

Open Letter Issued by the Bureau of Municipal Research, 137 Wellington Street West, Toronto 1



An independent fact-finding organization
reporting to the public on civic affairs.

CIVIC AFFAIRS

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RECRUITING CIVIC VOTERS

Fellow Citizens:

In twelve of metropolitan Toronto's thirteen municipalities elections are slated for this year-end and prospective candidates are already beginning to concentrate their attention on building support for themselves at the polls. The contestant who seeks a large and representative following has by no means an easy job; for the hardest opponent to dislodge in order to reach that objective is public apathy. Indeed, in nearly every contest last year, the people who could have voted but didn't easily outnumbered the combined poll of those who did. Small wonder, then, that good candidates as well as a growing number of local citizens are keenly concerned with determining the causes of public apathy and applying the remedy.

There is, the Bureau believes, no single or easy answer to the problem of awakening genuine interest in civic elections. It seems equally plain that a last-minute appeal to the electors can not be relied on to produce and cement the improvement that is needed. The purpose of this letter, therefore, is to bring together in summary form, factors to be considered in developing a long-term recruiting campaign--a campaign that should get under way now for this year's elections and be picked up and carried forward year by year.

The Voting Group

REAL PROPERTY FRANCHISE: In local elections, the franchise is not given to every individual entitled to a voice in the Provincial and Federal elections. Broadly speaking, the vote is restricted to owners and tenants of real property, together with their wives or husbands. The reason lying back of this requirement is that our local municipalities were founded and developed as 'corporations' concerned principally with services to property. Owners and tenants banded together to protect their properties from fire, theft and public nuisances; they serviced their land with roads and sidewalks, street-lighting, drainage facilities, parks and public squares; they built and equipped the local schools.

Today the mill rate still yields the major portion of local revenues, and services to property continue as key municipal undertakings. Yet the picture is certainly changing. Present heavy expenditures on roads and streets are demanded by motor vehicle operators whether property owners or not. Again, the value of a man's real property holdings is not a fair measure of his financial responsibility for new and expended social and educational services. In consequence, provincial tax revenues are being tapped through grants-in-aid to local authorities. Real estate in this way has gained partial relief and is seeking more. Four years ago, in England, the property franchise for local elections was abandoned in favour of universal adult suffrage and some seven million persons were added to the rolls. The reason: the property tax had ceased to be the chief source of local funds. In this Province, the change has not gone that far. There is still a strong argument for retaining the property franchise but the question is becoming more debatable. One point does seem clear. Little is to be gained by keeping the issue in the background, while a reasoned airing of the pros and cons might well stimulate public interest in civic affairs.

TAX ON OWNERS OR OCCUPIERS: A person who has local taxes to pay is likely to take a keener interest in civic elections than someone with no direct financial responsibility. In the long run, everyone who pays for living or business accomodation does contribute to the cost of municipal government, but on residential properties it is only the owner who gets a tax bill and on business properties, tenants merely pay the supplementary business levy. This leaves a large group of residents who may be completely unaware of the share they contribute in rent towards civic revenues, and a smaller number of business tenants who can easily forget that part of their taxes are also paid out of their rent. Because rents do not fluctuate with each tax change the cost is hidden. True, assessment notices are mailed to everyone qualified to vote as owner or tenant; yet tenants are often uncertain of their meaning and, in any event, the notices carry no statement of the actual tax levy.

As a method of fixing financial responsibility on tenants, English authorities charge local property taxes directly to the occupant, rather than to the owner. It is a more cumbersome method and experience has shown that the problem of collecting from delinquents is greater. Nevertheless, there is much to be said in its favour. Owners would certainly welcome the change as at times they absorb a tax increase rather than add it into the rent. The main advantage, however, would be in the new interest it would awaken in civic administration.

MONEY BY-LAWS: The submission of money by-laws to the electorate provides a valuable check on capital spending and at the same time brings increased participation in municipal management. Here, the privilege of voting is given only to property owners, the group most concerned with such long-term commitments. Corporations, which have no voice in ordinary elections, may vote on money by-laws through registered nominees. Yet if experience in the City proper is bypical, corporations owning property do not place much value on this franchise. In 1948 when a by-law was last submitted, only 82 corporations bothered to register. Individual and corporate owners alike would do well to use their votes, for already the law has been changed permitting a larger proportion of capital outlays to by-pass approval at the polls.

