

policy maker's authority. Still, when all is said and done, deciding the big issues at any level of American government is a political act in which an ombudsman will not share and which he should certainly never seek to displace.

Persons who advocate the ombudsman system because they think that "politician" is a dirty word they would like to expunge from the community vocabulary are badly self-deluded. No matter how expert he may be, no matter how much the public may respect him, an ombudsman can never be a substitute for the political processes that shape the community's choices and set the goals of its administration.

3. A third, somewhat related negative proposition is that the ombudsman cannot possibly be considered a super-administrator who will do a better job than, say, the mayor in superintending departmental activities.

During a six months' period in 1965 the mayor's complaint bureau in Buffalo received more than 5,000 complaints, chiefly concerning alleged shortcomings in municipal services or seemingly uneven exercises of municipal police power. They had to do with such things as removing trash from vacant lots, ending the nuisance of illegally parked cars, enforcing building ordinances and housing laws, repairing leaks in city water lines, repaving the streets and synchronizing traffic regulation devices. Anybody who hopes that an ombudsman will eliminate potholes in the streets, see to it that traffic lights work properly and arrange to have detritus regularly carted away from vacant lots is going to be badly disappointed.

In no foreign country has the ombudsman been a general supervisor of public services or of the public servants who render the services. He has been able to improve the operating agencies' methods for receiving, considering, responding to and acting on service complaints. In a few instances, because of repeated assertions to him that a particular agency has been too slow in replying to complaints, he has investigated the alleged dilatoriness. Sometimes, after investigation, he has reported his conclusion that the agency in question has been doing the best it possibly can with insufficient personnel. But an ombudsman's expressed belief that an operating staff needs to be enlarged in order to give satisfactory service is far different from an actual decision to increase the staff—and it is even further different from deciding that this pothole should be repaired before that one, this vacant lot in a slum area be cleaned up before the rich folks' garbage be removed.

I venture to guess that a municipal ombudsman would have to detach himself from the vast bulk of the substantive complaints urban citizens might wish to dump into his lap. Still, he might strongly decrease their future frequency. Time after time foreign ombudsmen have found that a word of explanation has dissolved a grievance. The same thing would probably happen here. A pertinent episode of apparent but unavoidable delay in removing a fire and health hazard in Buffalo is reported by Professors William H. Angus and Milton Kaplan of the State University of New York at Buffalo in a paper prepared for the American Assembly.

"Although numerous complaints had been received by various City departments about the structure in question, they went unacknowledged while the standard demolition procedure took its usual course. Some form of communication to the complainants that the matter was in hand would undoubtedly have gone a long way towards easing their fears concerning apparent City inaction to meet the abandoned building hazard in this instance. Undoubtedly the same holds true as a general rule where a time lapse necessarily intervenes between the filing of a complaint and governmental action to remedy it."

An ombudsman, in situations like this, might be able to teach municipal administrators the desirability of becoming politely prompt correspondents, but he will never teach them how or even whether to rearrange traffic signals, repair leaks in city water lines or remove automotive carcasses from the streets. A large city's police chief recently boasted that within twenty-four hours he could absolutely end illegal parking in his city. "Of course," he added thoughtfully, "I would have to assign every man in the force to that duty. We might then possibly receive one or two complaints about not performing other duties, I suppose." Deciding the proper order of priorities will continue to be the job of the department head and of the mayor, and the ombudsman will bring no comfort to those who wish that different priorities had been established.