

TOWN COUNCIL OF 300.

Change in Government of Brookline Proposed.

Massachusetts is watching with deep interest the course the town of Brookline is taking for the abolishment of the time-honored and historic town meeting system of municipal government there, and the substitution of a town council, which shall have the powers now possessed by the town in town meeting. There has been no public question considered in recent years in Brookline that has brought out more discussion in less than two weeks. It is the opinion of hundreds of the townspeople that, should the legislature pass an act to enable Brookline to establish a town council, to be limited in numbers, and it proves successful, it will afford the most effective solution for a radical improvement in American city governments that has been broached.

Professor Bryce, in his great work, "The American Commonwealth," says: "The town meeting has been the most perfect school of self-government in any modern country."

That author also says: "If we compare the New England scheme with that of England of today, we are struck not only by the greater simplicity of the former, but also by the fact that it is the smaller organisms, the towns, that are the most powerful and most highly vitalized."

Again he wrote: "Of the three or four types or systems of local government which I have described, that of the town or township, with its popular primary assembly, is admittedly the best. It is the cheapest and the most efficient; it is the most educative to the citizens who bear a part in it. The town meeting has been not only the source, but the school, of democracy."

Thomas Jefferson, who wished the system to be transplanted to Virginia, was the author of the famous eulogium: "Those wards called townships in New England are the vital principles of their government, and have proved themselves the wisest inventions ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government and its preservation."

Since Jefferson's day the town meeting system has attained a degree of efficiency far beyond

anything of the kind then known, especially as exemplified by the town of Brookline. But it as long been realized in Brookline that a change must come with the rapid growth of the town. The present decade, from 1890 to 1900, witnesses an increase in the population of Brookline of from about 12,000 to about 20,000, and the next decade will undoubtedly bring it proportionally greater accessions.

Observant citizens in Brookline forestalled all this, and bided their time un-

til the decisive moment came for action. That time is now recognized as at hand, and the course to be taken has been disclosed for the public consideration, with characteristic Brookline promptness and confidence.

A town that set defiance to the powerful local and state agencies brought to bear 20 years ago to put it out of existence as a township, approached the present issue calmly and intelligently, fortified by the assured position it now holds, which rests upon an unparalleled record of successful administrative autonomy.

While Brookline's present action is prompt, it is not considered hasty by the major part of the citizens. They say no more deliberate community exists in the state. Its leading citizens never attempt to "rush" the town. The exercise of patience in dealing with the public has been a notable feature in the conduct of Brookline's affairs. But, given a general recognition of an exigency, and an intelligent, prudent, conservative remedy, and Brookline responds with alacrity, rather than incur the perils of sluggishness and somnolence.

This has just received a striking illustration, for during the last fortnight nearly 200 of Brookline's representative men, from the various walks of life, and taxed for many millions of dollars of property, have united in a petition for a special town meeting, to consider an application to the next general court for the creation of a town council in Brookline, to be limited in numbers, and to take the place of the town meeting when acting upon the fiscal and general affairs of the town.

They are a unit in the belief that this action indicates no haste, but merely a prompt recognition of the fact that the time has come for action, in a matter long anticipated, and long under consideration by leading citizens. Hardly one-third of the voters can now gain access to the town hall for deliberations at town meetings, and where public spirit is strong and general as in Brookline, if not even a majority can take part in debate and in voting, the propriety of some satisfactory equivalent for the present system becomes self-evident.

The idea of a town council, in name at least, is not new. More than a century ago, in 1791, a

The Idea. committee of 21 inhabitants of leading influence of the period reported a new system of government creating a town council for the town of Boston, which then had about the same number of people that Brookline has today, such town council to be composed of two men from each ward, with the selectmen. But this system was rejected by the inhabitants. It went from one extreme to the other;

from that of an unlimited, or rather impracticable, town meeting to a very small—too small—body.

Later in its history, and prior to Boston's acceptance of a city charter in 1822, other modifications of a town council were proposed, but none of them was accepted, for they were all too violent a departure from the town meeting idea so strongly imbedded among the Boston people of that day.

In Rhode Island the functions of the selectmen were performed by a body long known by statute law as the town council, of from three to five in number.

The present Brookline plan of a town council is based upon an experience far surpassing that of Boston, or any other community which has tested the town meeting system. The men of Brookline of years ago had nothing like the experience and tests which signalize Brookline's splendid record.

The entire municipal expenses of Boston 100 years ago, in 1799, were only \$49,061, or about \$135 a day. Even up to 1822, when Boston became a city, with about 43,000 people, its annual expense was only \$249,170; whereas the annual expenses of Brookline are now about \$1,500,000, or about \$4,000 a day. Boston's fiscal operations a century ago were a mere bagatelle when compared with those of the Manhattan Club, for instance, of New York, which are about \$1,500 a day.

The merits of the proposed Brookline town council are simplicity and efficiency, according

The Merits. to those advocating the change, with the least practical departure from familiar and long tried conditions, keeping in view the demands to arise from an increasing population. The amount of property or money to be handled does not disturb Brookline people; for under the thorough system of accounting which they employ, and the watchful scrutiny of the town, they feel assured that they can manage any increase of their fiscal operations as successfully as heretofore.

But the size of the body to finally pass on appropriations, apart from elections, must be limited. That is common sense to Brooklineites. The only question is, what number shall be chosen as a sufficient body in which to repose public confidence?

On the whole, a town council of about 300 chosen citizens, 60 from each of five precincts, together with the chief elected town officers, is thought to be reasonably safe. That avoids the extremes upon which Boston's former citizens differed, and it conforms more to what the great experience of Brookline suggests as a safer number.

It may be asked, why has not this been suggested before? The answer seems to be that Not Suggested Before. never before in any other community than Brookline has the genuine town meeting been put