

Civic Improvement League for Canada

"THAT A CIVIC IMPROVEMENT LEAGUE FOR CANADA BE FORMED WITH THE OBJECT OF PROMOTING THE STUDY AND ADVANCEMENT OF THE BEST PRINCIPLES AND METHODS OF CIVIC IMPROVEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT, TO ENCOURAGE AND ORGANIZE IN EACH COMMUNITY THOSE SOCIAL FORCES WHICH MAKE FOR EFFICIENT CANADIAN CITIZENSHIP AND TO SECURE A GENERAL AND EFFECTIVE INTEREST IN ALL MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS."

The launching of a civic improvement for Canada at the instance of the Commission of Conservation was attended with all the eclat that its promoters could wish. Practically every civic organization was represented at the preliminary conference which was held at Ottawa, Nov. 19, in the offices of the Commission, and the speeches were all noticeable by their unanimity for a common cause—the improvement of the civic life of the Dominion. The outcome of the conference was the election of a provisional committee to prepare a draft constitution and to take steps to promote a National Conference to be held in January. The exact date and place is yet to be decided.

Sir Clifford Sifton in addressing the members, said the function of the Conservation Commission was rather to start things than to do things; to investigate and secure the co-operation of other bodies. The Commission had done much in the past particularly in the conservation of forests, and the prevention of fires on the railroads. But it had got to the point when it was felt necessary to inaugurate a new era of town planning, and it sent for Mr. Thomas Adams. "We have never regretted sending for Mr. Adams," said Sir Clifford.

In connection with municipal work in Canada, Sir Clifford said it was incorrect to say that it had been a failure. It had been a partial failure. The system of municipal government in the Dominion did not operate well in large municipalities. He did not think it would ever be effectively applied to cities if it depended on the individual judgment of electors in voting for councillors and aldermen. Sir Clifford said he had voted in municipal elections in Ottawa for the past 15 years and he could not conceive anything less intelligent than voting as he had done. He did not know why. How, therefore, could the working people intelligently direct civic development. The remedy would be found in men such as they who were attending the conference in forming plans for civic improvement and then getting them applied somewhere.

Education Methods Criticized.

Canada suffered from haphazard methods and a lack of efficiency. Nothing had done so much harm to Canada as the system of education. Young men are receiving education which fitted them for lawyers or professional men and nothing else. It had affected the whole development of Canada. Some improvement ought to be made.

"We have the whole history of the world to look back upon," said Sir Clifford. "Can't we do it in a better way? Can't we do it in such a way that the poor will not grow poorer and the rich more luxury-loving and callous to the needs of the people?" They were failing to get at the problem which makes slums. They had not yet got to realize the value of land.

Land Valuation.

Land values, Sir Clifford characterized as extortionate and absurd, and attributed the existent congestion in city slums to the fact that the workingman had to pay out at least the savings of ten years to purchase land near enough to a city on which to build a home.

"We have not yet realized the real value of land," he said. "How can we have happy, contented people, when the price for a few feet of land is more than a working man could save in ten years."

Much of the present day unemployment, he attributed to the frenzied rush of Canadian municipalities to obtain industries. "I don't care whether you raise the tariff 5 per cent, or lower it correspondingly," said he, "it won't make a particle of difference to unemployment. Canadian municipalities had been allowed to get new industries by any means, and, had done so without counting the cost. They secure a few orders," Sir Clifford concluded, "get their factories, and bring in men to work them. Then the slump comes, and the men go out on the streets. Three months of this and they are unfit for work."

"The things I have mentioned are the things worth while. If we want a happier, higher and nobler Canada, these are the things we want to solve."

Real Test of Civilization.

Sir John Willison, chairman of the conference, said the real test of civilization, he would imagine, was the condition of the average man. It ought to be the business of all of them to look after the men at the bottom. They should see that fewer were at the bottom, and that comfort and happiness were greater, because comfort and happiness means better citizenship. He believed civic government was honest in Ontario, but it was also comparatively feeble. Our councils did not learn as well as they should learn how to use voluntary associations. There was a feeling that the latter infringed upon the prerogative of councillors. The wise councillors were those who will use voluntary association to the best advantage. All services in the public interest should be utilized. He did not think that all the municipal failures were confined to the cities. He said it was something to think about when they saw how cheaply the villages of Canada could be made beautiful and how ragged and unkempt they were. Some source of inspiration was needed.

In many of the country municipalities there were 5 or 6 acres of fair grounds open for only two or three days of the year. They should be opened to the people for civic playgrounds. They had the examples of the United States and the old world before them and if they fail to benefit by those teachings, and fail to produce a better civilization and a happier people, they would fail in their purpose.

Thomas Adams.

The proposal to form a Civic Improvement League was a first step in accomplishing the task of betterment. "Our objects must be wide enough to cover all phases of civic improvement and development," said Mr. Adams, "whether in city, town or village. We must proceed on lines that will involve the interest of the people and inspire our provincial and civic rulers with confidence. It seems likely that no existing league or society which has been formed in Canada will withhold co-operation in forming this Dominion League. They all heartily endorse the proposal."

The full text of Mr. Adams' address appears on Page 434.

Mr. W. D. Lighthall, K.C., the Hon. Secretary of the Union of Canadian Municipalities, in endorsing the formation of a civic improvement league for the Dominion, pointed out the necessity of some such non-official association—to work in harmony with the one he represented, which was confined to members of the municipal councils. The work of such a league in educating the people in civic affairs and in forming public opinion would be invaluable.

Douglas Nelles, of Ottawa, in the discussion that followed, spoke of the importance of adequate surveys.

Mrs. Adam Shortt, Ottawa, said the National Council of Women had done much for civic improvement in Canada. She deplored the existence of politics in almost all municipal councils. She hailed with joy the formation of the Civic Improvement League because such an organization stood for health, efficiency and beauty.

Prof. Johnson, Toronto University; Mr. A. G. Parker, Bank of Montreal, Ottawa, who specially represented Sir Frederick Williams-Taylor, and whose letter appears in our financial columns; Rev. Frank Baldwin, Dr. W. H. Atherton (Sec. of Montreal City Improvement League), and Mr. Frank Beer, Toronto Housing Co., heartily supported its formation.

Mr. Beer said in part:

Movements of an unprecedented character are showing us the necessity for greater national and individual efficiency. The perversion by a great nation of its ideals should not blind us to the advantages of scientific organization, collective effort and a measure of central control.

If we leave effective organization for the forces that hinder progress we are guilty of social treason—and we admit our inability and unworthiness to mould the future development of Canada towards the fulfillment of a great national progress.