past thirty years has improved steadily in efficiency, economy and honesty. The same might be said with important reservations concerning our State governments. At the dawn of the century no State had a budget system. By 1932 forty-seven of them had taken to the budget—and the one exception Arkansas, was bankrupt.

In 1900 the Governors of most States were only nominally the executive heads of their administrations. From five to twelve other State officials, often belonging to an opposition party, were elected by the people and had the constitutional right to defy a chief executive.

Steadily Governors have acquired more real power, have moved nearer the ideal condition of representative government—a responsible head under the eye of a Legislature with the power of impeachment. Or, as Pudd'nhead Wilson expressed it: "Put all your eggs in one basket—and watch that basket."

A few of the States, like Maryland and New Hampshire, have reorganized their bureaus, put their expert services into the hands of real experts, installed modern bookkeeping methods. Nearly half of the rest have moved in this direction.

These States can save very little more except by the process of shaving those services which the citizen demands—like care of public health, education and maintenance of roads. But the smaller units—municipalities, townships, counties and "special"—are the great squanderers of our tax money.

These small governments, according to our experts on taxation, form the black spot in American democracy. It is also the spot where we can save most to the taxpayer by sensible reorganization. The stake is titanic—between two and three billion dollars a year!

Now the States are nominally sovereign over these small divisions. By revision of their constitutions and a majority vote of their citizens the States could even annihilate them.

In practice, old habits embalm custom, archaic laws and the cohesive force of three million political jobholders keep things pretty much as they were at the beginning of the century—or of the last century, for that matter.

Yet Virginia has dared to squeeze the thistle and found that it doesn't prick. She has largely taken to the State itself such powers as road building and education, persuaded her counties to combine, for such functions as care of prisoners, and the poor, opened the way for amalgamation of counties and the sensible, business-like county manager system.

Another State, North Carolina, has gone even further in another direction. She is on the way to gather almost every function of government, outside of the incorporated towns, into the hands of the State. The former, county with scores of minor officials half of them useless, and with no executive head is the comedian and spendthrift of our American political scheme. North Carolina it would seem, is on the way to abolish the county by leaving it nothing to do.

North Carolina was almost wholly agricultural in 1900. When the New England cotton manufacturers began to move South it became important industrially. It built up the resorts in its low, beautiful mountains. Wealth multiplied. And the State with a new energetic element in control, started to create a physical plant worthy of its destiny. Notably it built a system of hard and semi-hard roads scarcely excelled in this country. As happened nearly everywhere in boom times, the small units of government went optimistic and plunged into debt.

When in 1929 the crash came they found themselves distinctly embarrassed. Thirty towns and counties went into bankruptcy; others tottered on the edge. By 1931 some counties

inhabitant of a city or incorporated town has such a school of politics in his local government. The inhabitant of a rural district in the State at least has an equivalent opportunity for daily education.

North Carolina plan, in fact, is a great political machine that is working only a little better. The Virginia plan makes a more complete use of the State's resources.

When the session adjourned the State of North Carolina, as contrasted with its counties, had sole charge of the two most important practical activities of a modern American State—education and highways.

Just as completely, it had taken over that important secondary function—care of prisoners. Further, it had asserted its sovereignty over the finances of the towns and counties within its borders by providing that they could contract no bonded indebtedness without permission of a State board.

Now the State conducts the road building and road maintenance, from purchase of supplies to sweeping of cement. Ignoring the old local units, which used to work loosely under control from the capital, it put a good road engineer in charge of the whole job, appointed five other experts to command subdivisions, selected from the county road officials those who best knew their jobs and made them non-commissioned officers in this army.

Officials in the backward counties had in former years a way of building dirt roads, and letting them go to pieces for lack of care. Today, every inch of road in North Carolina is patrolled by a man responsible for its maintenance.

Being semi-tropical, North Carolina has usually handled her prisoners in camps, rather than in jails. The Southern chain gang, under small, limited county management, has often furnished awful examples to the prison reformers.

The State, took over the whole business of prison camps, put in charge of men who understand modern methods, set 4,000 prisoners to work on the roads. Having at all times a general strategic plan, the directors of this prison system could send the gangs to any point in the State where they might be needed.

The State government assumed full charge of education. It began by guaranteeing every child within its borders six months of schooling every year. A State official appoints the local superintendents. Here, as in the road work, the central authorities make concessions to local feeling. But they are only the hands of the State.

And in 1932 North Carolina not only gave, in these three departments, better service than before, but it had cut taxes on land by about \$12,000,000—20 per cent. That was a period of transition, involving extra expense. North Carolina expects to do even better this year.

The citizens have accepted this change with singularly little fuss and opposition. North Carolina may in time go the whole route—take over all functions of government, except in the towns, and administer such of them under a single head responsible to the Legislature, the Governor and the voters. If that ever happens the expensive, outdated county governments must fold up and die of anæmia.

No one doubts that this strong centralization would be the most economical and efficient form of State government under modern conditions.

But another consideration aside from economy and efficiency makes many experts prefer the Virginia plan. If we are to preserve the spirit of representative democracy we must preserve also some measure of local government. The small political affairs of a small unit furnish an unrivalled school of citizenship.

There the citizen and voter learns how to distinguish between gold and brass; there our future leaders get their primary education. The

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