

CHARLOTTETOWN GUARDIAN.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 19 1905.

CIVIC OWNER HIP.

In another column we publish the letter of Taxpayer, whose object is sufficiently apparent. He cites certain articles from the pen of one John Holt Schoolings in the Windsor Magazine. This magazine is not very extensively read in Canada and as for Mr. Schoolings, until he is in some way further accredited his name will not give much additional weight to his argument in the minds of Canadian readers. But to the argument, Mr. Schoolings is opposed to municipalities embarking in reproductive undertakings, such as water works, street cars and light and power plants. He himself tells us that 317 municipal councils in England and Wales exclusive of London, have embarked in these undertakings. Who is probably the wiser, Mr. Schoolings of whom we know nothing but his name, or these 317 councils, say a thousand men, selected by the electorate to manage the municipal affairs?

We all know there are very rich and powerful corporations that are opposed to public ownership of water and lighting companies. Of these powerful and interested corporations Mr. Schoolings seems to be the spokesman. But he would be

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more convincing were he not so sweeping in his condemnation of the municipal councils. He affirms that they are "utterly incompetent" and ought not to have the powers with which they have been entrusted. In other words Mr. Schooling not only condemns municipal ownership, but condemns the entire municipal system itself as a failure. In taking this ground he writes himself down as an old fogy, utterly opposed to the progressive spirit of the age. Again we are constrained to ask, who is the wiser, this comparatively unknown writer, who has accepted a brief for the gas, electric light and water companies, or the entire body of people who have accepted and endorsed the principal of elective municipal councils as a boon?

Having condemned municipal ownership of public utilities, and incidentally condemning the entire system of elective city and county councils, what is the grievance of Mr. Schooling's charges? Simply this, that while some municipal electric lighting plants have been operated at a profit, others have made losses; and that generally they have not allowed enough for the depreciation of the plants, such allowance being set down at a very low per cent instead of 5 per cent, which he claims would be nearer the true percentage. We submit that these are not very grave charges. The object of the city and county councillors has been to furnish light to the people at as nearly as possible the actual cost. They may have figured too closely and not allowed sufficiently for depreciation. That is a matter to be tested by experience and to be adjusted in accordance therewith hereafter. The actual cost of producing light or supplying water, or of operating street cars must be paid in the end. Mr. Schooling's contention in the last analysis comes to this that the civic and municipal councils have been supplying these things at less than cost.

There are many points of importance of which Mr. Schoolings has not taken note, obviously because, as the advocate of the various corporations engaged in supplying light, water and other public utilities it did not suit his purpose to do so. One of these points is that in almost every case where the city or municipal bodies have undertaken to supply, say, light or water, or street-car service they have supplied those utilities at a decidedly lower rate than was previously paid to the companies. This is the undoubted fact, and it supplies the real reason why public ownership is rapidly spreading over the three Kingdoms. And Mr. Schoolings has not claimed that the civic and municipal councils have not managed their affairs with efficiency and economy. Doubtless he would have made this charge if he could. He has shown that a large increase of local municipal debts has accrued. That is inevitable. But what he has not shown or attempted to show is that the mass of the people are not better served and at lower rates under public ownership than under the company system.

THE EDITOR'S MAIL. MUNICIPAL OWNERSHIP.

Sir.—Those who desire to obtain information on the subject of municipal ownership of reproductive undertakings will find a very instructive article in the January number of the Windsor Magazine—the second of John Holt Schooling's articles on "Local Rates and Taxes". His figures deal with all England and Wales, exclusive of London, and are taken from the final report of the Royal Commission on Local Taxation, the Annual Report of the Local Government Board and other official returns. He states that the local debt of England and Wales has increased from £380,000,000 of population in 1874 to £1,000,000,000 as at present, that such increase is due mainly to the extent to which the municipal corporations have embarked in what they consider reproductive undertakings. Of the 317 municipal corporations in England and Wales, exclusive of London, 299 have invested a total capital of £121,000,000 in some 1029 of such undertakings. Taking up the one item of electric lighting, in which we are just now interested, his tables show that 102 municipalities own electric light plants in which they have invested £12,510,000, in round figures sixty one millions of dollars. In some few instances they may be operated at a profit but taken as a whole the official returns show that a loss of £11,707 is incurred—say fifty seven thou-

