

The City's Consultants

The history of New York municipal government during the past few years has been a gelatinous struggle to revise its outmoded equipment—Charter, zoning, administrative organization—to deal with a staggering multiplicity of problems in modern terms and with up-to-date methods. When he took office, Mayor Lindsay inherited a creaky 19th-century apparatus whose gears had been stripped by endless political accommodation. The very magnitude of the modern municipal workload and the unprecedented nature of today's urban problems required radical new techniques.

The dubious clubhouse mystique of conventional political wisdom is no substitute for the necessary tools of modern administrative management. The city is tragically underskilled and understaffed. Comprehensive evaluation by trained specialists, systems analysis and computerized data are a way to speed the city's workings and to incorporate essential expertise into its own agencies. New York is moving into sophisticated and necessary areas of planning it has only begun to recognize as the key to its destiny.

The absurdity of the *status quo* can be illustrated by the fact that it has been virtually impossible to find out where almost any capital construction project stands in the lumbering labyrinth of city procedures, starting with an almost meaningless line in the capital budget, and ending, with luck, in construction a decade later. It took a consultant, plowing through interdepartmental chaos, to find out, and to make corrective suggestions.

The Charter's "strong Mayor" government, so valiantly fought for as a way to make the city move, puts consulting contracts into executive hands without public hearing, Board of Estimate approval, or competitive bids. It is true that this procedure may carry with it some risk; and watchdog actions such as Controller Abraham Beame's recent questions on consultant contracts are entirely in order. The real danger of any new procedure on a large scale is that it can become one more vehicle for familiar ills—pork barrel and bureaucracy—both of which are immortal. Municipalities risk becoming sitting ducks for a new breed of opportunist, the carpetbagger consultant riding the coattails of legitimate specialists.

But current proposals to revise the City Charter by requiring Board approval of every consultant contract over \$10,000 involve the even greater risk of restoring a heavy dose of old-fashioned glue to the machinery of city government. And to deny that today's complex and troubled society has bred an able and essential kind of specialist, or to pretend that such specialists are not needed by cities or that they exist in sufficient quantity even within the most progressive civil service, is to wear blinders from the past. There is no need for rose-colored glasses or green eyeshades now; what is required is the best that technology and philosophy can contribute toward the survival of the cities.