

# The Illumination of Victoria: Late Nineteenth-Century Technology and Municipal Enterprise

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In 1886, the *Victoria Colonist* boasted of the "perfect lighting" of the city by electricity.<sup>1</sup> That premature statement reflected Victoria's pride in being one of the first Canadian cities to have electric street lights but it also obscured the role of past and continuing local controversy as Victoria dealt with private lighting companies, a brand new technology and a municipal street lighting system.

The story of Victoria's street lights falls into three phases. After considerable debate over monopoly privileges and maximum prices, the privately owned Victoria Gas Company began to operate in 1863. Because of its unsatisfactory service and high prices, it was never popular and did not get a street lighting contract until 1873. By 1880, the street lighting question was entering a second phase as local residents debated the relative merits of gas and the new lighting medium, electricity. Finally, in order to improve the unsatisfactory electric street lighting system installed by a private entrepreneur and to forestall a repetition of its disputes with the gas company, the city, for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons, made the electric street lights a municipal enterprise.

## I

When the Hudson's Bay Company post of Victoria suddenly became a "full-grown town" in 1858,<sup>2</sup> it lacked most civic amenities, including street lights. Coal oil, paraffin and camphene lamps lit homes, stores and offices; the streets were dark. Yet when the Legislative Assembly of Vancouver Island received a request to incorporate a company to supply Victoria with gas, it refused to act before the town was incorporated, an event which did not occur until 1862. Despite that decision and a temporary depression, two American promoters, John T. Little and Michael L. Cavert, took up

<sup>1</sup> *British Colonist* (Victoria), 3 September 1886.

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Mayne, *Four Years in British Columbia and Vancouver Island* (London: John Murray, 1862), pp. 44-5.

the scheme. Rather than follow the American practice of competition among utility companies, they first asked the assembly to grant them, according to English custom, “*exclusive* rights for a number of years” — that is, an indefinite monopoly. Responding to opposition to the principle of monopoly led by Amor de Cosmos, the mercurial editor of the *Colonist*, the promoters eventually sought only a five-year monopoly and lowered their maximum price from \$12.50 to \$7.50 per thousand cubic feet.<sup>3</sup>

Some members of the assembly expressed uncertainty about the promoters’ financial resources and their authority to act for California shareholders. De Cosmos’ description of the firm as “a fine rent roll” for absentee owners was a red herring.<sup>4</sup> When the company’s organization was complete early in 1861, almost all of its sixty-three subscribers were residents of Vancouver Island. Indeed, twenty-seven years later, thirteen of the original subscribers (or their estates) were still shareholders, an example of what J. M. S. Careless has observed to be a “notable feature of the Victoria commercial community . . . its continuity.”<sup>5</sup> Among the shareholders were three members of the legislative council, Donald Fraser, W. A. G. Young and E. G. Alston, and four members of the assembly including Alfred Waddington, who had once led the opposition to the company. Two members of the assembly, J. J. Southgate and Robert Burnaby, both British-born merchants, were directors. This alliance with politicians was useful. In December 1860 the assembly overcame its earlier reluctance to interfere with what would become municipal responsibilities. It satisfied itself about the company’s financial status and incorporated the Victoria Gas Company according to legislation which closely followed the Metropolitan Gas Act passed earlier that year in Britain. Only de Cosmos seems to have noted any possible conflict of interest between the private and public interests of the legislators. In Victoria, as elsewhere, differences between individual and community interests were not clearly discerned and the public interest appeared as “the sum of the community’s many private concerns.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Colonist*, 26 October 1859. (Italics in original.)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 November 1860.

<sup>5</sup> J. M. S. Careless, “The Business Community in the Early Development of Victoria, British Columbia,” in David S. Macmillan, ed., *Canadian Business History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 122. Information on the shareholders of the Gas Company has been obtained from its share subscription ledger in the British Columbia Electric Railway Company papers in the Library of the University of British Columbia and its Journal in the Provincial Archives of British Columbia (hereafter, PABC).

