

The Elections in Winnipeg

The sending of labor men to the Provincial House indicates that Labor is pursuing its ends by constitutional means—a much better way than by strikes

By J. W. MACMILLAN.

The recent Provincial election in Manitoba resulted in the government electing 21 members out of a House of 55. The other members are almost equally divided between labor, farmers and Conservatives. The chief interest centered in Winnipeg, where the first experiment in Canada of proportional representation was tried. Of the ten members elected from the city, four are government supporters, four are Labor men, and two are Conservatives.

It will surprise no observer of political affairs throughout the world that the government failed to secure a majority. These post-war days are hard on governments. Five fell, as I read, in a single week recently in Europe. The mental attitude of the aroused and annoyed 'man on the street' is one of suspicion towards all who hold power. Capitalists, diplomats, and statesmen alike have incurred his dislike. He blames the distress of the world on them, his argument being that they have held the reins and must take the responsibility of society finding itself in the ditch. All the low-paid folk are suffering from high prices. They do not know who has caused them, not being accustomed to deal with questions as abstract as that of the enlargement of credit, and being driven by their mentality to accept the most vivid conception which is presented to their minds. Hence all sensational cries seem convincing. Short, sharp and sudden deeds seem admirable. Caution is taken for cowardice and deliberation for a languid interest in the matter. The same mood is working which, during the war, was ready to say, "Stand him up against a wall and shoot him." So, at election times, the governments are stood against the wall.

The Norris government deserved better at the hands of the electors. It has been clean and effective. Elected on the basis of a number of pledges made to the people, it has honorably kept its promises. It gave a plebiscite on the prohibition question, and, obedient to the mandate of the voters, enacted prohibition. It gave woman's suffrage. It passed a Minimum Wage law. It established a Public Welfare Commission, non-political in structure, and put it in charge of the Provincial charities. It framed and enforced a model truant law, and has grappled boldly with the awkward problem of schools in the non-English-speaking portions of the Province. Within the last five years Manitoba has advanced from being one of the provinces furthest behind in matters of social legislation to the foremost rank. It is not because of bad government that it failed to gain a majority of the seats.

The experiment in proportional representation appears to have worked successfully. The one drawback was that an eager populace was forced to wait three or four days for the count of the votes. Bonfires on election night have become a thing of the past. The calculations did not become an inextricable tangle. The will of the people has been disclosed. It has done what it claimed that it could do. Doubtless we shall see a considerable extension of this plan of electing members to parliaments and councils, especially in the larger cities, where the geographical method is unsuitable to certain classes of the population.

The most notable thing in the election is the greatly increased representation of labor. In

the last legislature there were but two Labor members, and one of them resigned and went to the war when the Parliament was about half over. There are now eleven. Feeling runs so high since the general strike of a year ago that many feel a disappointment on this account, which, I believe, a calmer judgment will allay. There is much cause for gratification in the workingmen of the province having received adequate representation in the legislature. It is there that their grievances ought to be ventilated. It is there that relief from their burdens should be sought.

In the syndicalist propaganda of the six months preceding the strike all political action was scornfully rejected. The theory ran that economic matters were omnipotent in human life. Wages, production, distribution, capital, rent and the like terms expressed the realities of life, while law-making was but the useless pastime of dupes of the real potentates, the capitalists. It is curious to read the names of men as elected to Parliament who, a twelve-month since, called a Parliament a 'gas-house.'

It was the strike which converted the syndicalists of Winnipeg. Some of their leaders frankly declared that it had, and there are good reasons for accepting their word. Economic action did not turn out so compelling as had been anticipated. Government revealed itself as much more substantial than would have been expected of a gas-house. So the policy was changed, and the resolve made to capture the government. Now, this is just what democratic institutions are for. Any body of citizens has a right to govern who can command enough votes. It is a great pity that enthusiastic Labor leaders in Winnipeg had not discovered that prior to the month of May, 1919. Much sorrow and bitterness might have been saved. It is a great satisfaction that they have discovered it at last.

