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MUNICIPAL OWNERSHIP OF PUBLIC UTILITIES.

In the last session of the Ontario Legislature, a Select Committee on Municipal Trading or Municipal Ownership or Operation of Public Utilities was appointed. The net result of the labors of these gentlemen is the publication of an epitome of the periodical and other literature produced within the last few years on these subjects, prepared by A. Pardoe, librarian of the Legislative Library. The report devotes 220 pages to reprints of articles for and against municipal ownership in Europe and the United States, and thirteen pages to the financial returns of municipal water, gas, electric light and street railway undertakings in Ontario. While much credit is due to Mr. Pardoe for the vast amount of material he has compiled, it cannot be said that the labors of the seven gentlemen comprising the Select Committee have resulted in throwing any new light upon this important subject or in anything which would assist the public in arriving at the correct solution of the problem of municipal ownership. The desirability or otherwise of municipalities owning and

operating public utilities is not to be decided by the evidence of writers and experts acting for interested corporations whose articles in many cases are published as paid advertisements, on the one hand; or of social reformers and economists on the other, but by the actual results of municipal systems in operation, and the benefits, if any, which the community at large obtain from such services.

It is to be regretted that the Select Committee did not see their way to present the people with an intelligent record of solid facts showing the comparative results of private and municipal ownership, rather than a confusing mass of controversial matter and figures which do not afford the average citizen any basis on which to form an opinion. We would here call attention to the misleading effect produced in the public mind by combining the terms municipal trading with the municipal ownership of public utilities. These terms have no relation to each other and therefore should be treated as separate subjects. Municipal trading means the trading by municipalities in commodities in which there already exists open competition among the citizens, such as the supply of electric light, gas, and water fittings; bakeries, dairy and agricultural produce, etc.; in fact any article in which the consumer is not at the mercy of a monopoly, and the provision of which by the municipality, means competition with the legitimate business of individual citizens. Municipal trading, as here defined, is wrong in principle, and should be discouraged in every way possible. There are, of course, some phases of municipal trading which can only be judged by the peculiar needs of individual localities, such as the housing of the poorer classes, model lodging houses, public baths, and other undertakings, which in crowded cities ameliorate the conditions of the poor and protect them from oppression, but fortunately the necessity for such does not exist to the same extent in Canada as in Europe, and therefore need not be here discussed.

Regarding the municipal ownership and operation of public utilities, this has been defined by the Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, than whom no better authority on practical public questions exists, in the following terms: "The true sphere of municipal activity is limited to those things which the community can do better than the private individual. To take a single illustration: It is evident that the main drainage and sewerage of a town can only be undertaken by the representatives of the town as a whole, and cannot safely be left to, or, indeed, be possibly carried out by, each individual citizen for himself. But besides works which, from their magnitude, or from the necessity of concerted action in regard to them, must necessarily be placed in the hands of a central author-