
A strong argument can be made that the single most important political institution in the complex American system of government is the state legislature. In spite of the growing role of the central government, the national Congress and the President still function in only limited areas; and even then often through programs which are modified and differentiated by state decisions. All local governments, at the other end of the spectrum, do only those things authorized by state legislation. The General Assembly of a state is a key institution, involved directly or indirectly in many national and all local activities, as well as those of the states themselves.

Like most political institutions, especially those deeply rooted in history, the form and functioning of most state legislatures have lagged behind the rapidly changing needs and urgencies of the times. This report, produced by an official Illinois commission composed of a dozen legislators and ten citizens, includes eighty-seven recommendations for substantial and significant reforms and renovations in the Illinois legislature and its procedures. The recommendations are clearly and persuasively presented and justified; it is hard to escape the conclusion that the Assembly would be far more effective if the proposals should be adopted.

In spite of (or perhaps even because of) its extensive proposals for change, the report is basically a conservative document. It aims at the preservation and strengthening of an historic institution, and it envisions essentially the same role for the institution which the state’s first constitution-makers had in mind—a role for which its present structure and practices are not very adequate. The recommendations are for substantial changes, but not radical ones. Combining the two houses into one is not even considered, though joint interim committees and a joint committee on rules are proposed. The commission specifically rejects the concept of a full-time professional body in favor of the traditional citizen, part-time, representative assembly. To enable such a body to deliberate effectively, the commission proposes annual sessions; one-year appropriation bills; greatly enlarged and improved staff services in drafting, summarizing, indexing, and publishing bills; reductions in the number of committees; full-time professional staff for the important legislative committees during the sessions and interim committees between sessions; modern mechanical office and secretarial services; and revised procedures and schedules.

There is much in the report that would be just as valuable for Illinois’ sister state of Indiana.

Indiana University

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