

INITIAL
EXPERIENCES

at the

CITY HALL

by

J. Alex. EDMISON
Alderman
St. George Ward
and Member
Montreal Metropolitan
Commission.

January
31st
1939

special
collections
DOUGLAS
LIBRARY



QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY
AT KINGSTON
Presented by

JOHN BANNISTER
1985

KINGSTON ONTARIO CANADA

" INITIAL EXPERIENCES
AT THE CITY HALL "

Mr. President and Members of the
Rotary Club of Montreal:

Your Mr. Allan Walsh is either a supreme optimist ^{or} a keen election judge or both - because one week before the civic elections he wrote asking that I tell Montreal Rotarians about my initial experiences at the City Hall ! I am glad to be here today, if for no other reason than seventeen years ago this week that great Friend of Toronto youth, Mr. Morden Neilson, had me address the Rotary Club of Toronto. It was my first speech before an adult gathering - and I am certain that the ordeal which I went through was nothing compared to that suffered by the Toronto Rotarians !

You must appreciate that before encountering "experiences" as a member of the Montreal City Council one must run the gauntlet of a Montreal civic election - and believe you me, that is an experience ! For years I had been engaged in prison work and in slum area activities, and thought that I understood life in all its vicissitudes. But when I became a candidate I soon realized that I had a lot to learn, that I was appallingly ignorant of many sides of human nature and innocent of the vagaries of our democratic system. An election has been called a game;

and if this is true - the game it most closely resembles is that of hare and hounds ! I say this because the moment you are announced as a candidate you are besieged from all sides, by all kinds of people, with all kinds of propositions, by day and by night. Immediately, I was harrassed by a swarm of self-styled election experts who claimed that they, in turn, controlled the Protestant vote, the Catholic vote, the Jewish vote, the Greek vote, the vote of the grocer, the baker and the candlestick maker. They literally oozed affection and admiration - which moved me considerably until they made it known that their affection and admiration, together with their respective vote followings, would be transferred to my opponent unless they were paid \$3.00 per day during the campaign or given a civic job after the election - or both ! The campaign had not been on a week until I became aware of what a great literary city Montreal is - because no less than ten advertising solicitors informed me that their magazines were getting out special election editions and that for a small fee of from 5 to 15 dollars I could run a card which would automatically obtain the votes of their vast reading public. Several of them hinted that I would lose this support if I failed to advertise - but this form of mild blackmail was nothing compared with individual voters who offered to cast their votes in my direction provided that I had their water tax bill reduced, that I fixed their parking tickets, that I

placed their son, nephew or son-in-law in the Fire Department, or that I permitted the violation by them of this or that city by-law.

There are numerous other campaign features that I could mention, but I will refer only to the part gossip and scandal play in an election. Gentlemen, I will tell you frankly that we do the ladies a gross injustice when we infer, as we frequently do, that they have a monopoly on gossip and tale-bearing. I say advisedly that Mrs. Grundy would be put to shame in a Montreal election committee room. There, gossip breeds and multiplies. Rumours are a dime a dozen. At one stage of the proceedings I made a list of over thirty stories brought to me - about my opponent, about what the mayoralty candidates were doing in my ward, about the activities of certain individuals - all of which stories proved to be completely false. Many of them hinged around alleged plots to telegraph and steal votes. I am proud to say that, thanks to the long and honourable career of my predecessor, Mr. W. S. WELDON, telegraphing and other unfair election practices are definitely not traditions in St. George Ward ! Ever may this remain so ! I would like at this time to pay tribute to the courageous stand taken by Recorder Leonce Plante after the last election when he sentenced telegraphers to six months in jail. When election crooks realize that charges will not be withdrawn the morning after an election, that all those arrested will be photographed and finger-printed, and that all those convicted will receive certain

jail sentences, then, and not until then - can we hope for a sharp decline in Montreal election day abuses.

I now propose to give you the story of my initial experiences at the City Hall - and I am frank to admit to you that it would be better for the sake of Montreal, for the sake of St. George Ward, and for my own sake, if I could, in truth, give you a different account of what I have accomplished since I became an Alderman on December 12th last. I would like to tell you that I had begun to understand some of Montreal's grave fiscal problems; I would like to tell you that I had found some of the reasons why the tuberculosis rate in St. George Ward is so disgracefully high when compared to Notre Dame de Grace or Rosemount; I would like to tell you that I had even a partial grasp of Montreal's traffic problems; I would like to tell you that I had initiated some measures to aid the plight of those thousands of Montreal youths who are growing up in slum areas, who are not getting an elementary chance in life, and who are destined to populate our penal institutions and our refuges for the unemployed and the unemployable; but unfortunately, in the account of my stewardship none of these desperately important matters forms a single part. You ask - and you rightfully ask - "WHY???" Please mark my answer well - because in the one word I give you - there is also an answer to all your questions as to the reasons for civic waste, inefficiency and extravagance - that one word,

gentlemen, is PATRONAGE !

