



TELEPHONE RANDOLPH 5444

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

CIVIC AFFAIRS

November 28, 1950

ELECTIONS

Fellow Citizens:

Voters in the greater Toronto area are becoming more conscious every day of the fact that December is election month in the thirteen municipalities which make up our main metropolitan area. Breaking a well-established tradition of New Year's elections, the citizens of Toronto will go to the polls on December 4th and election dates in other municipalities are closely grouped around this time. Here are the municipal election dates for the City and its suburbs:

Town of Leaside	-	(December 2
Township of Etobicoke	-	(
Village of Forest Hill	-	(
Township of North York	-	(December 4
City of Toronto	-	(
Town of Weston	-	(
Township of East York	-	(
Village of Long Branch	-	(
Town of Mimico	-	(December 9
Town of New Toronto	-	(
Township of York	-	(
Township of Scarborough	-	(December 11
Village of Swansea	-	(December 16

With the exception of six rural school sections in Scarborough, where trustees will be chosen at open meetings to be held on Wednesday, December 27th, school board contests are to be staged on the same dates as the elections to municipal councils. Most suburban school boards have adopted the system of overlapping two or three-year terms for their members so that only a portion of the suburban trustees must stand for office at this time. Members of the Toronto and Suburban Separate School Board were all elected a year ago for a two-year term and will not face the voters again until December of 1951. In addition, there have already been several acclamations for posts on local councils and school boards; and, notably, Forest Hill Village has returned its entire council by acclamation. Nevertheless, a good quota of lively elections is in the offing.

Importance of Voting

Year in and year out, the Bureau of Municipal Research has urged a larger turnout of owners and tenants in civic elections. The record shows that there is still plenty of room for improvement. In the last City elections, even with the increased poll inspired by the Sunday sports issue, those who voted numbered only 52.8 percent of the total on the voters' lists. In other words, almost half the City's electors failed to vote. The suburban average was much worse; taking the last elections in which the chief office--Mayor or Reeve--was being contested, the voting turnout averaged only 27.4 percent.

If there are any doubts as to the importance of voting, a few figures should at once serve to dispel them. In 1949, councils and school boards in greater Toronto had control over the spending of more than \$75 million. For 1950 the total will be somewhat higher and no reduction is in sight for 1951. Most of the money is raised from the real property tax and all of it can be said to come directly or indirectly from the pockets of taxpayers in the Toronto area. In other words, every man, woman and child in metropolitan Toronto is being asked to contribute on the average nearly \$75 a year for the provision of municipal and local school services. How well this money is spent depends more than anything on the calibre of the men and women who serve us as members of local councils and school boards.

The Bureau is seeking a large vote but regards it as equally important that it should be an informed vote. It is not enough that electors should turn out to express an opinion on some referendum question or to keep certain undesirable candidates out of office. Others they elect may in their turn prove quite incompetent. If local elections are to serve their purpose voters in large numbers must develop a constructive understanding of what they are voting for and of the candidates who are most likely to fulfill their objectives.

The Secret Ballot

One of the most valued features of democratic government, wherever it exists, is the freedom of the ballot. It enables citizens to record their views privately and without fear of intimidation. The representatives they put in office by their votes are in an entirely different position. They are required to state publicly their stand on important issues. It takes courage and conviction for the responsible citizen to run for office because his opinions immediately become public property. Not only at election time do representatives have to declare themselves; for throughout the year an essential part of our democratic system is the open session and the open voting by members of municipal and other public bodies.

In the private sessions of the Toronto Board of Education we have had a taste of subjects dealt with in secret. One breach of confidence recently by a Toronto trustee has illustrated how too liberal use of that system may work: a good case can be made for handling a few special subjects in private but the secret consideration of general qualifications for teachers is indefensible. The Bureau supports the efforts that have been made in recent weeks to curb the use of the private session by this body.

The expressed opposition of the press and the Bureau to the conduct of civic business behind closed doors has gained new supporters through the current election campaign. More is needed, however, than rules requiring business to be transacted in open sessions. If the public's concern with proceedings is no more than sporadic, a council or school board can easily shelve debate on a ticklish question until a time when the galleries and press table are empty. The only real guarantee of a full and frank discussion on all public issues is sustained citizen interest in civic affairs.

Not a Blank Cheque

There is no intention in the laws which provide for local government in Ontario that our elected officials should be given a blank cheque for the conduct of civic business. When we vote them into office, it is not as free agents but as our representatives, required to determine and give effect to our wishes. We can assure ourselves that they have done so by finding out, for example, how our local alderman has voted on public questions; it tells us something of how he is carrying out his stewardship. Citizens have too an interest in learning the issues that individual trustees and members of council have considered important and the stands they have taken on each. It is information that citizens need to know both at election-time and throughout the year.

