

Value of Provincial Departments of Municipal Affairs

The Convention was fortunate in having present the three pioneer deputy ministers of municipal affairs in Oscar Morin, Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs, Quebec; J. N. Bayne, formerly Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs, Saskatchewan, and now of the Local Government Board, and John Perrie, Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs, Alberta. The addresses of these three gentlemen contributed much to the value of the convention and their summaries of what was being actually accomplished in their respective provinces were especially valuable.

MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS IN QUEBEC.

Mr. Oscar Morin, K.C., Deputy Minister of Municipal Affairs of the Province of Quebec opened with an address on the new Department of Municipal Affairs of that Province As this address has already appeared in the August issue of the Canadian Municipal Journal it is here omitted.

MUNICIPAL DEPT. OF ALBERTA.

Mr. John Perrie, deputy minister of municipal affairs in Alberta followed with an account of the work of the department in his province, as follows:—

"In dealing with this question, it is probably well that we should first consider what we mean by a Department of Municipal Affairs. A Department of Municipal Affairs is a department of a Provincial Government dealing entirely with Municipal matters. It is a Department which is closely in touch with all the municipalities of the Province, and as far as possible is an authority on all municipal matters. It is a department which keeps in touch by research, investigation and every other way possible with the problems which are continually being met with by municipalities, so that it may be in a position to give advice or direction as to what should be done to overcome these problems. Municipal problems are ever with us and always changing. If a municipality should be found that has no problems to deal with, no difficulties to surmount, then it is safe to say that there is something wrong and that the future has little in store for it. With growth and progress in municipal work, as in all other work, there must always be difficulties to contend with.

A Department of Municipal Affairs is a department, as I have said, which should have a knowledge of municipal problems, including, of course, a knowledge of the ever-interesting question of methods of taxation and should be able to give reliable information and advice on these matters. It is of course a department that has a thorough understanding of the different laws of the Province affecting municipalities and that is able to interpret the different provisions of such laws. Such a department will also be an authority on the different forms of municipal by-laws, the drafting of such by-laws, the effect such by-laws will have if put in force, and will keep in touch with Court decisions and any other things that will affect the putting into operation of any municipal by-laws.

In dealing with the question of the value of such a department, it is necessary that we should next look at what is the source of success or failure in the carrying on of municipal business. One of the main factors in the efficient administration of business in a municipality is the existence in the municipality of an active and enlightened public opinion. Given this as a basis to work upon, the business of a municipality is likely to be efficiently administered, as if the public keep in touch with what is going on in the municipality and are sufficiently interested to exercise their franchises properly, they will place a Council in charge who will see that the work of the municipality is properly carried on. Even under these circumstances, which are ideal, and probably not as prevalent as they ought to be, a municipality will be confronted with difficult problems from time to time. A department of Municipal Affairs can be of assistance to such municipality in dealing with such problems, because on account of the research in such matters, it should have knowledge of what has been found a satisfactory solution elsewhere, or if the difficulty is an entirely new one, it should, because of training and experience in municipal matters, be

in a position to advise as to what might be done to meet the difficulty. It may be that the situation is such that it can only be dealt with by special legislation and if such is the case, the department can be of great assistance, as on account of being in touch with matters of this kind at all times, it is in a position to give valuable direction and advice as to what form the legislation should take.

Then again a department is in a position to assist in meeting inquiries which such a Council would no doubt make as to how they may most economically carry on the business of the municipality. For example, they may be of the opinion that one of their public utilities is costing them too much. The department with its inspector's and auditors' reports has comparative figures as to the cost of such a utility in other municipalities similarly situated and is able to give information that would be of assistance. If these comparative figures show similar service being given elsewhere for a lower rate, then they can be directed to try the scheme that is proving more successful than their own. In addition to these comparative figures being available through the department, there will also be available information as to any new feature of municipal development, which may be of advantage, as it is the business of a municipal department to get in touch with any new development in municipal work that may be of value.

Where unfortunately the electors do not keep in touch with the business of their municipality, or are not taking an active interest in it, the department is of assistance in stimulating public interest. Municipalities are regularly inspected by officials of the department. If it appears that business is not being carried on as it ought to be, the reports of the inspections forwarded to the Council through the department, will draw attention to the fact and point out what action would seem advisable and urge that something be done. It is very easy for a body of men placed in authority to allow the business of a municipality to drift without their noticing where it is going. Councilors, particularly in the smaller municipalities are busy men, who too frequently give little time to municipal affairs, consequently things may get into rather bad shape unless some action is taken. A municipal inspector, having training and experience in such matters, can usually very readily detect where the weakness lies and indicate the remedy, or report the situation so that the Department may take the necessary action.

Where it is impossible to stimulate interest, it may sometimes be found necessary for the department to exercise the power which they have to place the municipality in the hands of an Administrator. Taking charge of the municipality in this way makes it possible to have the business placed on a proper footing, and after a short time control may be again placed in the hands of an elected council. The appointment of an Administrator also usually has the effect of arousing the attention of the ratepayers so that in future they will take the necessary interest in their affairs.

The organization of municipalities is another phase of municipal work which comes directly under the control of a Municipal Department. Without such organization being controlled by a Department in touch with such matters, the results are not likely to be satisfactory. One source of municipal trouble in our own Province, prior to the organization of a Department of Municipal Affairs, was the fact that many of our urban municipalities had been organized with altogether too large an area. The land owners asked for their lands to be incorporated within the boundaries of the proposed town without stopping to think what it would mean to them, and therefore, in many cases, large areas of farm lands were included within the boundaries of urban municipalities. The result was disastrous, as it gave too large an area for the municipality to look after and it placed such heavy taxes on what were really farm lands that they could not be profitably used as such. In some cases it will still take years to remedy mistakes of this kind. Action has already been taken in many cases. There are instances where over 1,000 acres have been withdrawn from some of our towns and the area is still large enough. If there had been a Municipal Department in existence when these towns passed from the status of a vil-