

British Columbia Municipal Convention

The report of the annual Convention of the Union of British Columbia Municipalities which appears elsewhere in these pages (the first part of the report appeared in the December issue) is strong evidence of the advance that has been made in municipal thought during these last few years. Anyone taking the trouble to look up some old reports of municipal conventions will see our meaning. Originally established for self-protection against the inroads of the big private interests, the municipal unions, in their conventions soon realized that the bond of self-protection which had brought them together could be strengthened by studying questions of administration common to all. These questions at first purely municipal in character, gradually broadened into subjects touching the civic life of the municipality, until to-day every phase of the social life of the community is brought within the

ken of municipal conventions—social welfare, public health, housing, etc. Town planning is better understood and consequently more intelligently discussed. This is as it should be for everything affecting the general well being of the citizens comes within the jurisdiction of municipal administration. Though this fact is not appreciated by all the councils as yet, much advance has been made, as instanced in the more stringent by-laws touching the social and moral welfare of the people that are in force to-day in every part of the Dominion. This progress in communal responsibility is reflected in the Provincial and Dominion conventions—or rather the conventions are, and should be, a little in advance of the local administration and the convention of the British Columbia Union was right in the vanguard.

Municipal Authority and Responsibility

The City of Guelph, Ont., with the 1919 election comes under a new form of municipal government, namely, eighteen aldermen, and a mayor who is elected by the aldermen from amongst themselves. The new system is a modification of certain recommendations made by a special committee of the council in January, 1917 (report of which appeared in this Journal Feb., 1917). The committee investigated different municipal systems, and finally recommended an adaption of the English form of local government as being the best, because it ensured more continuity of policy and service on the parts of both executives and officers—such security of tenure for the officers naturally attracting the best men to the municipal service.

The differences between the forms of municipal government in Great Britain and Canada are more fundamental than most people think. The British form, while theoretically autonomous, is in reality commission government under direct supervision of the Imperial government, through its local government board. That is, the municipal officer in England is responsible to certain government inspectors, as well as to his own council, for anything touching the finances of the municipality. This system of outside supervision and checks has worked so well as to make municipal government in the Old Country the most efficient in the world. On the other hand, the tendency of municipal government in Canada is towards more autonomy, for the particular reason that the average council considers itself quite capable of administering the affairs of the community without the aid, or interference as some of them call it, of the Provincial authorities. Such a feeling is simply the outcome of the theory of popular government in Canada, which in four words means autonomy in all things. To a large extent such a mode of thought has been brought about by the peculiar way in which the provincial governments in the past exercised their authority so far as municipalities were concerned. Instead of appreciating the fact that the authority over the municipal life of the province given to the provincial parliaments under the North America Act also

made them responsible for the good government of each municipality, for the benefit of the local citizens, the provincial governments simply used each community as a means of raising taxes, to maintain an elaborate system of provincial administration. The result of such exploitation of the industrial centres is that to-day urban municipalities contribute the principal part of the provincial income, but for which the average council cannot see adequate returns. What is more, some of our Canadian cities are so well administered, particularly in their finances, that their credit is quite equal—in one case better than that of the province from which they take their authority. It is this knowledge that makes our local councils feel irritated at times at a provincial paternalism which they consider not warranted.

But in spite of all the short-sightedness of the provincial powers in the past towards the municipalities it would be a bad day for municipal Canada if even the present checks, with all their weakness, were taken away. It is true that such would mean autonomy for the municipalities, but it would also mean the lessening of responsibility of the councils, which above all things should be avoided. What is wanted in Canada is more sympathetic co-operation between the Provincial and Municipal authorities than in the past. In the Provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and now Quebec the establishment of municipal departments under responsible ministers has done much to bring the local and provincial authorities together for the common good, for while the supervision of the municipal activities of these three provinces is more stringent than ever, the fact that each of the councils now know that a practical interest is being taken in their administration by practical men a better feeling is engendered. As each of the other provinces establish municipal departments this feeling of reciprocity between responsible authorities will grow, which together with more continuity in local administration and security of tenure for the officers, as now being attempted in Guelph cannot help but work for the benefit of municipal Canada.