The Machinery of Government

The particular way in which local governments are organized can do quite a lot to hinder or help our objective of wide public participation and effective control over civic administration. To illustrate: Over the last forty years, more than eight hundred U. S. cities have adopted one new form of civic government--the Council-Manager plan, and the change has been followed by a marked improvement in municipal standards. If mere enthusiasm for reform had something to do with the results, time has also proved the new model's superiority. For the Ontario scene, this American experience has a direct application. Contrary to the common impression, our machinery of local government is not inflexible. Features we don't like, we needn't put up with, and indeed there have been many changes in Ontario practice over the years. Usually these have been proposed by municipal representatives and the Provincial authorities have responded readily with Departmental approval or, if necessary, legislative action. Here is a valuable feature of local democracy that can help us keep pace with modern needs. It should not be allowed to fall into disuse.

LENGTH OF TERM: For many years, the Bureau has recommended the three-year staggered term for elected representatives. It is not opposed to annual elections but has strongly maintained that the one-year term will neither attract good candidates to seek municipal office, nor give them an opportunity to demonstrate their worth. The unfavourable count on this question chalked up by Toronto voters last January, while due in part to a complication of the re-assessment issue, was nevertheless a serious setback. Mimico, on the other hand, with a two-year term is profiting from the successful experience with the longer term in all English municipalities, in 98 percent of U.S. centres over 5,000 population, and in the great majority of Canadian cities and towns.. It is worth noting, too, that Mimico's turnout at the polls last year was far above the record of any of its neighbours.

REMUNERATION: Nowadays, with high income taxes and succession duties, it is not easy to find good candidates who are able to give their services to the municipality without some modest remuneration. Indeed, it is only fair that all elected representatives should be paid sufficient at least to cover their out of pocket expenses and loss of time from the business day. Moreover, in every one of the metropolitan municipalities, the work entrusted to elected officers is much too important to take any unnecessary risk of bringing in incompetents. Experience has shown also that paid positions will draw electors to the polls in larger numbers.

SPLINTERED GOVERNMENT: A major shortcoming of local government organization in this Province, and one that American municipalities have not escaped, stems from the multitude of separate authorities that carry on its work. The public has to interest itself in the Council, the Board of Education, the Separate School Board, the Police Commission, the Library Board, the utilities commissions, the Planning Board, and several other bodies in order to keep abreast of the full story of civic affairs. Here again, the contrast with English practice is striking; for in that country nearly all these jobs are handled by the Council with the help of its Standing Committees. We, in Ontario, can hardly expect to wipe out all separate Boards and Commissions at one stroke, nor is it clear that all should be brought under a single elected body. At the same time the splitting-up process has gone quite far enough. There is surely no good reason to strip the Council of any more functions, and consideration might well be given to combining some of the established agencies. Part of the success of the Council-manager plan has been due to

the fact that, with its adoption, the number of separate Boards and Commissions has usually been reduced.

REPRESENTATION: For Councils, Boards and Commissions, it is important to settle on the number of members and method of selection that will best combine adequate public representation with operating efficiency. Recently, for example, the question has been raised whether the Exhibition Board could perform its work more easily if its numbers were reduced from the present total of thirty-three members, requiring much business to be handled by an executive committee. The issue is not one to be disposed of summarily, for it is part of a wider political controversy. Again, some local Councils are heavily weighted with ward representatives and run into sectional contests that interfere with the more pressing needs of the municipality at large. The suburban municipalities are not handicapped in this way, but, in the City proper, Council business might be expedited by increasing the proportion of members elected on a city-wide basis.

MUNICIPAL BOUNDARIES: In a fast-growing country like Canada, municipal boundary lines in the built-up areas are one of the first parts of the local government structure to get out of date; and, more often than not, they are among the slowest to be corrected. Today, it is plainly ridiculous for York and East York to continue to operate as townships, and the answer is not to incorporate as new cities, for both have become integral parts of urban Toronto. The metropolitan problem, which the position of these municipalities well illustrates, is by all odds the most serious structural difficulty standing in the way of effective civic government in greater Toronto. Right now, the attention being given to this question is awakening renewed interest in civic affairs. If we are to hold this interest, a constructive solution will need to be put forward and adopted without too great delay.

