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For the CANADIAN ENGINEER.

MUNICIPAL OWNERSHIP.

BY RODERICK J. PARKE.

The discussion of this interesting and important question has during the past few years called forth arguments so varied and so numerous that to the non-technical, although directly interested, citizen, the matter has assumed of late a more or less chaotic condition, and a satisfactory solution seems to be no nearer achievement than formerly. For the benefit of those who have been unable to follow the arguments through the columns of the various technical journals, the writer will endeavor to present as briefly and clearly as he can the principal considerations influencing the agitations for and against, and the actual control of, municipal industrial services, and more particularly that branch of the services which embraces the supplying of electrical current for street lighting and private consumers' purposes. This article is not intended to advocate municipal in preference to private ownership, or vice versa, but merely to place before the reader those facts which will have to be carefully considered before an intelligent, unprejudiced conclusion can be arrived at respecting either form of ownership, to the possible exclusion of the other, in those localities in which the question may arise.

To present the subject in a proper light, it is necessary to first ask and answer this question, namely, "What are the principal motives prompting the increasing agitations in favor of municipal ownership? The answer is found to be: (1) The prospect of reducing the cost to taxpayers and private consumers for street and private light-

ing services. Other motives in the order of their importances are: (2) That the municipality should avail itself of the profits of commercial services, for obvious reasons; (3) Dissatisfaction with the service as rendered by the local company; (4) Local political considerations, and less frequently, purely personal motives among some certain citizens.

Granting, then, that the first-mentioned motive is the prime one influencing the agitation, the question resolves itself not as to who should own the source of supply, but as to whether a cheaper and more efficient public and private service cannot be obtained, and if so, at what proportionate reduction on present cost. Present results show beyond the possibility of a doubt that, giving the same conditions as formerly, in reference to population, cost of fuel and other local conditions, electrical current can be profitably supplied at in some cases a very considerable reduction to the consumer, if modern methods and apparatus be adopted by the central station manager. Competent authorities emphatically point to the fact that if it can be shown that private enterprise can supply municipal industrial services as cheaply and economically as through municipal ownership, very few will be disposed to question the policy of permitting private ownership to continue, providing, of course, that the private corporation will accede to the popular demand. Unfortunately, however, the local company, secure in the monopoly it holds, more often exhibits an utter disregard for the rights of the public, hence the movement for supplying a remedy through municipal ownership. Other reasons for this disregard are lack of enterprise and ability on the part of those responsible for the inefficient and unprofitable condition of the system. In villages and the smaller towns, however, where the demand is necessarily confined within certain limits, the cost of manufacturing is proportionately higher, even with the most efficient machinery, than is the case in the larger towns and cities, hence the public should exercise careful discretion when attempting to compare prices existing in any two localities having a marked difference in population. The individual commercial conditions should also be carefully compared.

The public has every right to demand in return for the privileges accorded to the private corporation in the locality, that the service shall be rendered in the best manner known to be commercially practicable, and at the lowest reasonably profitable prices. Failing in this, the owners of the system can have no cause for complaint in the event of the municipality taking the matter into its own hands, as already illustrated in a number of cases. The question now comes up, whether the company is giving a sufficiently good service to the municipality and at the lowest consistent prices. On this question a great many differences of opinion are found to exist among those directly interested, the only apparent method of arriving at an exact estimate being to have the methods and operations of the system carefully investigated by a board of competent and thoroughly disinterested electrical experts appointed one from each side, and a third chosen mutually by the first two. In this way, assuming the rigid integrity of the experts, the municipality and the company cannot fail