

Mayor Grady's First Year

Sun

MAY 19 1960

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On today's first anniversary of his inauguration, Mayor Grady faces the same problems that he did a year ago, with prospects for solution not much improved.

How strictly a new Administration should be marked on material change in its first year is a matter on which its friends and foes will disagree.

Mr. Grady himself concedes that the tangible gains of the past year have been peripheral. The central problem facing the city remains the same as it was last year, when he rode on a wave of political change and popular discontent over the fiscal muddle to a record majority in the Democratic primary and an easy victory in the general election.

Preparation of the 1960 budget, which began within a few months of the inauguration, was a time of some confusion, and unexpected discord. Some of the promised budget cutting was accomplished but was more than offset by forced growth in essential city services. Whether another Administration would have cut more or less is a matter only of speculation.

Closer to the crux of the city's financial problem is the quest for a new tax which will eliminate the need for continued increases in the property tax rate.

Here the prospects, at this writing, are for a repetition this fall of last year's budget crisis. Mr. Grady has committed himself to a metropolitan earnings tax, based on sources of income rather than on residence, as the best long-run solution.

The odds are very much against the city's winning authority to impose the earnings tax this year. Mr. Grady himself admits he has little hope of accomplishing it this year.

He is hoping rather that the joint city-State committee on tax problems will agree on a regional sales tax for the city and adjoining counties or on a surcharge on the State income tax, individual and corporate, to be imposed for the city and counties.

Such an agreement, if indorsed by Governor Tawes and accepted by the county Administrations, would provide an acceptable stop-gap, in Mr. Grady's opinion. Both taxes would have some growth potential but would not be as desirable as the earnings tax, he believes.

The past year's history of the tax debate provides representative samples of arguments pro and con over the Grady Administration's performance during the past year. The city has obviously failed to accomplish what it set out to do. But could anyone else have done any better?

Critics argue that Mr. Grady (who must take the brunt of the criticism simply because he is Mayor) handled his campaign ineptly. He went through the motions of "consulting" important groups in the community when all the evidence indicated his mind was already made up. It was one of the few instances when the Mayor took a firm stand on an issue, but then he failed to follow through.

Instead of attempting to line up support for his program at the outset he held the series of inconclusive semi-public conferences. He took his stand openly in a series of television talks and then looked to Annapolis for the unpopular decisions which had to be made there.

Lacking any political lever with which to force action in Annapolis, Mr. Grady failed to make any perceptible effort to mobilize support within the community which might have helped to bring pressure on Governor Tawes and city members of the Legislature.

The negotiations between the Governor, who city officials feel holds the key to solution, and the Mayor were carried out largely at arm's length, through an exchange of letters which reached the press about as quickly as they did the addressee.

Just how much help Mr. Grady was entitled to expect from the Governor is another matter which depends on the observer's point of view. An analysis of his tactics hinges on an unknown factor: did the Mayor really hope to win authority to impose an earnings tax last year?

Reviewing the campaign many months later, he referred to last fall's apparent debacle as "a conditioning process rather than a productive process." The implication of this assessment, perhaps made with the benefits of hindsight, is that Mr. Grady believes many months, possibly years, of "educating" must precede accomplishment. This view is buttressed by his frank admission that he is not at all optimistic over prospects for the earnings tax next year.

Mr. Grady claims among the accomplishments of his regime the bringing of the tax debate out into the open, where it can be waged in public view. He also claims credit, with considerable justice, for having the political courage to identify himself with a new tax, creating a public image of himself usually avoided by office holders.

Criticisms of the Mayor's handling of the tax problem are not typical of complaints about his conduct in office in one important respect. Where in

the tax debate he did take a firm position, even if he did not win, his critics generally accuse him of dallying with important problems and avoiding as long as possible important decisions.

An objective observer must give considerable weight to this complaint. Mr. Grady's "soft sell" approach to electioneering, which contributed to his popular appeal, has been carried over into the administration of his office with much less success.

Discounting the complaints, some overt and some private, made about the Mayor's performance by those with axes to grind, high-ranking officials with no personal rancor for him have still wondered aloud whether Mr. Grady has much stomach for the stresses of his post.

Several highly reputable persons who have official contact with the Mayor have described conferences at which he has seemed to recoil at the dumping on his desk of another decision to be made. Remarks such as these have become less frequent in recent months, suggesting the possibility that the initial experiences were just those of a shakedown period.

There have been instances of late in which Mr. Grady has acted with vigor against substantial opposition and won out. An example is the recent heavily debated proposition to turn the parking meter operations over to a private company.

The proposal seemed certain to be accepted by the Board of Estimates until the Mayor openly declared his opposition, compelling three of his four colleagues on the board to backtrack. Those who wish him well have pointed to this incident as a possible sign of new assurance in his policy-molding role.

But it is still true that it usually takes considerable time to get action from the Mayor's office. Mr. Grady inevitably spends a great deal of time at ceremonial functions and in receiving delegations which feel they must speak only with him. The lack of an effective staff system in his office, a defect the Mayor says he recognizes but has thus far failed to remedy, tends to keep productivity low while he is otherwise engaged.

This discussion of the Administration's performance has centered on the Mayor because he is, in fact, the Administration. Despite campaign promises that he, Mr. Goodman, the Council president, and Dr. Graham, the comptroller, would work as a team, the contrary has been closer to the truth.

Mr. Goodman has publicly and Dr. Graham has privately complained that the Mayor goes off on his own without consulting them. There is, of course, some truth in that, but whether it is a wholly fair criticism is another matter entirely.

Both officials have digressed from the Administration's line on important occasions and both have acted independently of the others in matters on which the Administration would normally be expected to take a unified stand.

The complaint of Mr. Goodman and Dr. Graham against the Mayor is ironic, for the source of their discontent is more likely the opposite of what they say.

There is considerable evidence that each thought, when he teamed up with a political novice in the primary campaign, that he would be able to manipulate Mr. Grady and become the real power at City Hall.

While the open breach of several months ago has been healed, at least superficially, the three officials are bound together by only the flimsiest of ties. The ties are holding at the moment because there is no strong pressure on them.