

Some Anomalies in Municipal Government

Will of the Majority Does Not Always Rule in Civic Affairs,
as it Does in Dominion and Provincial Arenas

(By HARRY BRAGG)

There are two rather curious anomalies in the municipal field which prevent the good working of the municipal machinery to a certain extent. A very general claim is that we, in the British Empire, enjoy that blessing of democracy, and that "The Majority always governs." The accepted rule in all elections, Federal, Provincial and Municipal, is that those who carry on the functions of governing, are representatives of the majority of those who are governed.

Lately, some new ideas have been imported from across the line, such as Proportional Representation, the Referendum and the Recall. And it may be noted that the archaic machinery of elections in the "Land of Liberty" is largely responsible for an earnest desire for improvement. It should also be remarked that the cures for diseases are not necessary when the diseases do not exist. Some would-be progressive people grasp at new ideas, without considering whether they are necessary, or even advisable, under other conditions.

Majority of Voters

However, in the main, the will of the majority does prevail in the Federal and Provincial elections. That is, the will of the majority of those citizens who are sufficiently patriotic to do their duty, and record their votes. As to those lazy and careless citizens who do not vote, they certainly do not deserve any representation at all.

But in municipal elections, a very hard and fast line is drawn, as to who shall vote; and the right to vote is not dependent upon residence, or ownership of property, but upon having paid the current taxes, if the voter is a proprietor. That is to say, that the right to vote may be cancelled, and is in most cases, if the taxes due are not paid.

The argument in favor of such a law is a valid one. It is that the municipality has to provide certain things for the property owners, which cost money, and that the said owner is bound to pay his share of the expenses incurred by the municipality. Further, if the owner has not paid what is due from him, he is not entitled to choose who shall manage the expenses of his municipality.

How it Operates

This, on the face, is very proper, but how does it work out?

An owner may have half a dozen tenants, who are all in arrears in paying their rent to him. As a consequence, he cannot pay his taxes. But the tenants, by paying their water rate to the municipality, are entitled to vote, and help to choose the men who are to administer the finances of the municipality in which their landlord has to pay taxes.

An extreme case would be that in which the tenants, who have no permanent interest in the place, have the preponderance of the voting power,

because the proprietors, who are permanently interested, are in arrears with their taxes, and are consequently disfranchised.

A case in point exists within a short distance of Montreal.

A large number of the proprietors in this municipality are working men, who have saved up sufficient money to buy a lot on time, and have secured lumber on the same terms, and utilize their leisure in building—not a house, but a home. Owing to the hard times, many of these men are behind in their taxes, and are, therefore, unable to vote. So the real estate dealers, and similar temporarily interested voters, control the situation. And as a result, the Council of that municipality does not represent the majority, but only a majority of a small minority of the proprietors.

Not Rule by Majority

This municipality is certainly not governed by the majority.

Another curious situation is found not far away from that already noted.

In a certain municipality contiguous to the "Commercial Metropolis," there has been a good deal of the real estate development which has been such a curse in many parts of the Dominion. The smooth-tongued salesmen got people to believe that the lots they were selling would be actually sold again at many times the original price. So many invested—or rather, gambled—and bought lots, not to build on, but to sell again later on. Of course, as in other places, these lots have never risen to the fabulous prices that the salesmen promised, and the owners have had to keep paying interest, without any return, or chance of disposing of them.

But quite a few lot owners built their own houses, and went to live in the town, getting out of the overcrowded city into comparative country.

Needless to say, the house builders found that the taxes on the property they had thus improved for the Town, as well as for themselves, were very much higher than the taxes on the vacant lots, held by the speculative buyers. And in some cases, while the speculators were able to pay the trifling tax on vacant property, the house owners were too hard pressed to do so.

Consequently, the land speculators were in a majority at the last election, and the Mayor was elected—not by his resident fellow citizens—but by what have been termed the "land sharks," whose only aim is to get the Town into such a shape as makes it easy for them to sell and get out. As a matter of fact, while the majority of the Mayor at the election was 17, the vote in the residential polls was more than one hundred against him.

Is it not an anomaly that the men who govern, and finance any place should be elected by the land speculators, and not by those who have helped to build up the municipality?—The Monetary Times.