

A PUBLIC DANGER.

From Winnipeg Free Press.

When the order-in-council, designed to discourage the employment of seditious language, was enacted some months ago, the Free Press said that the terms of its provisions were so wide-embracing that it could only be tolerated upon the understanding that great discretion in its enforcement would be shown. It was explained at Ottawa, at the time, that while the authorities believed it was desirable that they should possess these extreme powers to meet exceptional cases that might arise there was no intention or desire to make any general application of the order.

There is always the danger, however, that a weapon like this, intended for extreme cases, may be used upon occasions where not only is there no need for it, but where its employment is a public injury. The temptation to employ arbitrary power, if it can be invoked is very enticing; and to certain types of mind irresistible. We have had an illustration of this in Winnipeg within the past fortnight; when an attempt to invoke the powers of the order-in-council to prevent the free discussion of a matter of public importance threatened for a time to have very serious political and national consequences.

The fact that this action was taken without the knowledge of the central authorities at Ottawa and that it was promptly disavowed by them does not explain away the incident. It is in reality, an illustration of the danger inherent in the present system. It reveals the possibilities of mischief in the too free application of the order-in-council, either through stupidity or by design. That public harmony, which the order-in-council was intended to further, is placed in constant jeopardy by it.

A modification of the terms of the order-in-council would seem to be in order. It should be divested of every phrase which would appear to limit the free discussion of the administrative policies and political methods of the Canadian government. It will be quite practicable to phrase an instrument which will prohibit seditious

and defeatist propaganda while permitting that free discussion of public questions which is essential to the free workings of a democratic constitution. If the Dominion government has any idea of limiting freedom of speech or of debate upon matters of public policy, it must know, from the teachings of history, that no free people will submit to such restrictions even in war time. But we assume that there is no desire on the part of the government to protect itself against criticism or attack—even though it may be factious and unreasonable—by invoking the extensive powers which it has taken to itself under the order-in-council. If this be so, the government should remove temptation from itself and its officials by bringing its order-in-council in conformity with its real purpose.