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Résumé de l'article

De 1888, date où Saint-Jean avait été érigée en municipalité, jusqu'à 1913, la communauté marchande ne s'était guère intéressée à l'administration du Conseil municipal. Les gros commerçants étaient, pour la plupart, trop pris par leurs affaires; en outre, ils préféraient siéger au Conseil législatif, plus prestigieux, ou tentaient à l'occasion de se faire élire à la Chambre d'assemblée. Le décret municipal de 1888 conférait aux commerçants membres de ces deux corps législatifs une véritable mainmise sur l'administration et les finances de la ville.

Le Conseil municipal se trouvait sans cesse en butte à des difficultés pécuniaires, faute de revenus suffisants pour financer les travaux d'amélioration. En décembre 1913, William Gilbert Gosling, président de la Chambre de commerce, fonda un mouvement de réforme civique dont la mission était de découvrir de nouvelles sources de financement pour les travaux publics. En réalité, cela impliquait une augmentation de l'impôt foncier, mesure que les commerçants se virent contraints d'accepter pour accroître la réserve d'eau en cas d'incendie. Ces nouveaux revenus devaient également servir à mieux loger les pauvres ainsi qu'à améliorer l'hygiène et la propreté de la ville. Au début de 1914, la Chambre de commerce réussit à faire remplacer le Conseil municipal élu par une Commission composée d'hommes d'affaires désignés. Le mandat de cette commission était d'administrer la ville pendant un an, à partir du 1^{er} juin 1914, de réorganiser les services municipaux et de définir les grandes lignes d'une nouvelle charte municipale qui garantirait à la ville des revenus suffisants. L'initiative de Gosling amorça le mouvement qui devait aboutir à la charte de 1921, qui régit encore aujourd'hui l'administration municipale de Saint-Jean.

WILLIAM GILBERT GOSLING AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF
COMMISSION GOVERNMENT IN ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND, 1914*

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Melvin Baker

Résumé/Abstract

De 1888, date où Saint-Jean avait été érigée en municipalité, jusqu'à 1913, la communauté marchande ne s'était guère intéressée à l'administration du Conseil municipal. Les gros commerçants étaient, pour la plupart, trop pris par leurs affaires; en outre, ils préféraient siéger au Conseil législatif, plus prestigieux, ou tentaient à l'occasion de se faire élire à la Chambre d'assemblée. Le décret municipal de 1888 conférait aux commerçants membres de ces deux corps législatifs une véritable mainmise sur l'administration et les finances de la ville.

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The St. John's commercial community took little interest in the administration of the Municipal Council from the city's incorporation in 1888 to 1913. Most prominent merchants were pressed for time because of their businesses; they preferred either to sit in the prestigious

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Legislative Council or, occasionally, to seek election to the House of Assembly. Under the terms of the 1888 Municipal Act, membership in these legislative bodies gave the merchants considerable control over the city's finances and management.

The Municipal Council constantly experienced financial difficulties because of insufficient revenue for improvements. The aim of the civic reform movement organized in December, 1913, by William Gilbert Gosling, the President of the Board of Trade, was to devise means of obtaining additional revenue for municipal improvements. In effect, this meant increasing the property tax, a prospect the city's merchants were forced to accept to achieve an improved water supply for greater fire protection. The additional revenue was to be used also to provide better housing for the poor and to improve public health and sanitary conditions. Early in 1914 the Board of Trade was successful in having the elective council replaced by an appointed commission of businessmen. This commission was intended to administer the city for one year from July 1, 1914, re-organize the various municipal departments, and draft a new municipal charter that would give the council the revenue it required. Gosling's initiative set in motion the events that led to the charter of 1921, the basis of present-day municipal government in St. John's.

* * *

In 1914 the wave of municipal reform that had been sweeping Canadian and American cities since the turn of the century reached St. John's. "The science of municipal government has only recently received the study and attention it merits....," a local citizens' committee reported in that year. As a result "hundreds upon hundreds of cities" were "busy with re-organization schemes." St. John's had now to join this crusade for its municipal act "was quite a curiosity in city charters" and needed "to be entirely re-drafted."¹ What was perhaps curious about the St. John's charter was the extent to which the city's freedom of action, especially its right to tax, was circumscribed by the colonial legislature. Led by the St. John's Board of Trade and its mercantile President, William Gilbert Gosling, the 1914 generation of reformers sought both to make the administration of the city more efficient and to find new sources

of revenue for badly needed improvements. Their ambition was to reorganize the water supply to afford greater fire protection of the business district, provide better housing for the poor, and raise the level of public health and sanitation. To realize their objectives the reformers ultimately decided upon a twelve-man appointed commission which would sit for one year from July 1, 1914, in place of the existing elective municipal council. This commission would be charged with the drafting of a new charter for St. John's based on its experience of administering the city. That so bold a scheme should have come from the mercantile community, which directed from its St. John's base the international fishing trade of the colony, represented a sharp break with the past. Since the incorporation of the city in 1888, commercial, as opposed to service, St. John's had not been notable for its interest in civic affairs. Its new found zeal can be attributed in part to

its own need for fire protection, but the leaders among it at least were determined to improve living conditions generally and to alter the physical appearance of a much neglected city.

