

August 11, 1983

STATEMENT TO MINNEAPOLIS CHARTER COMMISSION
By Richard M. Erdall

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission. As you know, the Citizens League, from its founding in 1952, has maintained a strong interest in the structure of Minneapolis city government.

You have before you tonight a proposal from Mayor Don Fraser, which, in our judgment, is the kind of proposition this body should put before the voters of the city.

Ours is a city with a national reputation, a well deserved one, earned by taking sensible, progressive action, by anticipating our problems and our opportunities. The challenge to the Charter Commission in 1983 is to be anticipatory, to look ahead and envision the kind of government structure our city needs to maintain its vitality.

We are fortunate that this opportunity comes at a time when we have outstanding people in leadership positions. The Mayor and the President of the Council do not always agree, but we are persuaded that they both have the interest of the city as their highest priority. Two years ago, amid discussions of possible charter change, they agreed that divisive atmosphere around City Hall was a serious problem, that bringing the Mayor's office and the City Council closer together would improve the effectiveness of government. Informal changes were made to increase coordination and communication.

These changes rest on a limited legal base, supported only by an ordinance which is necessarily at variance with the charter. And, after two years, the mayor's assessment is that the changes were aimed in the right direction, but that they do not go far enough. We agree. We urge you to give the voters in Minneapolis an opportunity to end the distinction between the council and the mayor, by making the mayor the presiding officer of the council. The Minneapolis City Council has always been a strong body, in a deciding role on policy matters. A consolidation of leadership, rather than weakening the council's role in determining policy, will actually strengthen it by having all the participants at the same table. Moreover, the gains to be made in "managing" the city are likely to be substantial, putting an end to the perennial who's-in-charge question.

The mayor's proposal makes the mayor a non-voting member of the council and retains the mayor's veto power. While we are not persuaded that the whole question ought to turn on this point, it will be controversial. Unfortunately, discussion usually focuses on who is gaining or losing power. The question ought to be what arrangement will work best. While it is not an official Citizens League position, there is growing consensus among many persons--myself included-- that conflict between the council and the mayor can best be reduced by making the mayor a fully participating, voting member of the council. Retention of veto power would not be consistent with this approach. But the mayor, as the only official who is elected city-wide, should have some special prerogatives to assert the city-wide interest. The mayor should propose the annual capital and operating budgets to the council. The mayor's comments should accompany proposals to the council from department heads and agencies. The mayor should be identified as the official spokesperson for the city and should establish the agenda for council meetings, subject, of course, to directives from the full council. One function of the veto, however, should not be

lost. Occasionally in the heat of the moment, or lack of full knowledge, a legislative body will take an action which on reflection seems ill-considered. It would be beneficial to give the mayor the right to comment on and compel reconsideration of an action prior to its becoming final.

Finally, on the matter of the Executive Council, we urge you to set this section aside for the present. The fundamental issue here is bringing about a merger of the offices of the mayor and city council president. If you give the voters a chance to approve that, and if they concur, the new council will certainly work out its preferences in defining leadership positions from among its members. If an executive committee needs to be formally written into the charter, the council will surely urge this commission to take a specific action, on which it has already agreed, in some future year.