

Our Municipal Controversies

The matter of improving the municipal electoral system by removing the great inequality between the wards has been before the city council for many weeks but no decision has yet been reached. The present arrangement is very unsatisfactory because it does not give the different parts of the city anything like fair representation. Any changes, however, requiring amendments to the city charter must be decided on immediately if they are to be secured this year because the Provincial Legislature will, in all probability, be in session only a few weeks longer.

There has been no serious discussion of a new ward system by the city council because of the division between the two sides in the council and the disputes and general discord which have characterized recent meetings. There has been too much of this for the city's welfare. The interests of the city are bound to suffer seriously if there is not more harmony and co-operation in the council.

The trouble is that labor, on the one hand, and the Citizens League on the other have each been trying, through their representatives or supposed representatives on the city council, to secure an advantage through changes in the electoral system. One side seeks to gain a better position through adult suffrage and the election of aldermen from the city as a whole. The other side suggested a different arrangement of the wards and other changes in the electoral system more or less favorable to them. The result is absolute opposition and no progress anywhere.

The only way out of such a situation is for each side to cease striving for advantage and consider these matters solely from the standpoint of what is fair and reasonable and in the interest of good government.

There is no reason whatever why a re-arrangement of the wards and the question of adult suffrage should be mixed up together. There may be room for difference of opinion on the suffrage question, but everyone admits the need of changing a system which gives 3,500 voters exactly the same representation in the city council as 15,000 voters in another part of the city. Moreover, the difference regarding the suffrage will have largely disappeared in a year or two. This year the franchise is being extended so that the husbands or wives of those already entitled to vote, shall also have the franchise. And the municipal income tax, which seems likely to be adopted in the near future, will affect most unmarried men if the exemption is put at \$1,000. Payment of the municipal income tax would automatically give them the franchise. This would leave a comparatively small number of people without the right to vote.

The question of the ward system should be considered purely on its merits. The plan proposed by the Citizens League is open to certain objections and it is now evident that it will not be adopted by council. The proposal already made by the Free Press for three large wards and the elections to be held on the proportional representation system is one that is eminently fair to all parties and should provide a satisfactory settlement of the matter. The C.P.R. tracks could form the boundary between a central ward and a northern ward, while Portage avenue could be the line between the central and south wards. These three wards would be fairly equal in population. By electing three members for each ward each year for a two years' term the difficulty would be met and it would only be necessary to increase the membership of the council from 14 to 18.

The labor representatives in the council are on record as favoring the principle of proportional representation. The above plan should appeal to them for they would secure their share of representation in those parts of the city in which they are now unable to elect a candidate and they would obtain the full representation to which they are entitled in the other parts of the city. The remaining body of citizens would also secure their fair representation in each of the three wards. There are certain evils which result from a system of small city wards that would be largely obviated where there were only three large wards. Representatives from the latter would be more familiar with their districts (which is important) than representatives chosen from the city at large, and yet candidates for these large wards would have to be men of recognized standing.

The adoption of this system would require an amendment of the city's charter by the legislature. An agreement on this course should be possible but action will have to be taken without loss of time if anything is to be accomplished this year.

Proposals have been made that the mayor should be chosen from among the aldermen, according to the English system, rather than by the electors of the city at large. That is done nowhere in Canada or the United States, and it has not been clearly shown that the plan has advantages over the present system. An educational test for municipal voters has also been advocated, but this would hardly be justified. An educational test is now being required for naturalization purposes, but in municipal affairs naturalized citizens who pay taxes or are otherwise qualified should be entitled to vote. It is not reasonable that a disqualification should be imposed by the city which neither the province nor the Dominion recognizes.

An anomaly that does exist, and which should be removed, is the ability of aliens to exercise the municipal franchise. They go on the voters' list if they are property owners or tenants, regardless of naturalization. That should not be. They are entitled to the protection of our laws and the peaceful pursuit of their affairs, but they should receive the privilege of voting only when they assume the full responsibility of citizenship by becoming naturalized.