I

The proposed 1914 constitutional change would be the fourth revision of the municipal system since St. John's had received its own government in 1888. Before that year the colonial government had provided all municipal services except for water supply and fire protection. These were the preserve of a private utility owned by city merchants but greatly assisted by the colonial government.² The purpose of the 1888 incorporation was to justify the raising of a large loan in England.³ With this loan the government intended to buy out the St. John's Water Company, in which Prime Minister Robert Thorburn and other prominent government supporters and merchants were shareholders and to redeem a 25 year £15,000 loan, repayable by assessments upon the owners of all lands within St. John's, which had fallen due. It was also intended in 1888 to use part of the new loan to construct a better sewerage system and thus relieve the general colonial revenue of the increasing burden of maintaining city streets, sewers, and drains.⁴

In enacting the 1888 legislation, Thorburn's government was interested, first, in protecting property from any unnecessary taxation and, second, in giving St. John's residents the municipal vote. As the Attorney General, St. John's lawyer James Winter, noted, municipal government was "...more in the nature of a joint-stock company, because it is

with financial matters the Board had to deal, and property ought to have its fair representation...." ⁵ The composition of the new Municipal Council - the name "Board" was dropped because the politicians thought it would remind citizens of the other boards or departments of the government⁶ - reflected a compromise the government reached between the interests of the south side of Water Street, the historic business district of St. John's which faced over the harbour, and the rest of the community.⁷ The result was a hybrid council with two government appointees and five members elected through a ward system. Both prospective voters and councillors faced stiff property qualifications under the 1888 system, the determining factor in both instances being annual payments to the water company for its services.⁸

The Water Street merchants also had the Thorburn government place checks on the council's financial and legislative powers. With regard to taxation the council was to submit to the legislature an annual balanced statement of its revenues and expenditures and to obtain legislative approval for any taxation increase. This latter requirement enabled the merchants through both the government of the day and their immense influence in the Legislative Council, to decide what tax should be levied and what loans raised. Again, any new municipal by-law had to be approved by the Governor-in-Council, and any new authority or power sought by council could be obtained only through the amendment by the legislature of its original act of incorporation.⁹

In sum, there was little reason for the Water Street

merchant to run for municipal office. Most businessmen did not have the time available, especially during the busy fishery seasons of summer and autumn, to attend to the divers complaints of citizens. The few merchants who did participate were young and usually close friends of Edward Patrick Morris, an ambitious Roman Catholic lawyer who was elected in 1885 to the House of Assembly for St. John's West. An astute political opportunist and a champion of the city's Irish working class, Morris seemed to have an instinctive grasp of the workings of patronage, using both the council and the colonial government for "paying his friends and downing an enemy."¹⁰ His career reveals much about the early history of St. John's as an incorporated municipality.¹¹ Administratively, the new council was little more than a departmental appendage of the colonial government; politically it was but an extension of the normal patronage and intrigue of St. John's political life.

The chief source of revenue for the council was that which had been provided for the water company - an assessment based on the rental value of property, rather than the actual value as in Canada and the United States.¹² Under this taxation system water assessments were levied on ground landlords (that is, landowners), lessees, and occupiers of all lands, buildings, and tenements in the city. Ground landlords paid an assessment based on the annual ground rent they received. Lessees in turn paid an assessment based on the difference between the annual rental value of their property and the amount of ground rent they paid. In the case of freeholders, who owned and occupied, the rental value of land and buildings was lumped together.

Finally, owner-occupiers and tenants living in houses with an annual rental value of at least \$40 paid an occupiers' tax of six per cent on the annual rental value. To these assessments was added a sewerage tax; in 1907 this amounted to one-quarter of the water assessment to be paid. Business establishments were assessed two per cent on the value of the stock they carried. Thus if a merchant had \$300,000 worth of business, he was assessed on \$6,000 and paid \$450 in taxes, based on the six per cent water rate and the sewerage rate.¹³

This complex taxation system reflected the nature of ownership in St. John's, where much of the most valuable land in the mixed commercial-residential area on and above the central Water Street area belonged to British absentee landlords. To protect themselves from municipal taxation these landlords had placed covenants in their leases making local leaseholders and tenants liable for their taxes.¹⁴ The absentee landlords were given further legal protection from taxation by the Royal Instructions given to successive colonial governors, who were told to refuse assent to any legislation they considered prejudicial to the rights and property of British subjects resident elsewhere.¹⁵ Because the absentee landlords escaped taxation, although the value of their land was constantly increasing from public expenditure on city improvements, the politicians and merchants kept the occupiers' tax at six per cent.¹⁶ To increase this assessment would have meant placing financial burdens on local residents which they neither wanted nor could afford. St. John's was a city in which the interests of the

landlord, whether resident or absentee, reigned supreme over those of tenants. That influence pervaded both the colonial legislature and the municipal council. In both bodies it was the merchants, lawyers, and shopkeepers who, either directly or indirectly, held sway.¹⁷ They saw little point in altering the *status quo* in St. John's. Indeed, the protection afforded absentee landlords by the imperial government gave a great advantage to local landlords as well. As one former municipal councillor noted in 1899, any increase in taxation would reduce the value of property because many tenants would be forced to reside outside the city. This in turn would mean less revenue for council because a tenantless house would produce no taxation.¹⁸

The revenue of the colonial government itself came largely from an import tariff, but several other direct taxes were also collected.¹⁹ In time these included imposts on telephones, dogs, and motor cars.²⁰ Deprived of these obvious sources of revenue and unable or unwilling to increase the property tax, the council, like its predecessor, the water company, relied after 1888 on a duty on coal imported into St. John's. When more revenue was needed, it was this source that was invariably enlarged. Since coal was a basic domestic and commercial necessity in late nineteenth century St. John's, the duty on it touched all citizens.²¹ In 1891, E.P. Morris, now a member of the second Liberal government of William Whiteway (1889-1894) made this the basis of a sweeping revision of the municipal franchise. Over the objections of the Legislative Council the property qualification was reduced to include any male householder over 21 years who

occupied a house either as owner or tenant or both (no matter what the rent) or who paid water and sewerage assessments. In Morris' view even those paying less than \$40 a year rent and no water assessments still contributed to the council's revenues through the taxes of their landlords.²² As might be expected, Morris was the main beneficiary of this municipal largesse, which made it easier for his supporters to secure election to council and for him to gain access during colonial elections to an important source of patronage.

