

Prominent Topics

Montreal Gas and Electric Light Question.

A delegation of citizens visited Quebec Tuesday, to present Premier Gouin with a petition asking that a general law be passed enacting that all public utility franchises granted for over ten years duration should be subject to the approval of the electorate, or the Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council, and that Montreal should be given authority to construct its own system of conduits. Premier Gouin in reply stated that what had happened in Montreal might be repeated in other cities of the province. But it was a grave question to interfere with the autonomy of a city, and rather than incur the charge of a hasty decision, he asked leave to examine the petition at leisure, and promised to give it full consideration. The general impression seems to be that the government, while adverse to referring franchises to the Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council, is willing that there should be ratification by the electorate.

Public Utilities are Public Necessities. We have from time to time made suggestions as to an equitable and business-like solution of the above mooted question—the substance of them being that the city should grant a franchise of reasonable duration in return for a fixed minimum annual payment together with a stipulated proportion of net profits. One fact is to be kept in mind by this city—as by all towns and cities—that public utilities are a necessity of progress and growth, and that it is, therefore, most undesirable that such undertakings should be rendered so difficult and uncertain for capitalists that they will hesitate to expend what is necessary for most efficient service. Without the granting of some privileges, municipalities can scarcely hope that capital will be readily invested. But, of course, this does not mean that the giving of such privileges should not be carefully safeguarded, nor that the citizens should not be assured of moderate prices and a fair share of the profits that will increase with the city's own growth and progress.

The Building of Conduits.

The delegation which waited on the Premier of Quebec laid special stress upon the building of conduits by the city. Montreal may or may not at the present juncture be in a position to make the large outlay necessary for such an undertaking. And there is this fact to be kept in view, that the M. L. H. & P. Co. already has the right to construct conduits in Montreal—

a right of which it cannot well be deprived. How would it suit those citizens who most strongly criticize all proposed terms of settlement, if the company were now to take the attitude of not treating for a franchise, but were instead to deal direct with consumers—and escape paying any annual amount to the city, or having its charges fixed by it?

According to an amendment introduced in the Lower House, if the city builds the conduits and arranges that the M. L. H. & P. Co. pay a rental for using them, the company will be entitled to receive compensation for removal of the present wires and poles. Of course this proposal would have also to pass the Legislative Council before coming into force.

The Taxing of Industries.

All companies should bear their fair share of municipal taxation, but more than this no company should be asked to do. If a city enforces high taxes industries will be discouraged from establishing themselves. And in the case of companies serving the general public, it is to be reckoned with, that taxation unduly heavy means that the consumers themselves suffer through an increase in prices.

Civic Administration by Commission.

Incidentally, the aroused interest of the citizens regarding the gas and electricity matter is a hopeful sign that some day they will arise in their might and declare for the conducting of civic affairs by some form of administrative body that will take from the alderman all but legislative duties. It is after all scarcely fair that the aldermen should be expected to devote nearly all their time for the paltry sum they receive—or, putting it another way, it is perhaps less fair to the city's own interests to provide that its administration be conducted by those in receipt of so trifling remuneration. President Eliot, of Harvard, well remarked at the Canadian Club luncheon last Friday, that present-day forms of Municipal Government on this continent are an illustration of the "tendency of archaic theories to linger beyond their day."

Lt.-Governor Snowball.

Well and honourably known in public life, as well as in lumbering and railroad affairs, was the Hon. Jabez Bunting Snowball, late Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick. His sudden death occurred in Fredericton on Sunday evening, while he was on his way to attend Divine Service at the Cathedral. His decease will be sincerely regretted throughout Canada as well as in his home province.