

The Standing of Municipal Governments in the Province of Ontario

By G. H. KENT, City Clerk of Hamilton.

(Part of Presidential Address delivered before Annual Meeting of Ontario Municipal Association.)

At our last session we were hopeful that by this time the great war would have been practically ended, but we still find our Empire engaged in a stupendous effort to overcome the common enemy and to establish the principles of Democracy, Freedom and Justice throughout the world. We thoroughly believe in the righteousness of our cause and in the ability of our Empire and her Allies to accomplish this noble purpose, and although the task is hard and the sacrifices many, our faith in ultimate victory does not waiver or our confidence in God's guidance and direction fail us even when the clouds hang low and the burden will fully compensate for all the sacrifices we are called upon to make.

The war has brought much work and many responsibilities to the municipalities of our province, and it devolves upon our Councils to exercise great care and wisdom in the conduct of municipal affairs. Extravagances should be studiously avoided and only works of an urgent character undertaken as the obligations of our great war expenditures must be met in the future, and those municipalities that now conserve their finances most wisely will be the better enabled to meet their payments without having to impose extremely heavy burdens on the people of their communities. I therefore cannot urge too strongly the necessity of strict economy and careful expenditure of municipal funds.

Municipal Act.

I would draw your attention particularly to an amendment to the Municipal Act passed at the last session of the Legislature, being Sec. 3 of Chap. 32, 1918, which is as follows: 53a (1) To remove doubts it is declared that the words "officer," "employee," or "servant" in clause E of subsection 1 of section 53 of this Act shall be deemed to include a commissioner or a member of any commission or other body appointed by the council of a municipal corporation, and except where otherwise expressly provided no such commissioner or member shall be eligible to be elected a member of the Council or be entitled to sit or vote therein. (2) Subsection 1 shall have effect notwithstanding that the establishment of any such commission or other body is authorized by a special Act of the Legislature.

It is needless to say that had the Association any previous knowledge of the intention of the Legislature to pass this amendment it would have been strenuously opposed as its effect is to deprive municipal councils of representation on any commission or board it appoints. Many councils have in the past appointed commissions or boards to conduct certain branches of municipal work, and provided for council representation on such commissions or boards largely with a view of keeping the council in close touch with the business and at the same time having a limited control of the expenditures as the council is the body responsible to the citizens for the actions of the commission or boards.

I am loath to think that the Legislature had a full knowledge of the effect of this amendment before passing the same as it vitally affects the management of many municipal institutions and deprives the councils of direct representation on such commissions or boards. I think this Association should ask for its repeal at the next session of the Legislature.

In order to avoid such conditions occurring in the future I do not consider it too much to ask that some notice of proposed Legislation affecting municipalities should be given to this Association, and in this connection would it not be wise that we appoint a solicitor to whom all such proposed amendments be submitted at the time they are introduced. This Association would not presume to dictate what legislation should be considered or acted upon by the Legislature, but as a means of preventing legislation the practical application of which is not in the general interests of municipalities being passed.

Assessment Act.

The Assessment Act is under consideration by a special Committee of the Legislature. My personal opinion is that the Assessment Act of this province is without exception

the most equitable and satisfactory law in its practical application that I have had the privilege of considering. There are some minor matters that it would be well to make provision for that have been caused by war conditions in some municipalities. One of these is the collection of the income-tax on non-householders. This tax should be collected in the year in which the assessment is made and provision made for the co-operation of the employer with the municipality in the collection of this tax. Permission should be given municipalities affected to pass by-laws providing therefor, and I would suggest that the Resolutions Committee consider this matter and report thereon.

Form of Government. 4

The question of form of municipal government is one of the most important to the people of this Province. Efficiency is the demand in all departments of commercial and industrial life and is rapidly becoming the demand of the ratepayers. Our present system of municipal government is not conducive to a high degree of efficiency by reason of its character, and until municipalities are allowed to adopt and put into operation the business principles that apply in private corporations, conditions are not likely to improve. This question is one deserving the most careful and exhaustive consideration and the appointment of a special Committee of the Legislature for this purpose would I am confident produce good results.

Municipal Loans.

In view of the high rate of interest prevailing caused by war conditions I think it would be wise for this Association to confer at an early date with the financial brokers and with the Minister of Finance, and if possible devise a policy respecting the sale of municipal debentures that would be more favorable to municipalities than the present method of placing debentures on the market at any and all times which are subject to varying rates of discount and in the event of a general policy or plan being adopted that the municipalities be advised of the same by the Secretary of this Association.

Fire Prevention.

It is gratifying to note that the Provincial Government is taking up the question of fire prevention, and I trust this Association will render the Government every assistance possible in this matter of vital importance to municipalities. Legislation can do much, but education can do more to overcome the great loss caused by preventable fires. I would be glad to have serious consideration given the subject by the Association in order that some suggestions of a practical nature may be given the Government in their laudable effort to prevent fire loss.

Food Production.

Urban municipalities should do everything possible to encourage their citizens to produce food by making provision for the cultivation of vacant lands. The great problem before the Allied Countries is production—money and cost are secondary questions—millions of human beings have died of want in Europe since the war began. It devolves upon our Canadian Municipalities to produce as much of the food required for home consumption as possible to enable Canada to assist in providing for the great want of the world. Councils should be more than generous in setting aside sums for this work and assisting in every manner to promote the production of food. I would urge the delegates to impress upon their councils the great importance of rendering all the aid they can to encourage their citizens to plant gardens and provide for their own requirements. I think that it is not too much to say that every loyal citizen should make it a point of conscience to do his full duty in this necessary work.

EXEMPT REAL ESTATE.

The value of real estate exempt from taxation in New York City is \$2,200,086,802. The aggregate assessment on real estate in the City for 1918 is \$8,339,638,851.