St. John's now had a more *representative* system, but the government of the day still had the whip hand over the city. Thus when, in 1898, a majority of the councillors turned against the Conservative government (1897-1900), the council itself was abolished and a three man commission appointed in its stead.²³ Ironically, Winter, the architect of the 1888 Municipal Act, claimed that this change was necessary because the existing system of civic administration had broken down from the weight of government interference, as evidenced in the council's financial disarray. Since 1891 council had been unable to meet its annual interest payments, though the bungling of the legislature may have been a factor contributing to this situation.²⁴ Moreover, the city's debt had increased dramatically through expenditures the Liberal government had undertaken in rebuilding St. John's following a calamitous fire in 1892. In 1891 the debt was \$781,953.58; at the end of 1897 it stood at \$1,854,142.33. More than \$400,000 of this increase had been expended by warrant by the Whiteway government on municipal improvements to help secure its

re-election in 1893.²⁵ The Winter government now charged both the arrears of municipal interest and the rebuilding expenditures to the colony's debt, thereby adjusting the council's obligation at the end of 1897 to \$1,210,000.²⁶ The new municipal commission was not meant to be a permanent fixture; rather, in the words of A.B. Morine, a Canadian-born lawyer who was Receiver-General in the government and solicitor for the Reid Railway Company, it was to determine "how taxation can best be raised, so as to leave enough money in the hands of whatever body may continue to govern this city as to pay the interest on the debt, which ought to be paid by the city...."²⁷

Winter was an acknowledged admirer of the commission of government already operating in Washington, D.C.,²⁸ but no doubt the change effected in St. John's was motivated as well by the need to deflect any opposition a Liberal-dominated council might offer to the concessions within the city which the Government had recently made to the Reid Company. In March, 1898, Robert G. Reid, the Canadian contractor who had directed the building of the Newfoundland railway, was given control of the whole line and generous land grants along the route. In St. John's Reid's company was exempted from all municipal taxation. It was also permitted to purchase the dry dock and empowered to operate a street railway and construct a new railway terminus in the western section of the city. In 1901 Reid was forced by a new Liberal government to give up ownership of the railway, street railway, and dry dock, but he was left with a fifty year lease on the street railway and exemption from municipal taxation on his railway property in the West End.²⁹

Given this background, the 1898 commission form of government proved highly controversial from its inception. Despite Winter's declaration that one of the three commissioners would be drawn from the ranks of the opposition, the appointees were all government supporters.³⁰ Nevertheless, the commission lasted until 1902 but only because the uproar over the 1898 Newfoundland Railway contract pushed aside all other political considerations in the life of the colony.³¹ Once that issue was resolved, the Bond Liberal government (1900-1909), which included Edward Morris as the Minister of Justice and Attorney General, abolished another legacy of 1898 and St. John's received its third administrative structure in fourteen years.

This time there were two objectives: to get the government out of the council's day-to-day affairs and to entice more Water Street merchants, especially those not active in party politics, to run for municipal office. Yet the change made in 1902 affected only the manner of selecting municipal councillors; the legislature would still exercise the same control over municipal finances.³² Having experimented already with two forms of local government that were becoming increasingly popular with Canadian and American reformers - the part-appointed, part-elected and commission systems - Bond and his ministers decided to give the citizens the right to elect a mayor and all six other members of a new council. The old franchise was expanded to include any male British subject over 21 years who, for a year previous to the election, had occupied a dwelling within the city or who as a "ground landlord, lessee, or occupier of any lands, tenements, buildings" in

St. John's had paid taxes to the council.³³ Bond, over Morris's objections, instituted city-wide elections in place of the old ward system. Candidates, he said, should "appeal to a larger constituency...not a purely pocket borough...." No doubt Bond's view of reform was popular with many property owners. The Municipal Council, it was hoped, would consist of dedicated, competent businessmen and would devote itself to economical administration, low taxation, and efficiency in the public service.³⁴ These objectives belied the traditions of St. John's political life, but in 1911 a municipal politician in the Bond mould appeared on the scene in the person of William Gilbert Gosling. It was his high-minded leadership, exemplified by statements such as "we have no other interest, than your interest....," that returned St. John's to a commission government in 1914.

II

Born in Bermuda in 1863, Gosling came to Newfoundland in 1881 as a clerk with the fish exporting firm of Harvey & Co. By 1913 he had worked his way up to a directorship, having helped form the Board of Trade in 1909. Gosling was well-known for his literary and historical interests but had not previously been active in politics. His first book, published in 1910, was a history of Labrador. It stands to this day as the most comprehensive work on its subject. In 1911 he published a biography of the sixteenth century adventurer, Sir Humphrey Gilbert. A quiet and retiring individual, Gosling first ventured into public life in 1908 when he became vice-president of a charitable enterprise launched by his close friend and business associate,

John Harvey.³⁵ Both men were highly critical of the lack of civic pride shown by St. John's residents. As Gosling once bitterly remarked, "The interests of the community [were] perpetually sacrificed to the wishes of the individual."³⁶ The same zeal for detail that Gosling demonstrated in his business and literary careers was now to be applied to the city's problems.