The Issues

Judging by the accepted tactics of most candidates, live election issues are an essential ingredient in getting out a large vote. But live issues may be deep or shallow, pertinent or impertinent, sensational or serious. Any type may bring out voters but all are not equally valuable in fostering civic consciousness. And how to rate Toronto's referendum on Sunday sport is an open question. There is this much to be said: since it is a problem for the Ontario legislature to rule on, it might well have been taken up first with the local members from Toronto ridings. Failing action from this quarter, its introduction on the civic platform would have found a more solid footing.

The points touched on earlier in this letter present, we believe, opportunities to build a constructive interest in civic affairs. Such questions need to be explored fully and frequently by the electorate. The main election issue, however, comes down to the day-in day-out problems of civic administration. Proposals on day-care centres, street widenings, policemen's pay and a whole host of municipal commitments are together the issue in which the electorate must, in the final analysis, become interested. If properly presented and adequately publicized, these subjects need not be colourless. And perhaps the best way of tying them all together is in the record of expenditures and the proposed current and capital budgets under which they will be financed.

For this reason, the Bureau is concerned that the City of Toronto has again abandoned the attempt to develop a pre-election budget. Admittedly there were difficulties in the way of preparing an accurate forecast. Yet it will be unfortunate if the result now is either to talk about the tax rate with no real knowledge of the level of expenditures that is justified or to abandon the financial picture as an election theme altogether.

Today, the ordinary operations of our civic governments present problems of growing intensity. Electors should require their representatives to demonstrate that they are versed in these, the real issues, and capable of giving competent attention to the affairs of the municipality.

A Strong Electorate

Nowadays it is not easy to build and sustain interest in our municipal elections. As the character of municipal services changes and the revenue structure grows more complex, it becomes increasingly difficult to 'sell' owners and tenants on their stake in local government. The municipal structure has not everywhere kept pace with the times and the outworn parts have endangered the calibre of candidates and damaged the efficiency of civic operations. The real election issues, while undoubtedly important, are not readily presented to the electorate in understandable and attractive form. These are some of the reasons why metropolitan Toronto turned out just under 35 percent of the possible vote in the latest municipal contests but more than 71 percent in the recent Federal election. In the face of this poor record can we any longer claim that local government is the government 'closest to the people'?

INTEREST AND ACTION: But, before these problems are overcome, is there something positive and constructive that can be done to rebuild voting strength? For one thing, the methods adopted so successfully by the Community Chest can be used to strengthen the annual election campaign. Service clubs, the Boards of Trade, the trade unions, the churches, and other community groups can combine to publicize the nominations, to throw light on municipal issues, and to urge a large turnout at the polls. Already good work is being done by some such organizations along these lines. But everyone's help is needed, and there is no reason why these groups cannot co-ordinate the timing of their appeals. Certainly the first publicity should not be delayed until after nomination day, because a series of acclamations and a sprinkling of poor candidates who are self-selected can have a very dampening result on election day.

Sometimes the introduction of party labels is advocated as a means of sparking interest in local elections. Local voters have already shown some distaste for this innovation, and perhaps in doing so, recognized that local government, in structure, is not a party government and, in function, is an administrative job that has little to do with genuine party issues. Yet if party organization is to be rejected, and candidates are to be

selected for their ability to direct an administrative undertaking rather than on their partisan leanings, fully representative groups of citizens must band together to choose and support nominees.

This job is not one for the service clubs or other community organizations and they have wisely refrained from it, since it might tend to divide the voters along economic, religious or other lines. The selection needs to be handled by ward or neighbourhood associations that are open to all residents in the area. It is encouraging to find such groups gaining strength in our communities. Today they are backing community centres, forming home and school associations, and supporting recreational programmes and ventures in adult education. The work they can do in proposing candidates and in bringing them support at the polls can be of very real value in strengthening local democracy.

J G Rogers
President

Lic Hardy
Director

The Voting Process

PROPERTY FRANCHISE: In local elections, the franchise is not given to every individual entitled to a vote in provincial and Federal elections. Broadly speaking, the vote is restricted to owners and tenants of real property, together with their dependents. The reason lying back of this requirement is that all the municipalities were founded and developed as 'corporations' established principally with services to property. Owners and tenants banded together to protect their properties from fire, theft and public nuisance; they serviced their land with roads and sidewalks, street-lighting, drainage facilities, parks and public squares; they built and equipped the schools.