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How Commission Government Works

St. John, N.B., has a Clear, Unmistakable Story of Cutting Away From the Old Civic Regime

By W. F. BURDITT

AN encouraging sign of the times is the increased interest taken by thoughtful men—and women, too—in problems relating to Civic Government, and Civic Affairs in general. When the Canadian discovers that something needs reforming, be it Civic Government, the Cost of Living, or what not, he almost unconsciously looks across the border, to see what big brother Jonathan is doing. In the matter of Civic Government he discovers that within three or four years, over three hundred American cities, large and small, have relegated to limbo their former city councils, composed of ward representatives, committees, boards of aldermen, and all the cumbersome paraphernalia incident to the old plan, and have adopted in its place the compact and responsible elective commission. Three hundred cities, in three years, making this change, is a somewhat impressive fact, but, what is its significance for Canada?

Conditions, we know, differ widely as between Canadian and American cities. We do not mix up politics with civic affairs to the extent they do south of the border. Boss rule is almost unknown, or at least unfelt, in Canada. There is scarce a suspicion of graft, and in a general way we are proud to think that our cities are much better governed than those of the United States. Hence, we have less to gain by a change than they—and more to lose—we run more risk of making a mistake in adopting a new system. Had we not better let well alone, even if our present condition leaves much to be desired? In this connection, the experience of the first Canadian city to adopt Commission Government may be of some interest.

In April of 1911, the city of St. John, N.B., voted, by a nearly three-to-one majority, in favour of the adoption of Commission Government. A year later five commissioners, one of whom is Mayor, took the place of a Mayor and seventeen Aldermen, in the management of the city's affairs. Two years have nearly elapsed since the new system was inaugurated—too brief an experience, it must be acknowledged, upon which to base final conclusions, yet long enough to afford a fair basis of comparison of the working of the two systems—the old and the new—in actual operation under Canadian conditions.

WHEN five capable men began to devote their whole time and best thought to St. John's civic affairs, the weakness of the old system became more apparent than ever. In almost every department of public service, matters had been allowed to drift. The new commissioners, on assuming office, were confronted with large arrears of work. Nearly all of the streets were in a deplorable condition. The water service, notwithstanding the expenditure a few years previously of half a million dollars for extension to an abundant supply 300 feet above the sea-level, was ineffective as to pressure, and unsatisfactory. It was found that the distribution system was rotten. Pipes that should have been replaced twenty years ago were obstructing the flow, and causing endless trouble by breakage and leakage. A policy of replacement was inaugurated, in lieu of the former policy of patchwork repairs. Pipes of double the size are taking the place of the old, encrusted pipes, as rapidly as appropriations will permit. A large amount of work along this line has been accomplished by the reorganized Department of Water and Sewerage, during these two years; but, recent disclosures as to the condition of the distribution system, have created a demand for its more rapid renewal.

In the Public Works Department, having charge of the streets, the experience has been similar. Under the former regime, the greater part of a very considerable annual expenditure had been devoted to the repair and maintenance in poor condition of many miles of unpaved streets; but very few, even of the principal streets, were surfaced with any kind of permanent paving. Under Commission Government, a more progressive policy has been inaugurated. It is now recognized that the reduced cost of maintenance of paved streets makes for true economy. A law requiring abutting property-owners to pay a share of the cost of permanent street improvements, which had fallen into disuse, has been revived, and the central part of the city has taken on an entirely new aspect since Commissioner Agar took charge of the Department of Public Works.

All this, it may be said, might and should be done in any city, and by any city council, be it large or small; which is very true, yet the people of St. John will say in reply that much that *might* have been done by the old city council was *not* done, and that they are getting done better work and more of it, with greater celerity, than ever before. Moreover, it is being done with comparative

economy, and with a much clearer and more distinct knowledge of what it costs.

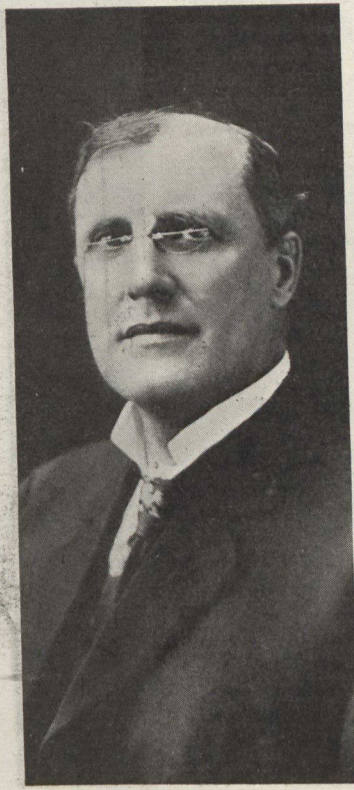
Commissioner Wigmore, of the Water and Sewerage Department, who has had experience under the old as well as the new system, having been an alderman in the former council, and chairman of the Water and Sewerage Board, feels safe in asserting that thousands of dollars have been saved the city on the work done by his department during the past eighteen months, as a result of the better systematization of the work, better control, better discipline, and more efficient service. The first thing the Commissioner did on taking charge was to thoroughly reorganize the whole department. Sub-heads—a superintendent of works, having supervision of all construction and repair work, and a chief clerk, in charge of the office, the stores, revenue and expenditure—are both directly responsible to the Commissioner, as he is to the people. The duties of each subordinate official are well defined, and employees have learned that efficiency instead of "pull" is the password to advancement. Similar remarks would apply to other departments.

THE Mayor is deluged with enquiries as to the working of the new system, and the first question usually asked is whether the tax-rate has been reduced, as though the tax-rate were the sole

Lethbridge Also Has Three Live Commissioners



Mr. Arthur Grace, C.E., is the Commissioner of Public Works. He gets \$3,500 a year for administering all such things as building waterworks and sewage systems, electric light plants, power-houses, street railways and public buildings.



Mr. W. D. L. Hardie, C.E., M.E., is Mayor of Lethbridge and Chairman of the Board of Commissioners. He gets a salary of \$4,000 and, like the other commissioners, is subject to the referendum and recall.



Mr. Arthur Reid is the Commissioner of Public Utilities, such as street-cars, telephones, electric light, gas, waterworks service and sewage. He gets a salary of \$3,500 a year for operating the utilities provided by his colleagues and the public.

Lethbridge is the first municipality in Western Canada to adopt commission government. The city charter provides for three commissioners. The above good citizens were elected. Twelve other candidates ran, but lost. Each winner had a majority of the total vote cast, which is stipulated in the charter. These three men administer all the civic business of Lethbridge under three heads. They are paid a total of \$11,000 a year for doing it. They also sit as a council to enact by-laws. The election was held on Dec. 8th, 1913. The new administration went into force on the day that some of the chief municipalities in Canada were electing Mayors, Councils and Boards of Control in the old-fashioned way.