In all likelihood the Board of Trade itself was organized in March, 1909, as a defensive response to the formation in the previous November of the Fishermen's Protective Union (FPU) in the northern outports of the island. By its very nature and rapid growth the FPU posed a serious challenge to the economic and political hegemony of St. John's. The union's goal was to achieve social welfare benefits for outport people and to eliminate the St. John's merchant as a middleman in the marketing of fish and the provisioning of fishermen. The union disputed fundamentally the belief common among St. John's residents that the prosperity of the island depended upon the prosperity of their city and more particularly of Water Street. Indeed, it was often said in St. John's that the purpose of William Coaker, the leader of the FPU, was to make grass grow in the city's streets.³⁷ By contrast, the Board of Trade's purpose was to bring together in one organization all merchants, importers, manufacturers, and industrialists. This would not only foster greater unity in the fish trade but would ensure that all disputes within the business community would be quickly settled. It would also mean that the city's businessmen would be united in their dealings with the urban working class, which had

become increasingly militant and organized since the turn of the century. The board also saw work for itself in promoting the expanding industrial and manufacturing enterprises of St. John's and encouraging resource development elsewhere in the colony.³⁸

What brought the Board of Trade to the issue of municipal reform was the inadequate fire protection in the Water Street area. St. John's had a sufficient water supply for domestic purposes by means of a gravity flow system constructed in the early 1860s and supplied from a lake to the northeast of the city. Nonetheless, although almost \$200,000 had been spent by council since 1904 to improve the mains to the city and to extend branch pipes to its rapidly growing suburbs to the north and west,³⁹ Water Street was still poorly equipped to face an emergency. The system simply could not deliver enough water at the right pressure to fight a major fire. Only if water was cut off to other parts of the city could the business district start to respond to such an event.⁴⁰ There was also an obvious need for a fire boat in the harbour. Following a major fire in October, 1908, which destroyed a large mercantile premise valued at \$600,000,⁴¹ the Board of Fire Underwriters urged upon the Municipal Council and the Board of Trade the need for this additional service. Unless it was provided, the underwriters' board indicated, premiums in the business district would have to be raised from \$25,000 to \$50,000 - sums calculated to stir the latent reformism in any businessman. The Board of Trade estimated the cost of a fire boat at \$10,000, with an equivalent annual maintenance cost. Despite the need the council proved

most unco-operative. Since the great conflagration of 1892 the Fire Department had been administered by the colonial government with the council merely contributing to its support. With the threat of an insurance rate increase hanging over them, the merchants found themselves caught in a jurisdictional battle. Council would not provide the boat because it could not afford it; the government was willing to lend the council money to purchase the boat, yet would do nothing to maintain it.⁴²

Related to the issue of fire protection was the problem of providing adequate housing for the poor, who lived in wooden frame buildings amidst great congestion just above Water Street. Many of the houses in this area were owned by absentee landlords or their St. John's agents and were really unfit for human habitation. Sewerage connection was uncommon, and council's sanitary carts a nightly presence.⁴³ In 1914 St. John's had approximately 900 to 1,000 tenements dependent upon this primitive form of sewage removal. As might be expected, there was a concomitant health problem. In 1913 the city's death rate was, for a total population of approximately 34,000, 18.95 per thousand. In Newfoundland as a whole the rate was 16.79 per thousand. According to Gosling's calculations the rate in St. John's was higher than in Glasgow or London. Infant mortality was an especially severe problem in the capital. Out of 866 deaths in 1912, 23.1 per cent had resulted from diseases of infancy and childhood. Most of these were directly attributable to unsuitable sanitary conditions; those who lived in cellar tenements and enjoyed little fresh air and sunshine were particularly

exposed.⁴⁴ What the merchants and other reform-minded citizens preferred for their slum neighbours was that the labouring poor shift to tenements in the growing suburbs. For their part the labourers living in the heart of the city wished, despite the appalling conditions, to remain, in the absence of adequate public transport, close to their place of work. Moreover, merchants and builders could not agree upon any alternative building scheme that would offer an acceptable return on capital investment.⁴⁵

The only possible way forward was through an increase in the property tax, but that solution clearly posed its own problems. As matters stood, the council was just able to meet its fixed financial obligations, which were interest payments to the government, a \$12,000 annual contribution to the Fire Department, and salary and service payments.⁴⁶ The council's financial woes were compounded by the problem of tax arrears. Since 1905 the number of defaulters had gradually increased, particularly among those who were billed for the occupiers' tax and who lived in tenements renting for \$40 to \$60 annually. These delinquents possessed little property against which writs of attachment could be had in the local courts; moreover, the cost of hiring lawyers to recover such small amounts was prohibitive. At the end of 1905 municipal arrears stood at \$52,963.90; by 1913 this figure had almost doubled to \$98,706.28.⁴⁷ In 1911 the council received legislative authority to impose a six per cent annual charge on all taxes outstanding for more than one year,⁴⁸ but in 1912 the government of Edward Morris (1909-1917) refused the council's request to turn off the water to householders

who had not paid their taxes. Morris argued that such action was not only arbitrary but dangerous to the health of the miscreants; though in arrears on direct taxes, the latter still contributed to the municipal revenue by indirect means.⁴⁹ Morris knew a political powder keg when he saw one, but some among his colleagues were inclined to go farther. Some taxpayers, it seems, were absolved of arrears by candidates seeking re-election to the council or a place in the House of Assembly.⁵⁰ The problem Gosling and the Board of Trade confronted, then, was to devise means to increase taxation upon property, without placing an undue financial burden upon the city's leaseholders and tenants.