Amalgamation

For many years the Bureau has advocated the joining of local municipalities in the Toronto area into a larger metropolitan community. The Bureau endorses amalgamation as the best way to secure efficient provision of municipal services, to distribute the tax burden equitably, and to give the green light to proper city planning. Amalgamation is one of the important issues in the current campaign. There is no direct vote being taken on the question and, because the issue is a complex one, the Bureau does not feel that the question should be the subject of a direct referendum. It is no problem to be solved now by a yes or no vote. In judging the fitness of candidates for office, however, their views on the metropolitan problem are of genuine importance. Yet, allowing its own support for amalgamation, the Bureau believes the important thing is to vote in candidates whose grasp of the question is adequate whether or not they favour the City of Toronto's present application to the Ontario Municipal Board. For the coming year, municipal bodies need members who can throw light rather than heat on the amalgamation issue.

Election Slates

Looking back over the conduct of civic affairs in the Toronto area, the Bureau acknowledges the excellent work done by daily and weekly newspapers in reporting regularly on municipal affairs. Generous coverage of civic issues has been and will continue to be a great help in reinforcing the judgment of electors as to the merits of opposing candidates. Organizations such as the Women Electors Association, who by their work have brought voters and representatives into closer contact, have performed a similar valuable service to the community. Such organizations, however, are among the first to recognize that there is no complete substitute for first hand knowledge of civic affairs.

Newspapers have long followed the practice of announcing slates of particular candidates who carry their endorsement, and it is quite proper that they, as organs of opinion, should do so. At the same time, the press gives much space to publicizing election meetings, for its editors are well aware that the best voters are those who form their own views

based on more than newspaper opinion. No reputable journal expects the voters to accept its list of candidates blindly. It is up to each elector to assure himself as to the integrity of the candidates who get his vote and to satisfy himself as to the soundness of their judgment on important civic issues. And amalgamation is only one question on which the candidates opinions should be examined.

Government Closest to the People

Local government has often been commended as the branch of democratic government closest to the people. Civic elections afford one occasion for putting this claim to the test. A much higher proportion of eligible voters in the Toronto area turned out in the last Federal election than in any recent municipal elections. Throughout Toronto and York ridings better than 70 percent of those on the voters lists went to the polls. In terms of votes cast, local citizens have a long way to go before they can claim municipal government as the government closest to the people.

In other ways, however, civic government has demonstrated its value as the foundation of any democratic system. It is in our own municipalities that we have the best opportunity to see elected representatives at work and to ensure that they do the job that is intended. Our local officials serve right at home in their constituencies; they can readily be questioned on civic matters any day of the year. In general, meetings of councils and school boards and civic committees are open to the public and no one has to travel long distances to attend them. These are facts of the greatest importance and it is only unfortunate that the public takes so little advantage of the opportunities open to them.

It has sometimes been suggested that if more citizens saw their elected representatives in action during the year in council or school board sessions there would be fewer re-elected. More often, we believe, an understanding of the job these representatives do for us--in and between meetings--would raise present criticism to a more constructive level. Certainly the number of good candidates now in the field merits a large turnout of civic electors at the polls and a continuing interest in municipal affairs after the votes have been counted.

Two-year Term

Toronto electors will again be asked to register an opinion on the two-year term for aldermen and trustees. Perhaps the outlook of local citizens is influenced too much by the situation that is found in the Toronto area. Only one municipality out of the thirteen, Mimico, gives its council an assured term of two years in office. By contrast, there is but one American city of over 25,000 population (Lewiston, Maine) which sticks with the one-year term; the four hundred remaining cities have terms ranging from two to as long as six years. Indeed more than 98½ per cent of all urban centres across the line with populations over 5,000 have terms of two years or longer.

Perhaps it is no more than coincidence that Mimico the one nearby centre with the two-year term has far outdistanced other Toronto municipalities in the strength of its vote. But American experience is solid evidence of the value of the longer term; for Canadian municipalities picked up the idea of annual elections from the United States. We are playing along with an American import which has been abandoned almost everywhere across the line, which is no longer popular in other Canadian provinces, or indeed in any other part of the democratic world. As well, Ontario centres are gradually adopting the longer term. At the present time, twelve of the twenty-nine cities in this Province have a two-year term, with Sarnia and Cornwall the most recent centres to vote in this system.

But mere numbers would not in itself be a sufficient argument for the longer term. Elections are the focal point of citizen control over local government and they need to be called often enough to ensure that government is truly responsible to the people. It is one thing, however, to require regular elections and quite another to make them so frequent that perhaps one-quarter of the representative's time is taken up in electioneering and his major attention diverted from those long-term projects which are of most importance to the community's well-being. With annual elections, we are pretty certain to vote in adroit campaigners, but a longer term will allow us to test their abilities to give constructive service. The men we trust to control public funds should be given a reasonable opportunity to study ways of effecting economies and promoting the highest returns from the tax dollar.

The Bureau believes that the longer term is an important issue for suburban as well as city voters. Toronto electors can carry the two-year term now; suburban voters have yet to obtain a referendum vote on the question, and their best way to assure early action is by backing candidates this year who are declared supporters of this worthwhile reform.

Lejane
President

Eric Hardy
Director

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- Township of East York - (December 4)
- Village of Long Branch - (December 4)
- Town of Mississauga - (December 9)
- Town of New Toronto - (December 9)
- Township of York - (December 9)
- Township of Scarborough - (December 11)
- Village of Etobicoke - (December 16)

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