

EDITORIAL

EDMONTON FACES SLUM EVIL

Ernest J. Farmer

Edmonton, Alta., is among the cities in Western Canada which at an early stage in their development abolished taxes upon buildings and improvements. As in Vancouver, Calgary and a number of smaller cities, there followed a period of extreme productive activity, with unprecedented increase in wealth and rapid influx of population. There followed also a fantastic degree of land speculation, which induced a ballooning of city boundaries, the wasting of huge sums on city services which would not be used for decades and the burdening of the city with debt. During the twenties there was a partial resumption of taxation upon buildings and improvements; in 1950 the Alberta legislature passed an act compelling cities to tax buildings upon 60 per cent of the assessment but permitting Edmonton, by a special dispensation, to tax residential buildings upon only 50 per cent of the assessment.

50% Insufficient

When Edmonton and other cities reverted to a partial taxation of buildings, there was some discussion among Toronto Georgists as to whether the remaining exemption of buildings -- which in several cities became stabilized at or near the 50 per cent level -- would be sufficient to prevent the development of slums, which were already a formidable evil in Toronto. The general feeling was that while such exemptions would undoubtedly have a favorable effect it would be insufficient. It was not long before reports from Vancouver, followed by similar reports from Calgary, showed clearly that the 50 per cent exemption is insufficient.

Edmonton Slums

Since the beginning of the present year, the Edmonton Journal has published a considerable number of articles describing slum

conditions in that city; several appeared during a two-week visit the writer paid to that city in June. In an article by Mike Lavoie, in The Journal of June 6th, it was stated that 32,700 Edmontonians -- 27,000 of them children -- are living in substandard homes. In another article in the same number it is stated that by national housing standards there are 50,000 persons living in overcrowded conditions in Edmonton and Jasper Place (a suburb).

In The Journal of June 11, there is a report of an inquest into the death of a boy who died in a blazing shack on May 14th. It was reported that the boy had been one of eight persons living in a shack 27 feet by 13 behind a restaurant, within half a mile of the centre of the city. The province's chief coroner, Dr. M. M. Cantor, quoted statistics to show that districts such as the one in which this shack had been located were responsible for 45 per cent of the city's fire costs, 55 per cent of its juvenile delinquency and 60 per cent of its tuberculosis cases, but only paid 6 per cent of the city's taxes.

Public Housing

The Journal is to be commended for calling attention to a serious evil -- one even more flagrant in Toronto and Montreal, universal among Canadian cities (except Regina) of over 100,000 population and common in many smaller centres, but unpardonable nevertheless. Unhappily, The Journal has nothing better to propose than the nitwit's remedy of publicly subsidized housing.

Many cities have spent many millions of dollars -- New York alone over two billions -- on subsidized housing without effecting any substantial improvement; in many cases without preventing continued deterioration. On the other hand, most of the cities in Australia and New Zealand have abolished slums, or better still prevented them from taking form, without spending any money at all, in fact saving themselves a great deal of money, by abolishing taxes on buildings and improvements and raising municipal revenue by taxes on sites.

Mr. H. Bronson Cowan found during the early forties that in Sydney, N. S. W., there were still some remnants of the former slums -- not more than ten per cent of what they had been. More recent reports by Mr. A. R. Hutchinson show a decided tendency towards narrowing the remaining slum areas, through rebuilding of decrepit buildings adjoining or near to sound ones. It should be remembered that in Sydney buildings are still taxed to a small extent. In the 21 boroughs of Greater Melbourne which now tax only site values there is proportionately more building than in Sydney.

Regina and Saskatoon

People who have been delighted by the wholesomeness and beauty of Regina may yet feel some disquiet. Regina taxes buildings on only 30 per cent of assessment. So far all is well. But the city is growing rapidly. Is the 70 per cent exemption of buildings sufficient to prevent slum formation when the city is the size of Edmonton? There is room for serious doubt. Worst of all, there are pressures for an increase in the taxable assessment of buildings to 40 per cent, as happened in Saskatoon, to that city's detriment, a dozen years ago.

Ontario has considerable natural advantages over any other province in the Dominion, or any state in the Australian Commonwealth. The only reason this province has more slums -- or more unemployment -- than New South Wales is purely and simply because of its uneconomic and unethical tax system. x

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LAND is bought cheaply and sold dearly. The almighty dollar -- not human intelligence -- is shaping our metropolitan growth. The price we and our descendants will pay is appalling. -- Sen. Joseph S. Clark, quoted in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin.

Psychologists say that in the process of thinking, blood is drawn from the feet to the brain. Therefore reflection on certain propositions is bound to give us cold feet. @