III

Gosling first brought the municipal question before the Executive Council of the Board of Trade on May 5, 1911, his purpose being to secure support for a civic reform campaign.⁵¹ While the local press was periodically barraged with letters from irate citizens about municipal management, the notion of a systematic program of reform had never gotten very far. During the 1910 municipal election there had been little informed debate, and none of the twelve candidates for positions as councillors had even held a public meeting - a point of great significance since this was the traditional forum of St. John's politics. The 1910 campaign had lacked the partisanship of the 1902 and 1906 contests, when the daily newspapers had vigorously supported or opposed candidates on the basis of party affiliation. Moreover, there had been no mayoralty race in 1910, the popular William Ellis having been elected by

acclamation.⁵² All the successful candidates except one (a druggist) were either builders or manufacturers. Ellis himself was a prominent landlord and the biggest employer of labour in the city. Moreover, with the exception of Ellis and John T. Martin, all the members of the council elected in 1910 were new to city politics.⁵³ Such a body would have obvious difficulties reforming itself since mercantile St. John's was not represented and Ellis, himself, was a known opponent of the colonial government, having run unsuccessfully against Prime Minister Morris in the general election of 1909.⁵⁴ By contrast Gosling and the other reformers at the Board of Trade had about them an air of respectability and non-partisanship.

The first step taken by the board in its quest for reform was the formation of a committee consisting of Gosling, John Harvey, and John Harris, a former councillor and Morris protégé, to enlist the support of the council. The council accepted in principle the need for change but refused the proposal for a joint meeting to discuss municipal problems. Instead, the council suggested the board for a watchdog citizens' league.⁵⁵ Buoyed by the success of the city's first Clean-up Day on May 15, the councillors obviously saw no reason, especially with Mayor Ellis absent in Montreal for medical attention, to subject themselves to the close public scrutiny that would follow an examination of municipal affairs.⁵⁶

Rebuffed by the council, the Board of Trade authorized Gosling's committee to appoint a larger committee of enquiry from among board members. Those selected were

Mayor Ellis himself; John L. Slattery, the council's Secretary-Treasurer; George Shea and Michael P. Gibbs, both former mayors; John R. Bennett, a former councillor and now one of the MHAs for St. John's West; and John Harvey and John Harris, both members of the Legislative Council.⁵⁷ The new committee was well acquainted with the city's administrative history and problems. Given their own political record, its members could be relied upon not to indict the council for its failings but to identify the weaknesses in the existing system and find ways to build anew. Several meetings were held in June and July although no plan was put forward, and, with members hard pressed for time in the busy summer season, the initiative was eventually left to Gosling himself.⁵⁸ True to his scholarly bent, Gosling was busy exploring the workings of municipal government in Canada, the United States, and Europe. When a board member asked the committee the following year to form a vigilance committee to stimulate interest in municipal affairs, Gosling denied the request on the grounds that more data was needed on municipal government in St. John's and elsewhere.⁵⁹ But Gosling's delaying tactics may have had a further inspiration since in all likelihood he would not have wanted a public meeting and the formation of a citizen's association until the existing council's term, scheduled to end in June, 1914, was drawing to a close. In this way reform would not be misconstrued as a partisan attack on the council; nor would it be sullied by the general election that was due to be held before the municipal election.

The general election was eventually held on October 30,

1913. Both Mayor Ellis and Councillor C.W. Ryan were candidates for Robert Bond's Liberal Party, now in alliance with William Coaker's Union Party, but neither was elected.⁶⁰ Gosling's moment had come, and at a December 22nd meeting he called on the board of Trade, of which he was now President, to act. It was necessary for the board to provide civic leadership because, he stated, it was the "only independent, non-political, non-sectarian body in the community." Noting that the Boards of Trade of Saint John and Halifax had recently taken similar initiatives, Gosling called for a reform agitation which would be "wholly impersonal." Improvement, he said, would mean increased taxation.

He did not believe that under existing conditions any vast economies were possible. There has always been waste, and, as things now are, waste there must always be. There might be a better system of supervision, and improved methods, but at the best only a very few thousands could be saved, and that in the course of years. If the city was to be really improved, a large expenditure would be inevitable. There must be a considerable increase both in the city's debt and in current expenses, and these increases must be met by taxation. At present municipal taxation was comparatively light; he was not prepared to say positively how it compared with cities elsewhere, but he thought about 1/3 to 1/2 of the amounts collected in similar cities in Canada and the United States. There were a great many points to be

considered, much investigation to be undertaken, and detail to be mastered....⁶¹

With Mayor Ellis present the meeting unanimously agreed to the appointment of a four-man committee to be chaired by Gosling. This committee was to issue 300 invitations to a public meeting to be held on December 29 for the purpose of forming a citizens' reform association.

