

Fairman C. Cowan



Alexis deTocqueville Meets Fairman C. Cowan A Tribute to a Treasured Friend and Wise Counselor

In 1830, when Alexis deTocqueville visited America one of the features he found most remarkable about our nation was the vast array of civic associations. "Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite," he observed. "Americans use associations to give fêtes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, schools ... In America I often admired the infinite art with which the inhabitants of the United States managed to fix a common goal to the efforts of many men and to get them to advance to it freely."

Tocqueville would have admired Fairman C. Cowan, a true gentleman with the demeanor of an aristocrat and the instincts of a democrat, who helped organize, shaped, and led some of our most important local civic associations over the past fifty years. When Fair passed away on October 14, 2008, Worcester lost one of its finest leaders and best friends, and a worthy model for us all to emulate.

The Research Bureau was a project tailor-made for what Fair cared about – good government, non-partisan research, and sound public policy. And when he believed in a cause, there was no stopping him.

In the early 1980's, a number of Worcester's civic leaders concluded that there was a need for a new organization to conduct independent, non-partisan research on public policy issues to replace municipal staff that had been eliminated under Proposition 2 ½; to assist the new City Manager by suggesting ways of running municipal government more effectively and efficiently; and to monitor the impact of Charter changes on public policies and electoral politics. Fairman was prominent among those leaders. A long-time supporter and advocate of Council-Manager government since moving to his adopted city from Boston in 1955, Fair suggested that we replicate the very successful Boston Municipal Research Bureau, which had been established by Boston's civic leaders in 1932. He traveled to Boston to learn about all facets of the Bureau – its organization, operations, publications, relationships with public officials, and fundraising. As a lawyer, Fair was well-positioned to draft by-laws and convince his comrades of the need for a research bureau in Worcester. And he did so very successfully.

Fair was a member of The Research Bureau's first Executive Committee and served as the first clerk of the organization. His hand-written, completed minutes were always hand-delivered, generally by moped, to The Research Bureau office the day after each Executive Committee meeting. After five years as clerk, Fair then voluntarily retired to make way for "younger" people – as if the younger people could actually keep up with him!



Fair was always full of great suggestions – which usually meant more work for everyone, especially himself. He suggested that to build trust with public officials, we offer to share drafts of reports for their comments prior to publication. This has been the Bureau's policy ever since. He also wanted the Bureau's Executive Committee to review all drafts, which he did religiously. When Fair left the Executive Committee eighteen years ago, he asked to continue to receive drafts. He had the distinction of having read and commented on every single draft report the Bureau produced until earlier this year, when he was no longer able to. He would regularly show up on our doorstep no more than two days after receiving a draft with comments and suggested changes, including grammatical ones!

In 1987, Fair's close friend, distinguished civic leader, and former vice president of the Norton Company, Tom Green, passed away. Fair suggested that to honor his memory, The Research Bureau establish the Thomas S. Green Public Service Awards for outstanding public service by municipal employees. The first awards were bestowed in 1988. Fair served on the selection committee from its inception, often participating at the event by introducing one of the recipients. Fair described his service on the Committee as an "opportunity to make new friends." This year's event was held on September 24th and it was the first one he ever missed.

The Research Bureau's public forums on urban and regional policy issues were another project of Fair's. In 1989, Fair suggested that the Bureau establish an endowment to support our public forums. He secured a \$25,000 commitment, contingent on the Bureau raising a matching amount from other sources. Using his famous powers of persuasion, he secured the matching funds from other local foundations. The yearly interest continues to provide support for The Research Bureau's forums. Fair attended nearly every one of the over 140 forums held during the past twenty-three years, actively participating in the discussions. On several occasions, he wrote letters to the editor (for which he was notorious) chastising his fellow citizens for not attending and getting involved. A few years ago, we held a forum on the morning of an ice storm. Fair was the first to arrive, while I didn't make it until the end because of the icy conditions on the hill on which I live.

Modest and self effacing, Fair always gave credit to others. On only one occasion that I know of did he let his guard down. In a letter he wrote after the Bureau's 20th anniversary celebration at which he was honored, he said the following:

"Despite protestations to the contrary, flattery is always welcome, and I enjoyed hearing all the hype and exaggerated statements which were said about me."

Of course, none of it was exaggerated. Fair was a man who lived life to its fullest. His optimistic and joyful outlook was infectious. While he was born with certain advantages, he never rested on those. I knew him only in his retirement years, and when most folks start taking it easy, Fair kicked it up more than a notch. I have visions of him standing on street corners and near polling stations holding signs for his favorite candidate. For this Amherst and Harvard alum, former Naval Intelligence officer involved in planning the invasion of Normandy, and general counsel of Norton Company, no job was too small. Yes, Fair was a founder of The Research Bureau. But he was so much more – a mentor, a nurturer and a visionary, an example for us all. I believe that Fair would be pleased with his legacy. Tocqueville would still find it remarkable.

Roberta R. Schaefer

