

Oxford Clerks' Association—County Council Reform.

COUNTY MUNICIPAL ASSOCIATIONS
ADVOCATED.

The annual meeting of the clerks and treasurers of the municipalities comprising the county of Oxford, was held in the court house, Woodstock, on the 19th September.

Mr. E. L. Sutherland, clerk and treasurer of West Zorra, occupied the chair.

Those present were :

R. J. Henderson, Blandford ; M. F. Ainslie, Blenheim ; Alex. Bell, Dereham ; W. E. Anderson, East Nssouri ; Alex. McFarlane, South Norwich ; R. Seldon, North Oxford ; F. G. Jackson, E. Oxford ; W. G. Francis, W. Oxford ; Jas. Anderson, E. Zorra ; E. L. Sutherland, W. Zorra ; Jno. Morrison, Woodstock ; W. R. Smith, Ingersoll ; A. E. Raynes, Tilsonburg ; E. Cody, Embro ; Wm. Fairley, Norwich ; Wm. Clarke, Blandford ; Samuel Grigg, Dereham ; D. Lawrence, E. Nissouri ; Thos. Walker, N. Norwich ; Walter S. Schell, E. Oxford ; A. Miller, E. Zorra ; W. S. Law, Tilsonburg.

County Clerk James White, read the following exhaustive paper on the county Councils Act which was much appreciated and for which he received a hearty vote of thanks.

THE COUNTY COUNCILS ACT.

For nearly half a century the law that gave the county its council had been but slightly, and in no radical sense, changed. By it the council was composed of the reeves and deputy-reeves of the minor municipalities. The deputy-reeves were limited after the local municipality had reached five hundred ratepayers to multiples of that figure, until the number limit of the township council had been reached. This made it possible in a county, comprising (as does Oxford) sixteen municipalities, for the council to reach a membership of eighty men. The council of Oxford had, as will be remembered, in the year 1896, reached a membership of thirty-seven, having increased in number from the date of its constitution, in 1850, when it only numbered sixteen (from exclusively township municipalities and only four of whom were deputy-reeves.)

The new County Councils' Act was passed in 1896, and the first election under the new Act was held in January, 1897. This county, Oxford, because its population was less than 60,000, was entitled to fourteen representatives, coming from seven divisions, in the formation of which municipal boundaries were not necessarily respected. And so we have in the first place a change from municipal to district representation, and a body of representatives elected to their special work by a direct vote of the ratepayers, and (although the district is larger in extent

and population than the municipality) a marked decrease in the number of representatives. Then we have also the municipal life of the county councillor increased from one year to two years. No new powers were granted, and no old privileges were taken away, but under the new order local prejudices stood a fair chance of becoming gradually, if not rapidly, obliterated, and broader, healthier views of public questions becoming the rule and method of all.

No person had the temerity, I judge, to look for sudden changes of method or improvement in practice or work, because the councils first elected under the new Act proved, "as was anticipated," in most cases throughout the province, to be simply a reduction in number without much change in composition. And the change in the law which had been radical and sudden, and, possibly, not fully studied by those most deeply interested, in all its bearings in active municipal life, was, as might fairly have been expected, somewhat dazing and partially paralyzing to their activities. However, it was soon found that the alterations, which had been made in the law were after all not very disturbing to the work of county councils, as such, and now the machinery moves with perfect smoothness, and the altered conditions are no longer a barrier, but rather a help to municipal activity, and county councillors are seldom now found speaking or acting on the narrow lines of local boundaries and sectional prejudices, but freely speak and act on lines of the public county interest.

The law, in respect of the county council, is in the judgment of many, not yet perfect, and some changes that might be made, "which, in my opinion, would be an improvement, are as follows :

1. No person should be eligible as a county councillor who has not served in a local council for at least a couple of years. This would have the effect of improving, by maintaining increased interest in the local councils, and would largely disarm adverse criticism on this line.

2. One member from each district should retire each year, and so an election for county councils would be held each year. This would keep the public more continuously in touch with county work, and add materially to the interest taken in local elections, and also ensure a good proportion of men in the council accustomed to the work.

3. The reeves of the several municipalities including the mayors of towns, should be granted the privilege of meeting together in the county council chamber at least one day in each year, at the county's expense, to discuss changes made from year to year in the Municipal and Assessment Acts, as well as their relation to the municipal government of the county as a whole. This would keep the councils of the minor municipalities constantly in touch with the work of the county council and the Provincial legislature ; encourage, if not

secure, uniformity of methods, and would prove a strong educational force in the municipal life of the province. These changes are not in any sense radical, and do not interfere with the principle of the County Councils Act, which, I conceive to be correct, and which, while I believe it may in its worthy details be advantageously elaborated and improved, should not be changed.

County councils, are, as constituted to-day, composed of an even number of members, and as a consequence, tie votes, in the work of the council are of frequent occurrence. In view of this difficulty, as well as for other reasons that may suggest themselves, the feasibility and advisability of electing the warden by a popular vote, is worth consideration. While my own mind is not perfectly clear on this point, I fail at present to see how any harm could arise. In conclusion, I have only to say that so far as I have had the opportunity of watching its workings, the County Councils' Act of 1896 is a decided improvement upon the Act which it replaced, and I am very strongly of the opinion that whatever changes may be made in the future the basic principles of the Act, viz., district representation and direct vote of the ratepayers will not be departed from.

It is a well-known fact that there are scores of municipalities in Canada where not more than forty per cent. of the total vote is really polled at any election. In some places the percentage is even less. And in a very few municipalities indeed, do the votes reach seventy-five per cent. of the total number on the list. We venture to say that such a thing as a full vote—100 per cent.—has never been polled in any municipality in the Dominion. This shows that a great many people do not take sufficient interest in public affairs to vote. We have known men who boasted that they had never voted in their lives. They seemed to think it was something to be proud of. In our opinion every man should be compelled to poll his vote, sickness or death being the only valid excuse for not doing so. When we have compulsory voting bribery will not be so common, and surely that is something worth striving for.—*Leader and Recorder.*

The town of Parry Sound, by a vote of 201 for to 16 against, has passed a by-law granting a bonus of \$20,000 to the James Bay Railway.

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The council of the township of South Elmsley have passed a by-law dispensing with the levying and collection of dog-tax in that municipality.

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At the recent assizes in Barrie an action brought against the village of Beeton by one McGill to obtain redress for the diverting of water on his land by the municipality, was dismissed by consent.