

# A City for the People

By JOHN F. COGGSWELL

How Edmonton administers its affairs for the Benefit of its Citizens

Legendary history has for centuries told us of Mohammed's trip to the mountain. But historians have neglected their duty in not informing us why the ancient ruler was so anxious to get into proximity with the mountain. Undoubtedly there was something highly desirable at or in that mountain, and it would have cost Mohammed too much to bring in the stuff, so he went and stayed by it.

Let us suppose that the afore-mentioned mountain was composed of coal—a highly desirable substance, you must agree—and our ancient friend wanted that coal to run the palace electric light plant—which, of course, there was none—or to pump water for the royal irrigation system. It would cost \$2.75 per ton to get the coal to Mohammed, but Mohammed could go to the coal and use it for \$1.25 per ton. If the king had use for very much coal it was obviously an excellent thing, for the royal exchequer, to go to the mountain.

That's just the proposition the officers of the City of Edmonton, Alberta, have found presented to them. Under the present arrangement it costs the city \$2.75 per ton to place coal in the bunkers of the city water and light plant. They can mine the coal within four miles of the city, and place it in the furnaces for \$1.25 per ton. So it is the intention to pick up the plant, lock, stock and barrel, and move it to the coal. A most worthy emulation of the long-passed prophet.

It's too bad that Henry George could not have seen Edmonton, for there he would have found some of his choicest doctrines flourishing—in truth, a "city for the people."

## No Improvement Tax

Edmonton has a population of 30,000; is growing rapidly; its building operations are unhampered by any tax on improvements; it is surrounded by an agricultural district second to none; is a railway centre, and the natural gateway to the, as yet, practically unsettled agricultural empire in Northern Alberta; the city owns its street car, telephone, water and light systems, and has a plant for the carrying on of municipal works. That coal proposition is characteristic of the administration of the civic government.

The first thing that is impressed upon an inquiring visitor is that politics are kept out of the city's affairs. An office seeker's political affiliations are not looked into. The only question is whether or not he can deliver the goods. And public office is not considered a public graft. No subsidized councilman has entered a plea for the council to consider the poor coal dealer before moving the water and light plant. They give no reason for the absence of graft, but are content to state that it has never entered the municipal administration, and they don't think it ever will.

## Advanced Civic Government

The city government is carried on by two branches, the legislative and the executive. The legislative branch is composed of a mayor and eight aldermen. "Ward politics" are eliminated from city elections by all the aldermen being elected at large, that is, each alderman is passed upon at the polls by all the voters. Aldermen are elected for two years and four retire each year, thus leaving half the council composed of men experienced in the business of the city. Aldermen receive no compensation, nor does the mayor in that official capacity.

The executive branch is composed of three commissioners, one of which, the chairman, is the mayor. In his capacity as chairman the mayor receives a salary of \$3,600 per year. The other two commissioners are appointed by the city council and have permanent positions, being removable only for cause

and by a three-quarters vote of the council. These two commissioners are professional men, and were hired after a thorough investigation of their capabilities. One is an engineer of high standing, and draws a salary of \$10,000 per year. The other is a financial expert, who does not draw quite as much salary as the engineer. The whole idea in providing for this commission, was to make them as independent as possible of outside influence. Obviously, the men who created the city charter believed that men would rather be honest than dishonest, but that they would be dishonest, if necessary, to advance their own welfare. The method of dealing with the commissioners was reasoned out thus: "Nothing is more conducive to dishonesty than the necessity of hustling after votes when seeking an appointment, carrying with it a high financial emolument." So the two high-salaried commissioners were not compelled to seek election at the polls. "Next to getting a good municipal position, the holder's chief occupation is, generally, hanging onto it." The fathers of the Edmonton charter recognized the fact that, unless there was "cause" there would be great difficulty in getting six out of eight aldermen to vote for his dismissal. Thus the commissioners were relieved from the necessity

to any one, be he alderman or friend of alderman, rich or poor.

## Not Yet Perfect

It is obviously just that no man, who is expected to give the best that is in him and to labor for the future, is expected to go to the trouble and expense of an election to procure his position; that he should not have to bind himself with promises to secure the place. In this respect the commission government of Edmonton differs from the widely heralded commission government of Des Moines, Iowa. In the American city the commissioners are elected by popular vote and are subject to the Recall, and may be forced to stand an election at the behest of the prescribed number of voters.

"Do you not believe the people competent to pass upon the qualification of the members of the executive branch of the city government?" I asked a prominent Edmontonian.

"I do not think that the ordinary man of the street is competent to pass on the professional capacity of the kind of men we want as our commissioners," he replied.

