

Taxation in the Urban Municipalities of Saskatchewan.

By Robert Haig. (Regina: The Department of Municipal Affairs. 1918. Pp. 48.)

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Professor Haig prepared this report for the government of Saskatchewan, at the request of the urban municipalities of the province for some such investigation. It has been felt ever since the collapse of the boom in real estate in 1912 that there was great need for the adoption in Saskatchewan of measures of fiscal reform of a fundamental and constructive nature. To analyze present conditions and to prepare plans for far-reaching taxation reform was the heavy responsibility placed upon Mr. Haig; and the report under review is the outcome of his researches in urban municipal finance in the province.

It may be said that previous to this investigation two separate committees—the one composed of ratepayers and officials, and the other of members of the Union of Saskatchewan Municipalities— had grappled with the problem of taxation reform in Saskatchewan, and had reached certain definite conclusions, the substance of which is embodied in Mr. Haig's report. Commissioner Yorath, of Saskatoon, outlines these conclusions as follows:

- (a) That the present burden of taxation is borne almost entirely by one class of citizens, i. e., the owners of real estate.
- (b) That the assessment for taxation is upon a wrong basis.
- (c) That the distribution of provincial taxation and license fees as between the urban and rural communities is not equitable.
- (d) That the final procedure in collecting arrears of taxes, i. e., obtaining title to property sold at tax sales, is cumbersome, and the fees charged by the Land Titles Office in connection therewith, are excessive.
- (e) That a new scheme of taxation is urgently required which will provide for distribution of taxes as evenly as possible over all classes of the community, and which will insure the prompt collection of current revenues to meet current expenditures.

Professor Haig devotes 41 out of 48 pages in his report to establish the soundness of the above conclusions. There is nothing new, therefore, to be discovered here. On the other hand, however, students of Canadian provincial taxation will be grateful for the care and accuracy with which the data bearing upon municipal finance in Saskatchewan have been collated and presented by Mr. Haig. His general deductions may be summarized as follows:

- (a) Speculative land values have been greatly reduced within the past five years, but assessments still exceed actual market values.
- (b) That tax levies have been reduced to a minimum, controllable expenditures considered.
- (c) That the rate of taxation has been increased as assessments have been lowered, to take care of fixed expenditures in connection with interest and sinking funds.
- (d) That the nearer a municipality came to applying the principles of the single tax, the graver became the problem of tax arrears.
- (e) That new sources of income must be discovered to provide the funds essential for municipal requirements.

In part II Professor Haig gets close to the real question at issue, namely: How are the urban municipalities of Saskatchewan to find the revenue necessary to cover fixed and current requirements, and collect that revenue in the most effective and equitable manner? Mr. Haig's answer, or rather suggestion, is to be found in the recommendation that the assessments on land values be reduced; that improvements be assessed up to 60 per cent of their market value; and that the rate of taxation be fixed by law at not more than 20 mills on the dollar. In addition, Professor Haig suggests that larger use be made of the business tax, but according to what method and to what degree, no guidance is given.

Mr. Haig regards with disfavor the present municipal income taxes in the province because of the expense involved in collection and the difficulty in getting at actual income. He rejects also the proposal to impose a provincial income tax, in which the municipalities might share. It will thus be evident that the author offers no constructive program of fiscal reform. He would place main reliance, in raising adequate municipal revenues, upon the present scheme of taxation, merely adapting the present taxes to fit the new situation, particularly by lessening the burden upon land and shifting it to improvements.

Ability to pay is no doubt the most equitable principle to apply in raising public revenue—but this principle must not be oversimplified, or worked to death by rule-of-thumb methods. Mr. Haig suggests, and even advocates, a fixed assessment of 60 per cent of the market value of improvements as approximating ability to pay; but such an assessment, especially since nothing is to be secured from an income tax, is almost certain to violate the principle of ability to pay, particularly in view of the fact that the heavy fixed expenditure of western Canadian municipalities compel them to make the tax levies high. It is a mere assumption to suppose that owners of improved property can carry the main part of the financial burden. True, as is pointed out by Mr. Haig, taxes on improvements will be shifted to the tenant; but in these days of high prices rent payers already find it sufficiently difficult to make ends meet. As for a legal maximum rate of 20 mills on the dollar, it might just as well—as Commissioner Yorath, of Saskatoon, points out—be 10, so far as facilitating tax collections is concerned. The rate must necessarily be governed by the tax levy, as well as by the level of assessment.

In the reviewer's opinion the income tax may be relied upon in the future to provide a considerable part of the municipal revenue, and this notwithstanding the fact that a federal income tax has been recently provided for. Through the lists compiled for federal purposes, it should be easily possible to impose a provincial income tax, in which the municipalities would share. As it is, it is notorious that many of the wealthiest corporations and persons in Canadian municipalities escape carrying their just share of the tax burden.

While the reviewer disagrees, in the specific cases cited, from the conclusions reached, he must add that sound workmanship and keen critical ability have been displayed in this report by Professor Haig. Within a brief compass Mr. Haig has compressed a great deal of extremely valuable material on taxation in the urban municipalities of Saskatchewan, and has presented that material in a clear and cogent manner. Students of finance, and Canadians in particular, will be grateful for this work.