There is no doubt that many votes were cast for Labor candidates by voters who do not belong to what is termed the working class. In the early days of the strike, before the later bitter enmity between the strikers and the citizens generally had set in, it was commonly remarked that Labor had a grievance in not having gotten fair representation in the parliaments of the country. Neither in Ottawa, nor in any of the Provincial capitals, had there been since Confederation any sufficient number of capable representatives of Labor. One or two, now and again, had sat for a time and lifted up their voices in the tumult of the contest of the big parties. No wonder that the man on wages felt that he had no champion in the arena of politics. Thus he was easily persuaded that his only resource was to 'direct action.' Nothing was to be hoped for from law, he must strike for his rights. It was felt in those days, when the sudden assault of so many wage-workers upon the peace and livelihood of their neighbors drew attention to them, that it had been a wise thing to have had Labor members in the parliaments. There must be many in Winnipeg who are of the same mind still.

The enormous vote for Dixon is worth studying. It is noticeable that the Labor candidates who were at the foot of the list are the pronounced O.B.U. men. Dixon came into public life as a single taxpayer. He sat in the last House and dourly fought for the poorer classes, in

season and out of season. Though prominent in the strike after it had progressed he was not active in fomenting it. He has always been recognized as a man of ability and honesty, who has raised himself from being a poor and ill-educated lad into being a man of force in public life. Two years ago, if an election had been held, he would have been overwhelmingly defeated on account of his attitude toward conscription. But his trial, and the able defence which he made, pleading his own case, have won him popularity again. He will be the leader of the Labor group.

It cannot be denied that the net result of the big strike in Winnipeg to date has been a gain to organized labor. The two factions in the labor camp, that which is allied with the A. F. of L. and the O. B. U. party, act with united strength against all others, however they may strive with each other in private. All the laborers who ordinarily are indifferent to class action, and any Labor leader will tell you that they are very numerous, have been aroused and keyed up to obey the instructions of the unions. The non-English speaking peoples have been won over to the organizations of labor. The next civic election, in December of this year, will witness a determined effort to gain control of the city council for labor.

There is nothing alarming in this, in itself. To be alert for one's interests, to form alliances with one's comrades, to seek political power for one's class—are not these the things which the masterful classes have constantly done? The laborers have as much right to rule as the manufacturers or the farmers or anybody else. What is not so satisfactory is the prospect that, if labor should gain control of the next city council in Winnipeg, it will use its power to take revenge upon the citizen's committee, which represents the greater part of the middle class. At the time of the big strike all the civic employees were forced to sign an agreement not to belong to any organization affiliated with the Trades and Labor Council. Many, refusing to sign, were thrown out of the service of the city. The Labor element loudly declare their intention to repeal this ordinance and to urge the organization of civic employees on trades-union lines and in affiliation with the trades unions of the city. The firemen and the police are included in this policy. The vast majority of the citizens, outside the Labor organizations, look on this prospect with deep concern. They fear that the real seat of civic rule may be transferred to the Labor Temple, and that the power of the police will be used to harrass all who are regarded as foes of labor.

The trials and convictions of the strike leaders have made heroes and martyrs of them. The power and influence which was departing from them as the strike 'petered out' has been restored four-fold. Sympathy is excited by the spectacle of their families being thrown on charity while men who were active in opposing the strike are making fortunes in law fees for prosecuting them. It is probable that the shortest road to restoration of peace and good feeling in Winnipeg is to wait until they are released and resume their public activities. Some of them, at least, will speedily forfeit the renown and authority they possess while behind prison walls. Others of them will become effective members of parliament and city council. Some of the best aldermen which have sat in the city council of Winnipeg during the last ten years have been Labor leaders. Once their bitterness is glutted or forgotten, they will again prove their worth.

At the annual meeting of Tooke Bros., Limited, two new directors were elected, Lt.-Col. Chas. W. McLean and W. M. Weir replacing W. Fred Heney and Hon. F. H. Phippen, K.C.