One hundred citizens answered Gosling's appeal. Their public meeting elected him the chairman of a five-man committee charged with selecting an executive committee of twenty-five, with power to increase their number. The executive committee in turn was to make a thorough study of the city's problems, and its recommendations were to be presented to the House of Assembly during its 1914 session, having first been approved at a public meeting.⁶² Gosling chose his associates judiciously. They all had backgrounds in municipal politics or in occupations or professions which bore upon the issues to be examined. Prime Minister Morris headed the list of politicians, which also included John Bennett, the colonial Secretary; St. John's East MHA James Kent, who had succeeded Bond as Liberal leader in January 1914; former mayor George Shea; and Legislative Councillors John Anderson, Michael P. Gibbs, John Harris, and John Harvey. In addition the committee numbered among its members the Inspector-General of the Constabulary and the Fire Department, the Secretary of the local Board of Fire Underwriters, the city's medical health officer and health inspector, and the president of the Longshoremen's Protective Union, the city's

largest labour body and the negotiator of the wages and working conditions of municipal labourers. The remaining committee members were merchants, lawyers and educators.⁶³

The Municipal Council dissociated itself from the work of the citizens' committee, but it did make information available to its various sub-committees dealing with municipal administration. As one of the city's largest builders, Mayor Ellis served on the housing sub-committee but avoided any other participation lest it conflict with his position as mayor.⁶⁴ In January, 1914, the council itself attempted to secure popular reforms to the Municipal Act of 1902. These were the division of the city into nine wards with a councillor elected for each (the mayor was to be elected by the city as a whole) and the enfranchisement of women property owners who paid water and sewerage assessments.⁶⁵ But this initiative was abandoned the following month when the citizen's committee released its larger plan of reform.

Having identified what the municipal problems were in the areas of housing, sewerage, lighting, public health, street repairing and cleaning, water supply, fire protection, and taxation, the committee called on the legislature to postpone for one year the municipal election scheduled to be held in June, 1914. In the interim St. John's would be administered by a committee of twelve citizens appointed by the Governor-in-Council. The members of this body would act without remuneration and would prepare a new municipal act based on their experience in governing the city. This draft act would first be submitted to the people in a

plebiscite. If the popular verdict was favourable, it would then be presented to the legislature during the 1915 session.⁶⁶ Gosling and his associates rejected existing municipal practice not only because it was cumbersome but because the colonial government and business community had not "trusted the electorate and their representatives" and had "hedged the municipal government about with many restrictions." What was needed was a system that would acknowledge the supremacy of popular will while leaving day-to-day administration in the hands of experts.

Our Municipal Act has been an experiment from the beginning. It is so inelastic, that every forward movement has entailed an amendment to the Act.... It is estimated that nine-tenths of municipal government is administrative, and one-tenth legislative. The principal aim and object of all city charters is now to obtain efficient administration in combination with electoral responsibility. This is what we want also. The source of government is the will of the people taking effect through their elected representatives. But the administration of the laws, the daily supervision which is necessary, cannot be performed by these representatives, and must be deputed to expert officials. The division of these duties and responsibilities between the elected representatives and the permanent officials requires to be carefully studied, and to be defined in the charter of the city....⁶⁷

With regard to taxes, the Committee assumed that the existing rental system would be retained because of the legal difficulties involved in either taxing the absentee landlords or acquiring freehold title to their property.⁶⁸ With the city stymied in this fashion, the committee recommended an increase in, and restructuring of, the property tax. The water and sewerage rate would be a general assessment on city property for the provisioning of municipal services and not just a levy for water and sewerage which, in any case, many houses did not possess. The occupiers' tax would be altered to make the owner of a house, whether leasehold or freehold, liable for all property taxes, except the three per cent tax on ground rent. The latter would continue to be paid in accordance with existing legal agreements. In turn the owner of a house would be permitted to add the occupiers' tax to the rent payable under his leases and agreements with tenants. This change would make it easier for council to collect its taxes; the landlord not the tenant would now be responsible for payment. Gosling's committee also wanted a change in the method by which houses were appraised with more substantial houses being appraised at a higher rate than at present while lowering the rate for poorer houses. The net effect of these changes would be an immediate increase in revenue. The extra funds, Gosling hoped, would be used to improve the water supply at a cost of approximately \$150,000 and to purchase the much desired fire boat.⁶⁹

Not surprisingly, the Citizens' Committee was well represented on the new Municipal Commission when its membership was announced. Out of

twelve commissioners, nine, including Gosling, had served on the committee. Eleven of the twelve commissioners had commercial or industrial backgrounds; the twelfth was the President of the Longshoremen's Protective Union.⁷⁰ Several of the commissioners had previous municipal experience and included from the outgoing council Mayor Ellis and Councillor Mullaly. Members of previous councils called to serve on the commission were John Anderson and John Harris. Ellis had accepted a place from Prime Minister Morris on the understanding that he would be named Chairman, a position he claimed to be rightfully his because of his long record of municipal service.⁷¹ But this was not to be. On July 2, at the first meeting of the commission, Gosling moved that the chief executive be selected by majority vote. He then easily defeated Ellis on the first ballot, the latter resigning in disgust the following day.⁷² Gosling had come to personify reform in St. John's, and his election reflected the determination of the commission to make a clean break with the past. In this fashion the chain of events which culminated in the charter of 1921, the basis of present-day municipal government in St. John's, was set in motion.

Like their counterparts in Canada and the United States, municipal reformers in St. John's undoubtedly spoke for the self-interest of the business community. But in a congested city, characterized by frame structures, where citizens had witnessed several major conglagratations in the nineteenth century, their interest, particularly in the matter of fire protection, could not be easily

separated from the general interest. Though the reformers were predominantly businessmen, they drew to their ranks representatives of many other classes and interests. The reformers saw themselves as concerned citizens "strongly democratic in their ideas" who would, in Gosling's words, resist "as firmly as anyone in St. John's any permanent interference with the franchise." What they had sought, he asserted, was to make St. John's "a cleaner, healthier, and pleasanter place to live."⁷³ Their efforts accord well with the interpretation by H.V. Nelles and Christopher Armstrong of Canadian urban reform in the same era in which it is stated that "reform movements in many places...should be viewed as coalitions of interests, sometimes uneasy, sometimes amicable."⁷⁴ This was certainly true of St. John's and its medley of political and economic interest groups.