sand dollars. But Mr. Schoolings claims that such showing falls very far short of the truth. An analysis of such returns reveals the fact that only three shillings and two pence half penny per £100 has been allowed for depreciation whereas (£5) five pounds is a moderate allowance. Seventy eight cents per one hundred pounds instead of twenty five dollars. Making the necessary correction the loss incurred by the 102 municipalities is over £217,237, or in round numbers three million dollars. This Mr. Schoolings says has to be borne by the rate payer. He put the yearly loss of the 1029 so called reproductive undertakings carried on by the municipalities at over twenty five millions of dollars. He further says:

"I maintain that the facts now disclosed prove beyond doubt that the local spending authorities of this country are utterly incompetent and that they ought not to have the power to raise one hundred and twelve millions of pounds annually. I specially direct attention to the two diagrams X and XI. These make plain to the eye a most serious defect in municipal accounts, the net result of which is to cause any plain man to distrust the whole working of 'reproductive enterprises' undertaken by the local spending authorities of England and Wales. This gross understatement of the amount that ought to be set aside for depreciation of plant, machinery, etc., may not be an offence in the eye of the law but it does not impress us with a relief in the honest dealing of spending authorities, who spend one hundred and twelve millions of pounds sterling yearly. If these authorities can thus attempt to bind the public in that part of their accounts which relates to the business run by them, there is, at the least, ground for suspecting that municipal accounts in other respects are not fairly handled. I do not know who does audit these accounts, and I speak, of course without reference to any individuals. I suggest that these accounts cannot possibly be subjected to an efficient and independent audit, and that the spending authorities who are responsible for spending 112 millions are also responsible, to some extent for the misleading results shown by their accounts which have now been exposed. 'Ask an electrical engineer what he thinks of putting aside for depreciation three shillings and two pence half penny per year per one hundred pounds of capital in respect of electrical machinery which has cost twelve million five hundred thousand pounds sterling.' Municipal ownership in England is cited as being most successful. Apparently the returns of the Royal Commission renders this a matter of grave doubt."

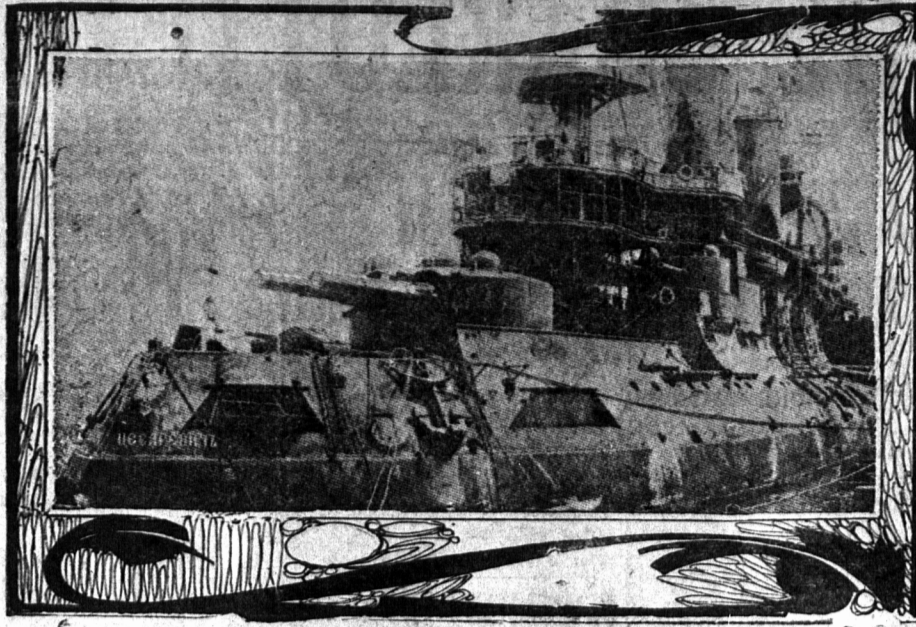
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