

What the Provincial Unions of Municipalities have accomplished

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Read at the Convention of the Union of New Brunswick Municipalities, Moncton, October 15th, 1913.

In any consideration of this subject it should be remembered that the Provincial Unions of Municipalities do not stand alone, but are parts of a widespread army,—covering in citizenship more than half of the population of the Dominion—in the operations which their existence is one of the chief factors, even if they did no work within their immediate spheres; and in which, through the Parent Union, they are constantly having an influence, not only on the whole of Canada, but also on each other's progress. Let me therefore commence by outlining the history of that connection.

The Union of Canadian Municipalities was established in 1901 as a necessary protective movement. It is difficult to understand at the present day how helpless every municipality then was. The charter-sharks who infest Parliament and the Legislatures,—unscrupulous purloiners of public rights and property by means of crooked statutes—and their henchmen who dishonor the legal profession for gain—regarded all municipalities, even the strongest, as easy prey, and treated the struggles and protests of the people with hilarious contempt. They were well organized, while the municipalities were like scattered sheep on a hillside, and were devoured one by one at pleasure. As civic franchises became more and more valuable, large fortunes attended the business of pirating charters, and these were, among other devices, based upon the fraudulent obtaining of monopolistic powers to charge the public high rates for necessary electric, and street railway, and other services. My language may seem strong but I always feel that out-and-out language is a deterrent of abuses.

In 1901 the Montreal Light, Heat and Power Company obtained a most unjust charter, against the protests of the public of Montreal and Westmount. This was the immediate incident which brought about the founding of the Union. A local Union of several municipalities in the neighborhood of Montreal was first thought of, and dismissed as insufficient. A Provincial Union was out of the question in the Province of Quebec, for local reasons. There was an Ontario Municipal Association, but it did not even attempt to make a stand on such matters, and did so little of anything that it was practically unknown for any purpose. It was totally unknown outside of Ontario.

The City of Toronto was suffering from encroachments of the Bell Telephone Company, which entered all the streets at its own sweet pleasure. Hence Mayor Oliver Howland, when appealed to by me (as then Mayor of Westmount), readily joined in the enterprise, agreeing that a strong Dominion Organization was necessary. Stiff fights with the monopolies and charter-sharks at once followed, and soon it was found by them that no municipality, however weak, could now be attacked with impunity. Many legal enactments were gradually secured, maintaining municipal control of streets and franchises and the present system of watching legislation and protecting municipal rights was evolved, with the sympathy of all honorable legislators and the press.

The Union had, however, many other matters to study besides protection, and of course the needs of large municipalities differed from those of the smaller, while those of some parts of Canada differed from those of other parts. Moreover distance and expense prevented the smaller municipalities from sending delegates to the Conventions of the Union. Hence arose a natural partial cleavage between the rural and the urban communities, and between those of the different provinces. After trying to meet the wants of both the rural and urban classes in joint meetings, it became more and more obvious that some kind of separation was inevitable. And yet it would have been regrettable had the separation been complete, for all possible strength and co-operation were necessary. To meet the situation, the project of Provincial Unions, as branches of the Parent Union, was devised.

The first to be established was the Union of Manitoba Municipalities, founded by Mayor J. W. Fleming of Brandon, in 1905. This energetic and enthusiastic man—a natural leader and now prominent in the political life of his province,—had given much thought to the problem. The Union he founded was successful from the first and has continued a model of its kind. At, or soon after its first Convention, held in Winnipeg, it had a membership covering half the municipalities of the province, and full of the desire for progress and proper organization. It was at once recognized as a power by the Manitoba Government. It was also recognized as the proper adviser of the Government in municipal legislation, which had previously been of a hap-hazard nature at which every crank took a whack. Many useful suggestions, the products of debate by practical municipal men, therefore now reached the statute-book. Another most useful result was the formation of the Municipal Department in the Provincial Government itself, by which municipalities were aided in organization, and their needs carefully studied. Such a Department will sooner or later exist in every province. It is a necessity, and its formation is pressed constantly upon the attention of the powers concerned by the Union of Canadian Municipalities.

A third great achievement of the Manitoba Union was the obtaining, largely through the efforts of the Honorable Colin Campbell, Attorney-general of the province,—the first government system of telephones in Canada. This also was the outcome of a proposal which arose in the Parent Union, during the bitter struggles of those years with the Bell Telephone Company. It was seen that that Company would naturally use its virtual monopoly in centres of population, where there was money in the business, and that the smaller places and the farming population would get practically no telephones. It seemed to us that to banish the dreary isolation of the farm would be to confer on the country population of the Dominion an inestimable boon. Mr. Campbell therefore journeyed all the way to Montreal to confer with me, as Secretary of the Union, on the institution he was about to bring into being, and which at our instance the Union of Manitoba had vigorously pressed. The Provincial telephone system at once realized the expectations of its originators, and today the isolation of the farmer, the farmer's family, and the small community, is banished throughout the Western half of our country.

The Manitoba Union was quickly imitated in Alberta and Saskatchewan, for in those enterprising Provinces everything is in process of formation, and the best methods and models are eagerly welcomed. The founder of the Alberta Union was the then Mayor,