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The Development of Citizenship

Citizens of Toronto:

The municipality a practical school of citizenship

There are two main theories of the State. One is that the State is a separate entity and the citizens exist for the State. The corollary is that citizens must act and even think as directed by the State. The other is that the State is an agency of the citizens to get performed for them collectively necessary services which cannot as well be produced by citizens individually.

According to the former conception, the citizen exists for the State. According to the latter, the State exists for the citizen. That government, at all levels, is the servant of the citizens, is held by most Canadians, and we have fought two bloody wars to maintain this belief.

In time of war, government in the interest of the citizens, must assume extraordinary powers which enable it to get quick action. Citizens must for the time being give up certain freedoms in order that their government may better protect their lives and their liberties, which should be returned to them intact when the conflict is over.

Difficult to discard habits established during the war

When, however, these extraordinary powers of government have been maintained for 6 or 8 years, and when citizens have become accustomed to living under war-imposed restrictions for a like period, to retrace the steps is extremely difficult. Human nature being what it is, the habit of authority and the habit of acquiescence are hard to put off. It is easy to find reasons why special powers should be retained, and it is least painful and least immediately disturbing to comfort for citizens to follow the lines of least resistance. Thus we tend to fall into the danger from which we sought deliverance at the expense of so much blood and treasure.

The larger the numbers of persons directly interested in public expenditure the more difficult is effective popular control

The creation of new departments or bureaux of government having to do with social welfare brings an ever-enlarging proportion of the population into government

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service and increases the number of those who receive direct service from the State. The result is, that no matter how desirable these new services may be, the effective control of government activities becomes ever more difficult. There is little doubt that the next two decades will determine in Canada, whether twenty years from now government will be working for the citizens or the citizens working for government.

Local government provides the solution

There is one important control in the hands of the citizens. This is local government. The processes of municipal and school management go on in full view of all citizens. They can if they will know what is going on. An ordinary resident of Toronto for example, may open the day by taking a drink of water which has been pumped from Lake Ontario, filtered and chlorinated by the city. He shaves in water which has been heated by power from Niagara supplied to him by a civic commission. He goes down town on a street car owned by the city and operated by another civic commission and pays his fare to an employee of that commission. On his way down town he may see a civic policeman directing traffic, and civic firemen and fire apparatus going to put out a fire. On getting to his office he may dictate letters to a stenographer, educated and trained in the city schools. He takes his lunch at a restaurant inspected by the city and drinks milk protected by the civic health department. When he comes back from lunch he may find on his car, a ticket which may bring him in touch with a magistrates court. Wherever he turns and whatever he does he uses local government services and comes in contact directly or indirectly with local authorities - not on one day in the year, but every day. He helps or may help to elect the City Council and the educational boards which administer the services referred to and many others. He is in effect, whether he realizes it or not, attending a practical school of citizenship. If he plays truant from this school, he not only loses something himself, but he has done a distinct disservice to his neighbour.

Citizen control of government seems to vary inversely as the square of the distance of the citizen from government at any level. It is interesting to note that at least in the early years of the war, in Canada as a whole, municipal debt and municipal tax levies went down. This may have been partly pressure from above war requirements and consequent absence of the necessary labour and material; but, in large measure it was due to the insistence of citizens.

The real antidote to unsound centralization and undue bureaucratic control is the development and maintenance of virile local representative institutions. If citizens become conscious and expert in the use of their power in local affairs, they will be able, although with greater difficulty, to form intelligent judgments and make their will effective at so called upper levels of government.

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