<sup>6</sup> Michael H. Frisch, *Town Into City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 48. I am also indebted to H. V. Nelles for permitting me to read the stimulating

The Gas Company turned on the lights in several stores and saloons on 1 October 1862, two months after the colony of Vancouver Island incorporated the city of Victoria. Expecting the new city's desire for street lights, the company purchased fifty "handsome street pillars." The need for street lights was clear. Although several merchants installed lamps outside their places of business, the *Colonist* observed: "The state of our streets at night, especially of Government Street, where there are no brilliantly lighted up shop windows, is fearful to make one's way along, and places the poor pedestrian in danger of breaking his leg, or at least of making a number of somersaults before his destination." To illustrate its argument, the paper cited examples of new arrivals being "immersed in mud" when they missed the plank sidewalks. The city fathers were aware of the efficacy of street lights but streets, sidewalks and a water system had a higher priority. Since the city had hitherto managed without street lights, council believed "we could do without [them] for the present" rather than go into debt.<sup>7</sup>

The city's financial problems, caused by a faulty Act of Incorporation<sup>8</sup> which limited its powers to impose taxes or borrow money, led to the first demonstration of the city's belief that the collective welfare of its citizens outweighed the individual interests of the Gas Company shareholders. It also showed that a municipal council dominated by small merchants and tradesmen was less friendly to the Gas Company than was the council and assembly of Vancouver Island in which larger merchants and senior civil servants, including investors in the Gas Company, were influential. In order to raise funds, the city council in 1863 introduced a Municipal Trade Licenses Bylaw setting licence fees for specified businesses and professions and imposing a tax of  $\frac{1}{8}$ th of 1 per cent on the gross revenues of other enterprises except "all gas companies," which were taxed at the rate of 1 per cent. As the only firm so affected (its monopoly was still in effect), the Victoria Gas Company naturally perceived discrimination. In a petition signed by 141 residents representing "most of the influential property holders and business firms," Gas Company shareholders asked Governor James Douglas to veto the bylaw or force the city to refer it to the rate-

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paper, "The Un-Bluing of Toronto and the Revenge of the Methodist Bicycle Company: The Fight over Sunday Street Cars, 1891-1898" which he and Christopher Armstrong presented to the June 1973 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association.

<sup>7</sup> *Colonist*, 28 July 1862, 15 January 1863, 21 April 1863.

<sup>8</sup> See P. F. Palmer, "A Fiscal History of British Columbia in the Colonial Period," (Ph.D. thesis, Stanford University, 1932), pp. 227-8, 255, 273n.

payers. Though unwilling to exercise his veto, Douglas was impressed by a request "from so numerous and influential [a] body," and instructed council to submit the bylaw to the electors. Believing only "parties interested in the Victoria Gas Co." opposed the tax, council reluctantly followed the governor's advice.<sup>9</sup>

The voters upheld the bylaw and defeated what Mayor Thomas Harris, a butcher and provisioner, described as "the monopolists who would tax the poor to serve the rich man." The mayor's comment reflected a split within the community between the company's shareholders and friends and the retail traders and others who were its principal customers. In an editorial criticizing the gas monopoly, the *Chronicle* noted "the lines were very closely drawn." On the side of the company were the "kid-gloved gentry," the wholesale dealers, the Hudson's Bay Company and, "for some inexplicable cause," the coloured vote. Supporting the city and its taxation policy were retail traders and mechanics who had a "fellow feeling" for the workingman and the city's revenue needs. The council was sustained, suggested the *Colonist*, because "the moderate portion of the electors believed that a dead-set had been made to bring our civic institutions into disrepute, and, if possible, overthrow the Corporation."<sup>10</sup>

Despite taxation and some two years of depression, the Gas Company prospered, paid dividends ranging from 9 to 18 per cent per annum, and raised new local capital to extend its mains. Although its monopoly expired in 1867, it never faced competition from another gas company.<sup>11</sup> Even though it ceased to have a legal monopoly and had to pay local taxes, the Gas Company was never popular. The public often criticized its "most villainous smells," its disruption of city streets while laying mains and, especially, its high prices during the depression of the late 1860s. In the fall of 1867, consumers complained the Gas Company was charging the maximum rate permitted by its charter while prices for most other commodities, including coal oil, had fallen. Dissatisfied customers called a general meeting. After the speakers, many of whom were retail mer-

<sup>9</sup> *Victoria Daily Chronicle*, 24 March 1863; W. A. G. Young to Mayor of Victoria, 21 March 1863, Vancouver Island, Miscellaneous Letters, Correspondence with Victoria Municipal Council, PABC; Victoria City Council Minutes, 23 March 1863, Victoria City Archives.