I will pass over the first two weeks following the election. I expected a swarm of job seekers, of election workers who sought rewards for their unselfish services, of civic job holders who either wanted my support for promotion or to retain their positions, and of truck owners who wanted more city snow removal work. In this expectation I was not disappointed - I met all these people by the literal score, and in some cases in addition their landlords, their spiritual advisers and their relatives to the forty-second degree.

With the knowledge that I was to speak before this Club on the last day of the month, I commenced keeping statistics on the 2nd of January, and have brought them up to date for presentation today. I give you them now:

During January I had 176 interviews directly concerning work at the City Hall, in addition to 147 interviews with people who wanted other things - such as water tax adjustments, permits, contracts, parking tickets fixed, and with people who complained of everything from noises at night and panhandling on the streets to alleged relief abuses.

All these interviews were in my own private law office. In addition, my ward secretary had a constant stream of men every day, who wanted work on the snow or who wished to file applications for civic employment.

These figures I think indicate that an alderman of Montreal is supposed to be a full time employment agent and charity

worker. During January I wrote 56 letters in reply to requests from people who wanted anything from a loan of \$3.00 to endorsement of a note for \$50.00, including some pitiful requests from the so-called transients who were outside the arbitrary chalk lines of governmental relief. And mark you - these are the figures for St. George Ward - which is supposed to be one of the so-called "easy" wards. Think of the harrassed plight of some of my aldermanic confreres in other more densely populated wards. Alderman Taillon of Prefontaine Ward tells me that he has over forty applicants for city work a day. Alderman Coté from Ville Marie Ward and Alderman Healy from St. Ann's give about the same figures. I would like at this point to pay a long overdue tribute to my confreres in the City Council. I now know what they have to contend with. I now know what thankless and profitless hours they have to put in on so-called aldermanic work. I now know why many of them who sincerely desire to grapple with the major problems confronting the city are unable to do so. My knowledge in these matters springs from sad experience, and I can best relate it to you by asking you some leading questions:

WHY should your elected representatives have to devote over 50% of their working hours to matters of City Hall employment?

WHY should aldermen have the right to make civic job appointments?

WHY should we dump employees on the heads of City Hall depart-

ments without their consent?

WHY should we seek to place as many men on the city payroll from our own wards as possible, regardless of whether they are required or not?

WHY should political considerations govern our job nominations rather than those of merit?

WHY should elected representatives interfere with promotions and with the routine of the Montreal civic departments which are admittedly headed by some of the ablest administrators in Canada?

WHY should our civic employees go about their work in daily fear of dismissal?

WHY should the men you elect to govern this important city turn out to be simply job finders for job seekers?

Rotarians of Montreal, you know - and I know, that the answer to all these vital questions is again that one despicable word - PATRONAGE!

Two weeks ago, during a debate in the aldermanic caucus, I referred to political patronage as a "howling farce". That was not an accurate description because patronage is more a tragedy than a farce. It breeds inefficiency and extravagance and corruption. It is directly the cause of many of Montreal's more pressing problems of today. It operates in a vicious cycle. It enslaves aldermen; it ruins their private businesses and professions; it prevents them from viewing the city's problems

in an objective way; it causes needless public works to be built so that jobs can be handed out to the more vocal and threatening adherents; it educates a large section of the electorate to consider the public purse as something to be grabbed by all in catch-as-catch-can fashion; it raises up civic employees who fear to use initiative and who live in constant dread of dismissal; I hate it civically as Mr. George McCullagh of Toronto hates it nationally - and for the same reasons.

In conclusion, Mr. Chairman - the only thing I have learned at the Montreal City Hall to date is that we need, and we must have, a CIVIC CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION. I hope to see the day when we advertise, as they do in England, to fill civic positions, and there is added boldly in the advertisement: "ANY APPLICANTS SOLICITING MEMBERS OF COUNCIL WILL BE AUTOMATICALLY DISQUALIFIED."

It has been said that that something stronger than armies is an idea whose time has come. May the "idea", therefore, soon become prevalent in this great city that Patronage must go. I, for one, intend to carry on this battle, with or without support, and regardless of my own political future. I humbly suggest that it is a matter which merits the serious consideration of the Rotary Club of Montreal.