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NOTES

- 1 Newfoundland Archives (hereafter referred to as NA), P8/B/11, Board of Trade Papers, 1914, Special File, "Report of the Executive Committee of the Citizens' Committee, February 12, 1914," p. 15.
- 2 E.B. Foran "St. John's City: Historic Capital of Newfoundland," in J.R. Smallwood, ed., *Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 2 (St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1937), pp. 1-25.
- 3 NA, GN9/1, Minutes of the Newfoundland Executive Council, January 7, 1887, and June 22, 1888; *Evening Mercury*, March 19, 1888.
- 4 See chapter two of the author's "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1888-1902," M.A. Thesis (Memorial University, 1976) for the incorporation of St. John's in 1888.
- 5 Attorney General J.S. Winter in Assembly Debates, May 6, 1887, in *Evening Mercury*, May 12, 1887.
- 6 Assembly Debates, April 16, 1888, in *Evening Mercury*, April 25, 1888.
- 7 Baker, "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1888-1902," pp. 17-55.
- 8 51 Victoria, Cap. 5.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 A.B. Morine in Assembly Debates, April 11, 1902, in *Evening Telegram*, May 10, 1902.
- 11 On Morris' political career see S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto, 1971), pp. 31-33; and Peter F. Neary and S.J.R. Noel, "Continuity and Change in Newfoundland Politics," Paper presented to the Canadian Political Science Association, St. John's, 1971.
- 12 "Report of Citizens' Committee on the City Taxes," published in *Evening Telegram*, May 19, 1914.
- 13 51 Victoria, Cap. 5 and 2; Edward VII, Cap. 6; City Hall, St. John's Municipal Council Letter Books, J.L. Slattery, Secretary-Treasurer, to L. Fred Monaghan, City Clerk, Halifax, Nova Scotia, July 20, 1907, and J.L. Slattery to W.P. Purney, Liverpool, Nova Scotia, January 31, 1912.
- 14 *Proceedings of the Newfoundland Legislative Council*, 1910, pp. 695-702.
- 15 "Draft of Instructions passed under the Royal Sign-Manual and Signet to the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the

- Island of Newfoundland and its Dependencies, dated March 28, 1876," in *Journal of the Newfoundland House of Assembly, 1877*, pp. xii-xiii.
- 16 In 1888 the occupiers' tax was 6% for the water company's assessment on property. P.J. Scott in Assembly Debates, February 27, 1888, in *Evening Mercury*, March 2, 1888.
- 17 *Proceedings of the Newfoundland Legislative Council*, 1921, pp. 71-72.
- 18 John Harris to *Evening Telegram*, July 25, 1899.
- 19 John Joy, "The Growth and Development of Trades and Manufacturing in St. John's, 1870-1914," M.A. Thesis (Memorial University, 1977), pp. 13-19.
- 20 "Report of Municipal Council for the Year 1917," printed in *Daily News*, April 22, 1918.
- 21 John Harris to *Evening Telegram*, July 25, 1899; City Hall, St. John's, Municipal Council Minutes, January 29, February 1, 1904.
- 22 54 Victoria, Cap. 4; Baker, "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1888-1904," pp. 92-97, 108-113.
- 23 59 Victoria, Cap. 28; 61 Victoria, Cap. 45.
- 24 J.S. Winter in Assembly Debates, March 26, 1898, in *Evening Herald*, April 5, 1898.
- 25 *Ibid.*; Baker, "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1888-1902," Appendix F.
- 26 61 Victoria, Cap. 45.
- 27 A.B. Morine in Assembly Debates, March 26, 1898, in *Evening Herald*, April 5, 1898.
- 28 J.S. Winter in Assembly Debates, March 26, 1898, in *Evening Herald*, April 5, 1898.
- 29 J.K. Hiller, ed., *The Newfoundland Railway Contract of 1898* (St. John's: Memorial University, 1973); and Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*, pp. 26-34.
- 30 J.S. Winter in Assembly Debates, March 26, 1898, in *Evening Herald*, April 5, 1898. One of the appointees was Thomas M. White who had been an unsuccessful Conservative candidate in St. John's West in the general Election of 1897. In 1899 he had resigned from the Municipal Commission to contest St. John's East in a by-election in that year.
- 31 Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*, pp. 26-34.
- 32 2 Edward VII, Cap. 6; E.P. Morris in Assembly Debates, April 9, 1902, in *Evening Telegram*, May 5, 1902.
- 33 2 Edward VII, Cap. 6.
- 34 R. Bond in Assembly Debates, April 11, 1902, in *Evening Telegram*, May 13, 1902.
- 35 A.N. Gosling, *William G. Gosling: A Tribute* (New York, n.d.), p. 367; *Newfoundland's Who's Who, 1930*, p. 229; H.M. Mosdell, *When Was That?* (St. John's, 1923), pp. 25-26.
- 36 Gosling, *William G. Gosling*, p. 98.
- 37 Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*, pp. 77-94; Ian McDonald, *Coaker the Reformer: A Brief Biographical Introduction* (St. John's, 1975); *Daily News*, September 24, 1913.
- 38 "An Act to Incorporate the Newfoundland Board of Trade, and for other purposes," passed June 12, 1909; *Daily News*, March 15, 1909.
- 39 Foran, "St. John's City," pp. 15-19; J.L. Slattery, "The Auxiliary Water Service," *Newfoundland Quarterly* (October, 1905), p. 18;