<sup>10</sup> *Chronicle*, 29 March 1863; *Colonist*, 30 March 1863.

<sup>11</sup> The one attempt to establish a rival failed. In 1872, C. McK. Smith, the brother of Amor de Cosmos, proposed to form the British Columbia Gas Company, which offered to provide the city with good gas at a price of not more than \$4.00 per thousand cubic feet. City council received the offer sympathetically but no more was heard of the scheme. Victoria City Council Minutes, 27 March 1872, 10 April 1872; *Colonist*, 8 October 1878.

chants, referred to its large revenues, its high profits and the generous salaries paid its management, the ninety-six consumers present unanimously pledged "to relinquish the burning of gas until the Gas Company has reduced its price to a figure which shall satisfy the majority of gas consumers." To encourage the company to avoid a boycott, the petitioners also demanded that the company accept any expenses they might incur in temporarily substituting other methods of lighting. The consumption of gas fell markedly but the company waited a year before reducing its price slightly. Victorians continued to use alternate lighting methods. In 1873, a visiting journalist observed that "in a very large proportion of the houses, petroleum (which is also very dear, having to be imported from the East) is used in preference" to gas.<sup>12</sup>

Provision for special rates for street lighting had been included in the Gas Company's charter but not until 1873, when Confederation and the transcontinental railway promised prosperity, did the city arrange to have street lamps installed. The street light situation remained unsatisfactory. In 1875, a "ratepayer" complained of lighting so poor that patients being carried to the hospital had been dumped into ditches when stretcher bearers missed their footing on dark nights. That objection, however, was directed more against the city than the company. Gradually the city ordered more street lights, and by 1878 fifty-seven were in operation at scattered points. An indication of their value was Chief Justice Begbie's observation that without the street lights a man he convicted for assault with intent to commit highway robbery would have escaped. That lesson was a timely one. Two months earlier, on 1 March 1878, after council refused to sign a five-year contract without a rate reduction, the Gas Company turned off the street lights.<sup>13</sup>

## II

By this short-sighted action, the Gas Company encouraged Victoria to seek an alternative lighting system. In the short run, the city called for tenders to light the streets by gas or coal oil. A San Francisco firm sent a sample

<sup>12</sup> *Colonist*, 14 January 1865, 20 September 1867, 21 September 1867; Victoria City Council Minutes, 14 April 1868, 29 January 1873; "Notes by a traveller in British Columbia written for the [Toronto Weekly] *Mail*, no. III," undated clipping [c. March 1873] in PABC. The Victoria Gas Company's profits were not unusually large for such enterprises. In 1865, the New York Gas Company declared a 50 per cent dividend. (Louis Stolz and Alexander Jamison, *History of the Gas Industry* [New York, n.p., 1938], p. 57.)

<sup>13</sup> *Colonist*, 16 October 1875, 10 February 1878, 29 May 1878.

coal oil lamp supposed to cost 40 per cent less than gas to operate. The difficulty of lighting this inferior light in the wind led to its quick rejection. Meanwhile the *Colonist*, in a remarkably prescient editorial, urged city council to investigate the electric light, shortly to "be *the* light of the age," and an economical one since three or four "jets" in elevated positions might light the whole city. By fall, however, the city concluded a new agreement with the gas company, "much to the gratification of pedestrians" who had suffered through seven months of dark streets. Though it was not reported as an issue in the municipal election the following January,<sup>14</sup> the absence of light may have contributed to discontent with the council and to the formation of a so-called "Reform Party" which elected the mayor and six of the seven councillors, one of whom was C. W. R. Thompson, the secretary of the Gas Company.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the *Colonist's* foresight, most Victorians only saw the electric light for the first time in 1879, when 1,200 of them made a special excursion to Esquimalt to see the electric lights on board H.M.S. *Triumph*. Victoria newspapers, however, carried frequent reports of experiments with electric street lights which C. F. Brush had demonstrated in 1879 in Cleveland and San Francisco and of plans to use electricity for such diverse purposes as the hatching of chicks and the execution of criminals. The new technology posed a serious threat to the Gas Company, which still faced a challenge from that primitive illuminant, coal oil. The existence of these alternatives stimulated intermittent discussion throughout the 1880s about the most economical and effective means of lighting the streets. Its basis lay both in hostility to the Gas Company and in the optimism about a new technology about which most disputants knew very little.<sup>16</sup>

