

The Story of Municipal Government in Canada

What It Is—Its Influence—Its Future.

(Frederick Wright)

Though the principle of municipal government was introduced into Canada with the founding of the first community—some four hundred years ago—it actually took the great war to open the eyes of the citizens to its fuller meaning as a factor in the social life and economic development of the nation. In pre-war days the government of the city, town, village or rural district was looked upon by the average citizen as a prosaic link in the administration of the country. But when the first excitement of the war was over and people began to ask the meaning of democracy, for which Canada was draining her life blood, the realization came home to many that democracy began in the community. And this conclusion is correct, for community government is the very essence of democracy. It affects directly the lives of the citizens in a way that no other government unit does, though to many people the word "municipal" just implies taxes—their levying, collecting and spending. These people cannot understand that the construction of our streets and sewers and their policing are but part of the duties of our municipal councils.

The very meaning of "municipal" denotes the very highest form of duty to "our neighbours" and means leadership in regulating the lives of the men, women and children that make up our communities. It means social welfare as it touches the daily life of the citizens—it means public health as it affects every household in the community—it means public morals as they influence our young people. Municipal or community government in short affects everybody every minute of the day and night, and it is good or bad as the community determines. There is then every reason for Mr. and Mrs. Citizen to appreciate the common sense of living for democracy through their community and its government.

A new importance has now been given to municipal government in Canada by the new social and economic conditions that have arisen in every community since the war. Capitalists and leaders of industry have come to realize the fact that the government of the community—whether it be a city or town or even incorporated village—is a vital issue in the safety of capital and the progress of industry; that social welfare, and all that it means, is just as necessary to the development of the vast resources of the country as capital itself, and that the full utilization of labor is only possible under decent living conditions and environments, such as can only be secured under sound municipal administration. In other words, if Canada is to take advantage of the great opportunities provided by nature there must be more actual and intelligent co-operation between capital, labor and the communities through their government.

Assuming then that "municipal" government is the true basis of democracy and that it requires more functioning to realize its full possibilities, the question arises as to how municipal government stands today in Canada. And here one can state, without fear of contradiction, that the municipal

system of the Dominion is as up-to-date and as complete as that of any other country, not excepting Great Britain, whose municipal machinery is highly efficient. Every foot of the Dominion is part of either a rural or urban municipality, and each municipality is a complete unit in itself under the administration of a council, whose functions and powers are broadly set down in the charter under which the municipality was created, or established. It is the construction placed upon these functions and powers, or rather how they are exercised, that strengthens or lessens the usefulness of the council to the community, but no council is likely to go beyond public opinion, because under our system of election the council is truly representative of the people. Whatever may be the spirit collectively of the citizens is also that of the council.

There are approximately 3,800 separate rural and urban municipalities in the Dominion, each one administered by a council that averages ten members. These mayors, reeves, aldermen and councillors, together with the permanent officials, make up a municipal army of upwards of 50,000 men and women. Fully eighty per cent. of the civic executives give their services gratis, and the compensation of the other twenty per cent. is comparatively small, so that Canada pays very little for her municipal service; certainly much less than does the United States.

So far as the personnel of this large organization is concerned, I would say without any hesitancy that in local affairs the people of Canada are splendidly served. With the exception of one or two small towns, whose councils in the past, with greater ambition than judgment, incurred too large debts, all of the 3,800 municipalities are to-day in a solvent position and able to pay their debts, in spite of the wave of extreme optimism of pre-war days, under which extravagant improvements were made everywhere in Canada, but particularly in the west. When the real estate boom broke and the slump came things looked very bad for the municipalities, but such was the splendid spirit displayed by the councils that the municipal credit, though impaired for a time, was not killed. Today it stands higher than ever. Such an achievement could only have been brought about by real hard work and faith, and a deep sense of responsibility on the part of the members of the councils and their officers.

Municipal Canada has produced many able men—men like Church, McGuire and Bradshaw, of Toronto; Lighthall and Martin, of Montreal; Gale, of Vancouver; Waugh, of Winnipeg; Hardie, of Lethbridge; Yorath, of Edmonton; Bayne, of Regina; Plant and Fisher, of Ottawa, etc. These men, had they have given the same amount of time and thought to other branches of the public service, would probably have made greater names for themselves. Of course the municipal councils of the Dominion are well organized through twelve municipal unions. There is the Union of Canadian