"If that is so," I asked, "how is it that you consider the populace competent to select competent men to select competent commissioners, or to select

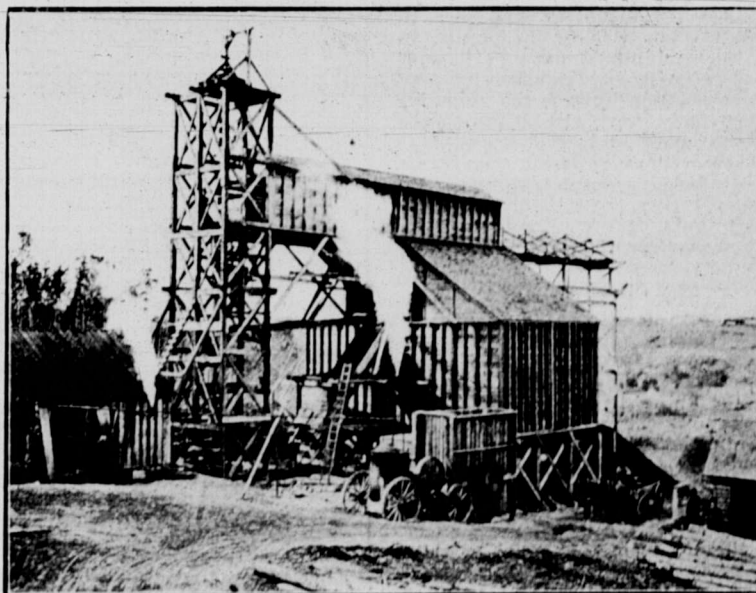
shacks occupying high priced land. There the "single tax" system has been worked out to a further point than in any city in Canada. When the present city charter was in the course of formation, William Short, K.C., one of the charter commission, perceived that the system of taxation should not in any way obstruct the upbuilding of the city. Mr. Short could not in any manner be termed a disciple of Henry George, in fact, it is stated that he had never read a work of the famous single taxer. Mr. Short wasted no time with elaborate theories; he was a hard-headed business man, and knew how anyone hates to pay out real money on a property that is returning no revenue. So he advocated that the taxes be wholly collected from the taxation of land values; that building operations be without let or hindrance.

The city fathers gasped when Mr. Short gave them the benefit of his cogitations; some who owned a lot of idle ground nearly had a stroke. A portion of the charter builders hailed his idea with joy; the balance, if not opposed, looked askance. Mr. Short believed that half a loaf was better than no bread, so a compromise was worked out. The stand-patters agreed that there should be no tax on improvements. In return the single taxers agreed to a business tax. This business tax will soon be a thing of the past. Every place of business has been subject to it, paying according to floor space used. There is a sliding scale; highly profitable businesses that occupy small floor space being taxed heavier than others. The civic officers soon came to the idea that the business tax was an anomaly when used in connection with taxation on land values only, and have constantly been reducing the proportion. Last year the business tax was less than 10 per cent. of the total tax collected; this year it will be even less, and next year the business tax will be a thing of the past, the whole revenue being collected from the tax on land values. This is the answer as to whether or not the single tax has been a success in Edmonton.

## Taxes More Equitable

Real estate men are enthusiastic over its merits; it keeps things moving, they say. The business man will next year be able to carry on his business in an untaxed building; the result will be less rent and lower prices to consumers. Landlords are satisfied. But above all the people are satisfied. The single tax places the greatest burden on the man who can best afford to bear it, the owner of large tracts of valuable land. The poor man who lives in a district where land values are not so high, pays no tax whatever on his residence and that on his lot is so small as to be practically negligible. So on up the line, as the estate of an Edmontonian increases, he pays more and more into the public coffers. But always it is the man who is possessed of much that pays the most. And yet there are those (not in Edmonton) who hold up their hands in holy horror at the mere mention of a single tax on land values. The speculator does not leave a piece of valuable ground lying idle to increase in value by the efforts of more progressive surrounding owners. The single tax makes such speculation unprofitable. For the owner may erect a building on the land, receive an income from it, and yet pay no greater tax than if the land were vacant. The proof of the pudding is in the eating; the citizens of Edmonton have partaken, and declared it good. The very men, who in the beginning, were opponents, are now the firmest believers in the efficacy of the single tax. And the writer will venture to state that there is not a more prosperous city on the continent; nor one that, size considered, boasts more comfortable homes;

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Coal Mine near Edmonton, which city may acquire to furnish fuel for the Water and Light Plant

of fighting to hold their jobs, except by administering the affairs of their offices to the satisfaction of the city council.

## Friction Not Lacking

But, sad to say, this seemingly ideal arrangement has failed to work as smoothly as the originators of the system thought it would. The fact is, there has been acute friction between the council and the commissioners. But neither body, nor any material number of the electors, lays the fault of the friction to any lack of idealistic qualities in the commission form of government. The disgruntled members of the council content themselves with saying that the commission, as now formed, is inefficient. The balance of the council, and other upholders of the present commissioners, state that the cause of the friction is that it has never been possible to elect a council that, as a body, has been able to grasp the idea that trained men are better able to put into execution the plans of the council than they (the council) could be. Furthermore, this faction states that certain members of the council are unable to comprehend the new idea, before mentioned, that public office is not a public graft—that the commissioners demand one hundred cents value for every dollar expended, and will extend no favors

aldermen competent to approve or reject the work of the commissioners?"

He parried the question. This is undoubtedly a defect in the city charter. The commissioners are the duly appointed representatives of the people, in the carrying on of municipal work, and yet the people, if dissatisfied with the work of a commissioner, can only reach him through the round-about and rather unsatisfactory manner of electing councilmen whom they have reason to believe will carry out their desires. Opposed to this, that almost any believer in the supremacy of the people's voice would consider a defect, is the obvious advantage set forth above, that the commissioners do not have to seek popularity, but are free to carry on their work in what they consider the proper manner. Would it not be more in line with the progressive idea, if the commissioners were appointed by the council, and when installed were subject to the Recall of the people?

## Benefits of Single Tax

When done with eulogizing their system of city government, the citizen of Edmonton will always next turn his encomiums to the city's tax system. There are few vacant lots in the business section of Edmonton, and few