ATLAINTA CONSTITUTION

## **Eugene** Patterson

## Arv.21, A Resource 1967 **Of Great Value**

Next Monday the finance committee of the Board of Aldermen will consider its appropriation for an agency that has given Atlanta cause for general thanksgiving, the Community Relations Com-

mission.

Operating with only \$25,000 from the city in its first year, the commission pulled itself together with unexpected effectiveness. It wants \$60,000 to improve its work in the coming year. At a minimum, it needs \$35,000 to \$40,000 to keep its hold on racial problems.

And it has, in fact, taken hold. At the outset nearly everybody took a show-me attitude. What good was a talk shop? Negroes didn't trust the commission and whites called it do-good.

Yet it promptly got on top of a lot of problems, and it functioned.

For the first time a lot of angry people had somebody to talk to. Grass roots organization in the slums is a useful concept. But if there's nobody above who'll listen, grass roots groups are simply organizing their frustrations.

Mayor Ivan Allen used to try to run the whole thing out of his hat. At times he was doing little more than receiving delegations. Likewise the Board of Aldermen, the Board of Education and others had moments when their time was consumed with the business of listening, or else they were denounced for refusing to listen. No agency of government can get away entirely from contact with the citizenry, of course.

But the Community Relations Commission has shown real promise of becoming a listening post for everybody. Its sometimes controversial executive director, Mrs. Eliza Paschall, has the confidence of Negro citizens and this is a key to effectiveness which is lacking in most cities. She keeps the commission in contact with the problem. The biracial commission in turn has kept its brains on straight, under the strong chairmanship of Irving Kaler. Its members have dedicated a lot of energy and time to hearing after hearing, right in the slums.

Atlanta had no riots last summer. The commission had to be part of the reason. It gave people with a buildup of tension some place to blow off. And it gave the city government a realistic appraisal of what needed doing. Not many cities have kept the contact. Their poor feel cut off. Their governments fly blind.

An abstract by-product may be the most important contribu-tor to the commission's success. The members are exposing themselves to the problem raw, not reading about it or riding through the slum peeping at it or sitting uptown and thinking about it. They are learning-and through them, many Atlantans are learning-to converse across lines of class or race or fear, and to listen for the real and the genuine undertones in the angry noise, as opposed to the stylized and exploited issues which frequently aren't the main issues.

If Atlanta didn't have such a commission it would have to invent one. To have one, and to have it going, is a resource of great value for the future.

## The New Commission

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ATLANTA'S new and official Community Relations Commission has made a fast start in its work to further communications across the city and in effect bring democratic processes into fuller use by those who have been In largely beyond them.

3 The commission was created by the mayor -and Board of Aldermen last November. Its 20 members, representing a wide range of Community leadership, were appointed in December. In January the commission chose as executive director Mrs. Eliza Paschall, a respected veteran of human relations work Whose familiarity with the immediate prob-A lems before the commission is deep and of Solong standing.

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The commission, despite the small size of its financial resources, has moved imthe mediately (though cautiously and with cir-S cumspection) into some of our most pressing problems. It consequently will annoy some of 2 those who would rather not look at those problems at all, or who feel that they are A the special property of standing bureaucracy.

We are especially impressed by the outcome of the first hearings held by the com-" I- mission in the slum areas. Through this open-> ing of channels and this offering of a forum T to people whose views otherwise might not be heard in the counsels of city government, 9 the commission has increased the contact be-Q tween city government and a very large part of the population of the city. :d

Already there is the kind of feedback that is badly needed. What the people in Vine City are thinking about recreational needs there, what the people of the Pittsburgh area need in the way of police protection, what Summerhill's people have to say about housing conditions-these are important feedbacks from the commission's work so far.

The commission also has a role to play, and is beginning to play it, in areas that have been in racial transition residentially and need a stabilizing influence.

We think the commission is off to a god start. It deserves strong support from the Board of Aldermen and the city at large.