

Another Form of Civic Administration in Canada

A very interesting report, which is printed on another page, was recently presented to the Guelph City Council by a special committee appointed to investigate different forms of municipal administration with the idea of improving the present system. After examining the working of every known system the report recommends the English form of Councillors, Aldermen and Mayor, the latter two being elected by the Council. The principal reason given is that the real work of the English Council is done by committees to which the permanent officials are summoned, these men having a "steading" influence on the discussions, and considerable effect on the decisions. But the report does not give the reasons for this "steading" influence, which principally is that the permanent officials are directly responsible to the Local Government Board, (a department of the Imperial Government), for the working of their departments; so much so that they call themselves civil servants, the effect of which is that any advice given to the committees will be checked by Local Board specialists in their own line. The double responsibility to the Council and the Local Government Board naturally make municipal officers careful in their advice.

When the United States and Canada adopted the English principle of local government—Mayor, Council and Committees—neither country adopted the system of well adjusted checks, which in the Old Country, as already suggested, is represented primarily in the Local Government Board. Consequently all kinds of abuses cropped in. In the United States, in many of the cities, they have tried to remedy this by changing the system to commission or manager form, with varying results. In Canada, too, other systems have been successfully tried where the personnel has been of the right material. Now the great advantage of the English system in its entirety is that the municipal councils have every opportunity to do progressive work, but very little chance to play ducks and drakes with their trust. Any council, or any official, misusing local public funds for instance, either through incompetence or dishonesty would soon be pulled up. As pointed out in the Guelph report the actual administration of the municipality is largely in the hands of the permanent officers, leaving the council itself (and even the committees) more time to consider new policies for the benefit of the community. There is no doubt that one of the drawbacks of our municipal system is the irksomeness of the detail work which should be left to the official staffs. This has had the result of driving many good men out of the council chamber, men who cannot understand why their time should be taken up with matters of routine which in their own business are left in the hands of his clerks. If the best men in the community are to be induced to enter and stay in the local parliament the work must be made interesting, as in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. In all of these units of the British Empire the standard of municipal administration is so high that the best men consider it a great honor to be a part of it. And all these local governments are based on the English system.

The City of Guelph is fortunate in owning its own

waterworks, electric light and power plant, gas plant and the local radial railway, but each one of these utilities is administered by a separate commission, and even the parks and sewerage are managed by separate boards. The suggestion of the investigating committee is that by bringing all corporation works under the direct management of the City Council, provided the members have more continuity of office, better results will accrue to the city. That, of course, remains to be tested, although the rate-payers evidently believe in the suggested change for in the recent elections they approved of a by-law to put into practice the recommendations of the committee.

This means that beginning 1918—should the Provincial legislature pass the required legislation—the city council of Guelph will be composed of sixteen aldermen, twelve being elected by the rate-payers directly and four by the new aldermen, evidently from outside. The time of office ultimately is for three years, one-third of the council retiring each year, and the mayor will be elected by the council for one year from among its own members. The present utility commissions will then be dissolved and their work undertaken by the council through committees.

A special feature of the By-law is that the city clerk will be an ex-officio member of all the committees, but without the right to vote, the idea being that he being familiar with the work carried on in the various departments is specially qualified to advise and recommend the measures necessary for the efficient working of the administration.

How this new system of government will work out in Guelph remains to be seen. It certainly makes for more continuity of office of the council and adds much to the responsibility of the permanent officials, particularly the city clerk. Our experience tells us that it is a step in the direction of more permanency and greater efficiency in municipal affairs, and the experiment will be watched closely by other councils in Canada.

CIVIC COAL DEALING.

The City Council of St. Catharines (Ont.), is to be congratulated on its foresight in contracting for coal with the object of selling it to the poorer citizens at the rate of \$7 per ton, delivered in quantities of as small as quarter of a ton. This cheap coal, which is of the "Pea" variety will be very tangible evidence, in these days of costly living, of the value of municipal trading, when in the hands of public spirited citizens.

We note also that the City of Lethbridge (Alta.) has bought a coal mine with the idea of operating it for the benefit of the citizens. As Mayor Hardie has a very practical and scientific knowledge of coal mining, and consequently knows what he is about, there is no reason why the mine should not be a financial success, even with the lower prices that will be charged. If coal manipulators are not satisfied with fair profits then a few sharp lessons, like the above, might bring them to their senses.