Politics and Efficiency of
the Commission Form of Government

Henry Sillman,
Ladysmith, Wis.

With the paying of taxes becoming more and more an exception than a general rule, governmental economy and efficiency are the topic of discussion everywhere today. As a consequence, many activities of our County Governments are either curtailed or entirely eliminated.

As soon as we are in a position to do so, we trade our old obsolete and inefficient car in on a new, modern, economical and efficient automobile. Is it not as logical for us to trade off our old-fashioned, obsolete and inefficient form of government for one that is modern, equitable, economical and efficient?

Take the Supervisor form of County Board. They give us every opportunity for inefficiency and needless waste. In the first place, the Supervisor Form of County Government does not give equitable representation. For example, in Rusk County we have several towns with around one hundred population. Under the Supervisor form of Government, the Town Chairman of such sparsely populated towns would have as much power in determining the policies and practices of the County as a Chairman of a Town with five hundred or a thousand population.

In such cases much "peanut politics" or political maneuvering, can and does take place in pairing with other Supervisors to steamroller projects through at the expense of the other Towns and the County.

The Town Chairman have charge of spending funds appropriated for County projects in their respective towns. As a consequence, many Town Chairmen are in favor of high levies for the large sums of money it gives to spend, and the possibility of giving out jobs, thus creating political power.

Under the Commission plan, the towns are districted according to population, eliminating this evil.

In view of the fact that Supervisor County Boards are required to meet once, and do not meet over three or perhaps four times a year, much detailed work is allotted to committees. This creates a mad scramble for committee places in order to receive favors or be able to give them. With the Commission form of Government we have in Rusk County, this is eliminated by the Board being the one and only committee. With the Commissioner more remote from local influences, than is the case with the Supervisor, better and more capable men are elected to office.

I have known of men being elected to Town offices, not on their merits, not on their ability to perform in the interest of all concerned, but because the person needs the office for the wage it gives. Feature such a man serving on the County Board of Supervisors, running the affairs of the County when he is a failure in
his own business. They would merely be rubber stamps to the more aggressive leaders.

With three or four leaders running the Supervisor Board, why not adopt the Commission Form of County Board, and eliminate the "dead timber"?

The question immediately arises, has the Commission Form of County Board any effect or influence on the election of the other County Officers? No, the Commission Form of County Board merely reduces the number of men on the board. The other County Officers, as Sheriff, Treasurer, Superintendent of Schools, etc., etc., are elected as usual.

Another question which may frequently come up is, how is the County districted? The county is districted by the County Board, on the same basis as the states, Senatorial and Congressional Districts are divided; on the basis of the census as taken by the United States Government.

In voting for Commissioner, the voter only votes for the man representing his district.

A very gratifying example of speed and efficiency of the Commissioners is shown by the way the farmers feed loans were handled in Rusk County. The Commissioners laid out a program of road construction or rebuilding in various parts of the County and today almost all of the feed loans have been worked off. In an adjoining county, to my knowledge, nothing has been done in regard to working off the feed loans, up to the present time.

I have here an article appearing in a recent issue of Madison, Wisconsin, Capital Times which I will read in part:

"Rusk County saves 39% by Board change. If Dane County adopts the Commission Form of Government, it is reasonable to suppose that savings here would be as great as those of Rusk County.

In the past six years, including 1933, costs of operating the Dane County Board of Supervisors have totalled $67,700.18.

If Dane County could cut 39% from its governmental operating costs as did Rusk County, the savings for a six year period would be $26,403.07, or $4,400.00 per year.

The old County Board cut appropriations to the bone in the fall of 1927, knowing that the administration would fall in the hands of the Commissioners the next year.

The Commissioners not only lived within the appropriations, but made savings in several accounts."

The obligations totalling over $22,000 were contracted by the County Board of Supervisors during a period of prosperous years, and were paid off by the Commissioners during the World's greatest depression, without handicapping any necessary County Governmental functions.
Such evidence speaks well for the Commission Form of County Government.

On April 5, 1932, after four years of operation, a referendum ballot was submitted to the voters to either retain the Commission Form of County Board, or go back to the Supervisor Form. The resulting ballot was very decidedly in favor of retaining the Commissioners.

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Mr. Ewbank (Chairman):

We are naturally interested in comparing the supervisory and commission forms at as many points as possible. Mr. E. L. Murch will compare the two systems on points not covered in the last two speeches.

Comparison of the Commission and the Supervisory Forms of County Government

E. L. Murch,
Weyerhalnser, Wis.

It may be interesting to you people to know background of the delegation from Rusk County. Perhaps you think that we are hand-picked Marinets coming down here to give the opinion of the minority of the county and therefore we do not represent the true sentiment of the county. This is not the case. Mr. Justus is President of the Holstein Breeders Assn. of Rusk County and is supervisor of his town, Mr. Sillman is Secretary of the Rusk County Farmers' Union and I, the least respectable of all, belong to the American Society of Equity, The Milk Pool, The Holiday Assn., and have joined the most militant group of the Farmers' Union. If there is any possible chance to kick, believe me, I will use my mouth if not my brains and make plenty of noise about it.

If I were asked what were the worst mistakes of the commissioners, I would have to say as yet we have been unable to find any bad ones. If I were asked, what was the main reason why we changed from the Supervisors to the Commissioner Form, I would say as I look back to those meetings which were held throughout the county back in 1927 that it was the impossibility of placing responsibility and the use by the supervisors of that principle so well developed, if you will scratch my back, I will scratch yours.

To make that clear I will have to explain the law known on the Statute Books as improvement of town and village initiative. Under this law a town may raise this money by taxing all taxable property in the county. It is clear then that one section of the county had to pay for improvements in the other and if a town were to receive any benefit from the money it paid in, it must have road or bridge improvement work going on all the time. Much of this improvement was not needed and a lot of it was very wasteful. Our county had raised money and spent it liberally yet in the peak of our Coolidge prosperity we had not been able to get the money to pay for this work as fast as the county was committed to spend it.