

WHY QUEBEC MUNICIPALITIES SHOULD HAVE CLEARING HOUSE FOR INFORMATION*

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THE broad objects of the Union of Quebec Municipalities, briefly stated, are to secure voluntary co-operation among the member cities, for the support and collective municipal ownership of a public organization to act as a clearing house for information and as a central bureau through which two or more cities, when they so desire, can combine for the purpose of securing from the province legislation which is in their interest, and for any other matter wherein it is thought two or more cities, acting together, can get better results than if they acted separately.

A service that could be organized quickly, and which would at once begin to pay dividends in savings effected by the several municipalities, is a central bureau which could be used for purchasing many items of supplies. This service would not abolish any separate municipal purchasing bureaus now in existence, but would be rather a super-bureau, requiring a well-organized system of purchases in each member city, for its proper working.

Central Purchasing Bureau

Why have the purchasing officials of many cities getting data and prices on general equipment they all use, when it can all be done by one man; and why not buy collectively whenever it is possible to do better that way? The organization of proper purchasing systems for its member cities would in itself be a suitable field of activity for this Union, and one good man, who would by study and experience become particularly proficient, could be handed around from city to city.

Through a central organization, each municipality will be better able to look its latest "gift horse" in the mouth, for the collective transactions of all the cities in any one article which is offered in the municipal market will be of sufficient moment to warrant the spending of a little money on investigation and study.

In no line, I think, is this more true than in my own; for were a careful engineering report secured by such a Union as this upon certain pavements which are being laid, and copies submitted to the various member cities, I think that pavement promoters would grow less fat and municipalities go less into debt and occasionally into a state which approaches bankruptcy.

Such a bureau, be it purchasing or any other, should have as its board of directors the purchasing or other interested officials of its member cities, and the super-purchasing agent should be their employee,—not their boss. Much greater efficiency, in many cases, comes from the bottom up, and I am inclined to think that the success of the Union of Quebec Municipalities is largely going to depend upon whether or not those entrusted with its launching will properly understand this principle and use their best energies in setting it to work. These are not days to talk of abandoning the principle of Home Rule for cities, even for the purpose of forming a municipal union. One ounce of voluntary effort is worth a pound of forced co-operation.

"Engineering Profession Principally Involved"

One great value the Union will have for its member municipalities will be in supplying them with reliable information and advice when they have to deal with professionals, especially from out of town; and here the engineering profession, of which I am a member, is principally involved, though the lawyers and the doctors also come in for their share of municipal work.

It may be true that when the Union attempts to handle engineering matters for the member cities, if great care is not exercised, there will be a slight danger of injustice to some of the profession; but I do not think this danger is to

be compared to that which the cities encounter when they go out, unaided, to seek engineering or other professional advice and services. High-class engineers are frequently not nearly so good at selling their wares as some other engineers who would do the country much less harm as commercial travellers.

There are, as we all well know, shysters in all the trades and professions to-day, for our present social system seems to encourage and reward their efforts in many directions. Under the plan of co-operative administration I have already outlined, where the engineering bureau would be in the hands of the engineers—subject, of course, to the general administration—it seems to me that the shyster would have a much less rosy path than he has to-day.

Says "Canadian Engineer" Mistaken

The *Canadian Engineer* of October 23rd, in its editorial column, shows grave concern about what it thinks the Quebec municipalities are about to do; but I am sure its attitude is based on a misconception of the plan. To me, it seems that more and not less professional services will be employed because of the existence of this Union. Cities will learn from their own representatives at headquarters, whom they will have reason to trust, just when and to what extent professional services are a good investment for them. To-day, they do not know, and have not a sufficiently unbiased and trustworthy source of information; and they frequently go with rather than risk employing some shyster.

I am quite sure that it was also a misunderstanding which led *The Canadian Engineer* to remark about the doubtful value of "free" engineering or other professional services. The Union will be paid by its supporting member municipalities through memberships, as far as its general work is concerned; and each city will probably pay extra for special services rendered. We have never heard the engineers complain when several private corporations formed a union or trust and amalgamated their engineering staffs, and such combinations are far more destructive of individual initiative and competition among engineers than the Union of Quebec Municipalities could ever hope to be.

Impugns One Firm's Integrity

One good which the engineering profession should get out of the formation of this Union is the better application of the energies of its members.

I have one particular case in mind where a firm of engineers undertook a piece of work in which they certainly were not specialists. The contract was let; and, not having an intimate knowledge of the subject, these engineers left it to the contractor to do the work in accordance with his own theories, which happened not only to be based on a limited experience and wrong, but were known by all specialists in that line to be wrong. The work, after one year, now shows signs of failure. It is bad enough to have to follow defective principles when it is not possible to follow the correct ones; it is inexcusable to do so through ignorance of those principles which have been proven correct in practice, and are generally accepted among the specialists in that field of engineering.

The leading member of the engineering firm referred to above, whose name professional courtesy prevents me from mentioning, at the time this work was being done in accordance with wrong practice (because to insure correct practice they would either have had to call in specialists and pay them out of their own very liberal fee or not attempt the work) said to me:—

"We never take a chance. If we are building a wall, we figure the usual factor of safety required by good engineering practice, and then add at least 20%. Our work is a monument to us, and our reputation is the very highest."

Yes,—building monuments to the reputation of their firm by the unjustified expenditure of public money, which expenditure also increased their percentage fee. The cities are, to-day, almost helpless before such engineering malpractice; in fact, on the part of unscrupulous engineers, it is an excellent way to acquire a very fine appearing though falsified reputation which will bring more business. The point in this instance is that this firm was willing to take all sorts

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