- Proceedings of the Newfoundland House of Assembly, 1911*, pp. 440-441.
- 40 "Report of the Executive Committee of the Citizens' Committee, February 12, 1914," p. 12; Foran, "St. John's City," p. 18.
- 41 Mosdell, *When Was That?*, p. 42.
- 42 "Quarterly Report of the Board of Trade" in *Daily News*, April 9, November 4, 1912; City Hall, St. John's Municipal Council Letter Book, J.L. Slattery, Secretary-Treasurer, To Hon. R. Watson, Colonial Secretary, January 23, 1912; NA, P8/B/11, Board of Trade Minute April 18, 1912; "Report of the Executive Committee of the Citizens' Committee, February 12, 1914," p. 18.
- 43 For a description of housing conditions in St. John's, see *Proceedings of the Newfoundland Legislative Council, 1913*, pp. 157-164; *Daily News*, December 23, 1913.
- 44 *Newfoundland Census, 1911*; "Report of the Executive Committee of the Citizens' Committee, February 12, 1914," pp. 6-11; Gosling, *William G. Gosling*, p. 92.
- 45 NA, GN1/1/7, 1914, Despatches to the Colonial Office from the Governor of Newfoundland, Sir W. Davidson to the Right Honourable Lewis Harcourt, March 16, 1914.
- 46 "Quarterly Report of the Board of Trade," in *Daily News*, January 16, 1912; *Daily News*, May 11, 1910.
- 47 *Daily News*, March 24, 29, April 21, 1913; "Report of Citizens' Committee on the City Taxes," published in *Evening Telegram*, May 19, 1914.
- 48 1 George V, Cap. 6.
- 49 NA, GN8/1, Prime Ministers Papers, Edward P. Morris, folder 35, E.P. Morris to J.L. Slattery, Secretary-Treasurer, St. John's Municipal Council, March 8, 1912.
- 50 *Daily News*, March 29, April 25, 1913, May 10, 1914; "Report of Citizens' Committee on the City Taxes," published in *Evening Telegram*, May 19, 1914.
- 51 NA, P8/B/11, Board of Trade Minutes, May 5, 1911.
- 52 *Daily News*, June 18, 27, 1910.
- 53 *Ibid.*, June 18, 1910; "Candidates for the coming Municipal Election," *Newfoundland Quarterly* (March, 1906), p. 4; "The New Mayor," *Newfoundland Quarterly* (July, 1910).
- 54 *Daily News*, May 12, 1909.
- 55 NA, P8/B/11, Board of Trade Minutes, May 5, 9, 12, 1911; NA, P8/B/11, Board of Trade Letter Book, G.E. Fearn, Secretary, Board of Trade, to J. L. Slattery, Secretary-Treasurer, St. John's Municipal Council, May 5, 1911; City Hall, St. John's Municipal Council Minutes, May 5, 12, 22, 1911.
- 56 *Daily News*, May 16, 1911; City Hall, St. John's Municipal Council Minutes, March 16, June 27, 1911.
- 57 NA, P8/B/11, Board of Trade Minutes, June 2, 9, 1911.
- 58 NA, P8/B/11, Board of Trade Letter Book, W.G. Gosling to J. L. Slattery, Secretary-Treasurer, St. John's Municipal Council, July 4, 1911, and July 19, 1911; "Quarterly Report of the Board of Trade," in *Daily News*, January 16, 1912.
- 59 NA, P8/B11, Board of Trade Minutes, June 7, 24, 1912; NA, P8/B/11, Board of Trade Papers, Correspondence, 1913, file C-G, Francis Conroy, City

- Clerk, Chicago, to Ernest A. Payne, Secretary, Board of Trade, July 7 and 22, 1913. See also file 1913, N-S, Common Clerk, City of Saint John, New Brunswick, to President, Board of Trade, St. John's, August 8, 1913; and, Gosling, *William G. Gosling*, p. 80.
- 60 *Daily News*, September 27, 29, 30, November 3, 1913.
- 61 *Ibid.*, December 23, 1913; NA, P8/B/11, Board of Trade Minutes, December 12, 26, 1913.
- 62 *Daily News*, December 30, 1913; "Report of the Executive Committee of the Citizens' Committee, February 12, 1914," pp. 3-5.
- 63 *Ibid.*; City Hall, St. John's Municipal Council Minutes, June 30, 1908.
- 64 "Report of the Executive Committee of the Citizens' Committee, February 12, 1914," p. 5; William Ellis to *Evening Telegram*, February 12, 1914.
- 65 City Hall, St. John's Municipal Council Minutes, January 29, February 16, 1914; *Daily News*, February 4, 1914.
- 66 "Report of the Executive Committee of the Citizens' Committee, February 12, 1914," William Gosling and John Harris to *Evening Telegram*, February 23, 1914.
- 67 "Report of the Executive Committee of the Citizens' Committee, February 12, 1914," pp. 15-16.
- 68 *Daily News*, March 31, 1914.
- 69 "Report of the Executive Committee of the Citizens' Committee, February 12, 1914," pp. 11-14; and "Report of the Citizens' Committee on the City Taxes," published in *Evening Telegram*, May 19, 1914.
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- 71 *Ibid.*, June 23, 1914.
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- 73 William G. Gosling to *Evening Telegram*, February 23, 1914.
- 74 H.V. Nelles and Christopher Armstrong, "The Great Fight for Clean Government," *Urban History Review*, No. 2-76 (October 1976), p. 56.