

THE CANADIAN MUNICIPAL JOURNAL

AND REVIEW OF CIVIC IMPROVEMENT

HARRY BRAGG, EDITOR

City Government League of Edmonton, Alta.

The City of Edmonton, Alta., has been for some time enjoying the reputation of having very up-to-date municipal legislation.

It has not only adopted the Single Tax—or rather the Land Tax—but has also abolished the Ward system, except by considering the lately annexed City of Strathcona as a ward, with certain privileges on the old lines.

It has published the success of a so-called Commission form of Government, though the Commissioners have been only salaried employees engaged by the City Council, which has—so far—been allowed to remain.

It now appears that all these modern innovations are not enough for some of the citizens, and a "City Government League" has been formed, whose "purpose is to tell the story of Elective Commission form of Government."

It has already engaged the services of printers' ink and a circular issued by it now lies in front of us.

Naturally, with such a "purpose," the presentation of Elective Commission Government is in the most rosy colors. The cover makes one understand that the Elective Commission Government means "Government of a City through Direct and Continuous Force of Public Opinion."

This is far too much to claim for any system of Government, for that fickle jade, Public Opinion, is very apt to go to sleep or even disappear after some victory of moral reform, until the never-sleeping forces of evil become too assertive and confident. The intended argument in favour of Elective Commission Government is too sweeping to be worth very much.

On the next page is a definition of this ideal system. We read that: "City Government by Elective Commission is the modern and approved plan whereby people directly govern themselves. It is the government of a city through direct and continuous force of public opinion. Its simplicity is exceeded only by its effectiveness."

That of course ought to settle the whole question, but the statement is open to criticism. Who has power to make it the "approved plan"? There are still a good many cities which have studied it, and have not "approved" it. There are still many students who have been studying it for the whole of the few years of its short existence, who do not "approve" it. There are many more who sensibly want further experience, and who have not as yet "approved" it.

■ The claim that by it "people directly govern themselves" cannot be confined to this new system. It is equally applicable to every elective system. The citizens of Edmonton are governing themselves directly today. So that this is quite misleading.

Its "simplicity" is a matter for debate. Unfortunately, as its rabid supporters admit, it must be accompanied by the new ideas of Initiative, Referendum and Recall, which are acknowledged in the pamphlet to be "safeguards" lest the Elective Commissioners should prove to be tyrants or boodlers. Now the "simplicity" of this complicated system, as compared with a municipal Government as formed in Canada,

seems rather a joke, while the necessity of "safeguards" makes one suspicious of its being so very perfect.

A weak point in the plan laid down in the pamphlet is that, after election, the Commissioners divide the different departments among themselves as they like. So the citizens have not the opportunity to choose a man for a certain position because he is specially qualified for it.

So far the pamphlet is merely enthusiastic and one-sided, but the third page starts off with a sentence which is absolutely misleading. It says:—

"There is a reason why over 300 cities in the United States and Canada have adopted the Elective Commission Form of City Government. The old system of city government, embracing aldermen, failed to get results. Unsatisfactory conditions prevailed. Hence the change."

This evidently implies that at least several cities in Canada have adopted the system. Do the authors know that only a single city in Canada, St. John, N.B., has adopted the Elective Commission Government? If they do not, they should not rush to the public with wild statements; if they do, they should not issue statements which must mislead those who do not know.

"There is," quite truly "a reason why" 300 cities in the States have adopted Elective Commission Government, but it is because conditions existed there that do not obtain in Canada. As we have pointed out more than once, the long ballot, with its party symbols, and the consequent party domination, is largely responsible for the willingness to change to any form of government which seemed to offer relief. Municipal government in American cities is so entirely different from our Canadian system, that it is absolutely unfair and ridiculous to say that because American cities are wise enough to make certain changes, Canadian cities should follow their example.

The authors of this little circular should obtain a copy of a pamphlet by Prof. William Bennett Munro, Professor of Municipal Government in Harvard University entitled "Should Canadian Cities adopt Commission Government," and they would get the opinions of an expert of high standing. We reviewed this and based an editorial upon in our February number, and wish that those responsible for this League would read his pamphlet.

Of course, these who believe in the new idea are at perfect liberty to advocate it, but they should try to understand all the circumstances which made for its adoption in the States; study the entirely different conditions here; and then avoid making misleading and erroneous statements to support their plea for its adoption.

■ Edmonton has been fortunate in securing the services of able and public spirited men to act as its Mayors and Aldermen, and in the present Mayor has a careful student of civics.

■ But neither Edmonton nor any other city need expect perfect government—of any form—unless perfect men can be procured. As for Public Opinion—that can be just as powerful under the present system as under a new fangled one.