

Municipal Union in Canada

In this issue we publish the valedictory of Mr. Clouston Rogers Woodruff, who after twenty-five years service has retired from the active secretaryship of the National Municipal League of the United States. In the August issue of last year we published the valedictory of Mr. W. D. Lighthall, who resigned the secretaryship of the Union of Canadian Municipalities after a service of nineteen years. Both valedictories, while modest regarding the labour and achievements of their respective authors, give strong evidence of the changed conditions in municipal affairs in North America that have been brought about by the long sustained efforts of those who kept the lights burning in these two civic organizations.

For the benefit of the new councils of Canada it would be well to remind them that the very freedom they exercise today as the local representatives of the people is due in no small measure to the activities of the Union of Canadian Municipalities. Founded nineteen years ago by Mr. Lighthall, then Mayor of Westmount, with the active co-operation of the late Mr. Howland, then mayor of Toronto, and who became its first president, the Union has fought, not only on behalf of its members but on behalf of all municipal Canada, many a long and bitter, and in the end successful, fight for municipal rights before the Parliament of Canada, and previous to the formation of the Provincial Unions, in the legislature halls of the different provinces. There is no doubt that had there been no national union in existence, municipal government in Canada would be today a mere name—in fact, a farce. Strange as it may appear, the Federal legislators of from twenty to ten years ago would have given away as of no value any municipal franchise for the mere asking, when that municipal franchise was embodied in a national project, such as a railway system or a telephone system. But thanks to the Union such wholesale jobbery was stopped, and finally there was introduced in the Railway Bill certain clauses—known as the municipal protective clauses—by which any utility company seeking a federal charter, must have inserted in the said charter these same clauses which, in short, meant that before operating in any municipality the sanction of the local council had to be sought and gained. It would be well to mention here that because of the action of the Senate and the lack of support of the Union by the municipal councils, these same protective clauses were eliminated from the Railway Bill passed at the last session of parliament. In other words, because of the apathy of the municipal councils themselves, that very power to protect their own city from the rapacity and greed of private utility companies, has been taken away by their own representatives in parliament.

This is not a very pleasant statement to make, but candour compels us to publish it in the hope that the new councils will rectify the mistake of their predecessors and keep up the good fight to get back these protective clauses. However vigilant the Union may be, it can do very little without the united support of the municipal councils.

In addition to the continual fight that the Union has put up for the protection of the municipalities, it has never lost an opportunity to raise the standard of the municipal life of the country. At its conventions each year every endeavour has been made to secure the best authorities on municipal government, whose addresses together with the discussions, have been placed at the disposal of the municipal councils, through the columns of this Journal. During the last few years there has been a tendency towards disintegration of the Union, the usual argument being that as civic affairs are tied up with provincial matters, there is no reason for its existence. While it is true that the greater part of the legislation affecting municipalities is passed by the Provincial parliaments there is introduced at every session at Ottawa legislation that does affect directly or indirectly the municipalities. These bills are carefully examined by the parliamentary agent of the Union, and if anything detrimental to local right, is found, immediate action is taken. Of course this work being done quietly is hardly known to the councils—yet it is a fact that the vigilance of the Union has saved many a municipality from being made the scapegoat of private interests trying to get, through legislation franchises that would have to be made good by the local authorities.

But municipal government is not local by any means. It is nation-wide in its scope, and as one of the principal factors in municipal strength is co-operation, such co-operation cannot be confined to the provincial borders. There is, then a real need for a nation wide organization, and though the Union has been hit hard during the last few years it should be made the basis upon which to build up a super-structure of civic activity that will be of lasting value to every municipality in Canada. But to bring about such a consumption there must be a broad-minded spirit of unselfishness on the part of our leading municipal men. There must be more give and take between the East and West—for the principles of municipal government are the same in all parts of Canada—and there must be less personal jealousy, for there is room enough, in all conscience, for all who would build up the municipal life of this country.

For the next convention, which, we understand, will be held in Ottawa, a special effort is being made by the President of the Union (Mayor Fisher) to bring together all the municipal interests of the country so that concerted action may be taken to waken up the civic conscience of Canada. In this effort we wish Mayor Fisher and his colleagues all success, for then will the ideals inculcated in the inception of the Union be vindicated.