

The Study of Civics in Our Schools

BY J. A. LIVINSON.

If one were to compare the advances made in the study of civics in schools in some of the larger cities of the American Union, with that accomplished so far in the schools of Canada, one would have to admit that this country must bestir itself in order that it be not outclassed by the United States.

Sir John Bourinot was one of the first citizens of this Dominion to advocate the introduction of the study of civics and politics in our schools. If I mistake not, I believe that he did so publicly at several of the meetings of the Royal Society of Canada. So also did Sir James Grant. Lapse of time seems to have acted upon us as a sort of pathological immunity. We insist upon forgetting the visions of our seers!

The connexity of public education with our topic will, upon reflection, be granted. It should, indeed, at this hour be an axiom that the school exists for public education. This was one of the uncontested facts brought out in the famous Hanus Report in reference to the educational system of the City of New York. The man who does not accept this proposition is out of gear with his times. To extend our sympathy to him for his attitude is the least we can do. Yet, we may assume, that sound logic may ultimately convince him.

It is the subject of this article (which addresses itself to educated people who feel contented with the present status of things, as well as to those persons who adhere to a more progressive attitude as to public education), to show how the school may come to the assistance of agencies battling for good civic administration, by making civics part of the school curriculum.

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From the ancient walled cities, from the ancient city-states, to our modern city, the student views with awe and wonderment the graduation the city evolution has gone through. To-day we behold the great cities emulating the cities of Hellas. They have their stadiums. They enact the "Trojan Women" in their improvised Grecian orchestra. Nay, their youth take their ephebic oath, and swear to be loyal to the city that gave them the beginnings of their educational development. With all this advance and emulation the feature that persists through it all is the complexity of civic life as it has come to be. Added to this is the ever encroaching interests of capitalism, and the "big industry" as elements which bear an influence upon civic rule or misrule. Then, too, there is the peculiar psychology of the up-to-date crowd in our cities who continue to elect misfits as their representatives in the Council Chambers. Thus has it come to pass that voters find the getting after the truth in civic problems so difficult that in their bewilderment they vote helplessly or not at all. Neutrality though a panacea to some of them, comes to be a curse, a blight, upon the community.

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To cope with this we must start with the youth of our elementary and secondary schools. But if the schools are to give this instruction properly, the school authorities must delegate groups of teachers who will take the matter under control. They should be solely responsible for the quality and content of civic instruction in our schools. To leave this teaching to the mercy of incompetent instructors is useless. I once heard ex-Recorder Weir tell a Montreal audience that every city manages to get the kind of government it deserves. However, I am sure many a city deserves better than it gets! Birmingham, England, is a typical example of a city that gets what it sets out to get, and then deserved it. In a word the schools may be

the saviors of the situation; the schools may lead us to the ideal city.

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Here let me narrate an experience that I had, and which bears out the thesis of this article. It was in the latter part of 1913 that I had my first opportunity to test the general knowledge, in civics and politics, possessed by a seventh grade class in one of the largest public schools in Montreal. The result of this improvised experiment unmistakably pointed to the conclusion that our boys and girls of the school leaving age, viz., thirteen years, knew but little of even the mere essentials of the subject.

Without any forewarning of their being interrogated I entered the class room, and put the following questions to the pupils, asking them to write down their replies:—

- 1.—Who is the mayor?
- 2.—In what ward do you live?
- 3.—Give the name of the alderman representing your ward?
- 4.—Who is the member of the legislature for the division in which you live?
- 5.—Give the name of the chairman of the Board of School Commissioners.
- 6.—Who is the superintendent of the public schools?
- 7.—Who is the Member of Parliament, at Ottawa, representing your division in which you live?
- 8.—Who is the Premier of the province?
- 9.—Give the name of the Premier of the Dominion.
- 10.—Who is the Leader of the Opposition in the Federal Parliament at Ottawa?
- 11.—Who is the Governor-General of Canada?
12. (a) Give the name of the chief of police.
(b) Who is the chief of the Fire Department?

Before asking each question I took care to eliminate misunderstandings, because I wanted to feel satisfied that the pupils realized, at least, what I meant. I trusted to their general information to give me some kind of an answer.

Here are the percentages of correct answers:—Question (1) 76.9 per cent.; (2) 84.6 per cent.; (3) 80.7 per cent.; (4) Nil; (5) 3.8 per cent.; (6) 77 per cent.; (7) 11.5 per cent.; (8) 11.5 per cent.; (9) 57.6 per cent.; (10), 7.6 per cent.; (11) 53.8 per cent.; (12) (a) 42.2 per cent.; (b), 65.3

I will confess that this is a fair showing of cosmopolitan group of pupils. I did not anticipate that the answers would be comparatively of so high an order. However, it indicates that there is room for further work to improve the knowledge of such matters.

The school and the community should not be a phrase but a reality. It is folly to divorce the two. It would be well nigh a crime if "the people" look on, and do not raise their voices to demand reforms with regard to the education in citizenship of our youth. Our youth have far too long departed to "a far country"—let us lead them back! The reader, after perusing the foregoing, will see the justification in declaring this preposition:—

"In not doing its share of inculcating more information about civics, the work of the various departments of the city, as well as the methods of provincial and federal administration, those who are delegated with the solemn duty to look after and direct the development of our children in the elementary and secondary schools, throw themselves open to the serious charge of nurturing a 'laissez faire' policy."

I most earnestly advocate the efficient instruction of civics and politics in our schools because the possibilities for good that the city and country may derive therefrom are far-reaching.

Public Ownership of Telephones in Canada--Continued

to the decision of the government to operate the local exchanges.

3. The Rural Telephone Act.

The last-named act is remarkable as being one of the most progressive examples of legislation in the interest of rural telephone development on this continent, for the reason that it provided that the government may furnish, free of cost, to rural companies the necessary poles, up to 30, for each mile of line to be built.

The legislation resulted up to 1913, in the establishment of 304 rural telephone companies, serving approximately 8,000 subscribers.

In April, 1909, the government purchased the Bell sys-

tem in Saskatchewan for \$367,500, or \$175 per telephone. A month later the plant of the Saskatchewan Telephone Co. was acquired for \$150,000, or \$140 per telephone. These purchases placed the government in possession of all the long distance lines and, with a few isolated exceptions, of all the local systems in the province.

It is interesting to note that in 1913 there were approximately 24,000 telephones in Saskatchewan, whereas in 1905 the Bell Company, which had a virtual monopoly, was only furnishing service to 350 subscribers, truly a sad commentary upon the public spirit of a corporation which the Federal Government had declared to be "a work for the general advantage of Canada."