In the spring of 1881, after many of the "Reform Party" of 1879, including Thompson, had left council, Victoria once again turned off the gas street lights, this time for economy. Mayor J. H. Turner claimed that

<sup>14</sup> The Gas Company was a minor issue in the federal election of 1878. J. P. Davies, an auctioneer and Liberal-Conservative candidate, promised \$500 to anyone who could demonstrate that an outlay of \$25,000-30,000 could result in the profitable production of gas at \$3.50 per thousand cubic feet. Davies promised he would personally raise the necessary capital "without having recourse to San Francisco capitalists." (*Colonist*, 8 October 1878.) Davies lost the election and no more was heard of his scheme.

<sup>15</sup> *Colonist*, 1 June 1878, 2 June 1878, 2 October 1878, 10 January 1879, 15 January 1879.

<sup>16</sup> *Colonist*, 17 May 1879; Harold C. Passer, *The Electrical Manufacturers, 1875-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 14-19.

people from New York to San Francisco were talking about this disgrace. His appeal to civic pride was not necessarily an argument for modernity; he was a friend of the Gas Company and wished to restore its service. Because a majority of its members wanted to frighten the Gas Company, council called for tenders for sixty coal oil lamps. It was nonplussed when local residents Reginald Nuttall, an agent of the Brush Light Company, and a partnership of R. B. McMicking and E. Crow Baker responded to its invitation for tenders "for the exclusive privilege of lighting the City of Victoria with Electric Light" for a term of years to be stated in the tender. Although both the *Chronicle* and the *Colonist* hailed the city's progressive attitude in considering the electric light, which the *Colonist* argued should be a public work, council shared Mayor Turner's belief that "Victoria was not sufficiently rich to experiment with electric light." It referred the electric tenders to committee and accepted the lowest of three tenders for coal oil lamps. Describing this decision as "only flying in the face of the Gas Company," Mayor Turner appealed directly to the ratepayers. At a "long and acrimonious" public meeting he urged council to accept the Gas Company's revised offer of reduced rates and better-quality light. The subsequent bylaw, however, aroused "no excitement or canvassing" beyond the council itself; the tiny minority of ratepayers who voted overwhelmingly chose gas over coal oil. Council then concluded a new contract with the Gas Company including a provision for its termination if the electric light were adopted.<sup>17</sup>

As it confirmed this agreement, council engaged in "a lively discussion" on the first reading of an electric light bylaw. Again, council referred directly to the ratepayers. Once more the Gas Company was a prime target. Calling on ratepayers to vote in favour of the electric light, Councillor John Boyd suggested a favourable vote would permit Victoria to boast of being "the first place in the far west" to follow the example of such progressive English cities as Godalming, Surrey. Civic pride was not his only motive; that city had adopted electric street lighting as the result of a quarrel with its gas company. The argument was effective. Only a few of the ratepayers exercised their franchise, but they authorized the city to borrow the \$12,500 necessary to introduce the electric light to Victoria. The idea of municipal ownership was not examined, despite an

<sup>17</sup> *Victoria Daily Standard*, 25 August 1881, 31 August 1881; *Weekly Standard*, 7 September 1881; *Colonist*, 14 May 1881, 1 September 1881, 29 September 1881; *Chronicle*, 13 May 1881. The reports of the public meeting raise an interesting question about the degree of participation in civic affairs. According to a newspaper account, many non-ratepayers attended but were denied an opportunity to speak.

understanding that the city might eventually buy the electric light system if it performed satisfactorily at a reasonable cost.<sup>18</sup>

During the municipal election campaign in January 1882, the relative merits of gas and electric lighting stimulated some vigorous debate. The *Standard* praised the incumbent councillors for making arrangements for electric lighting, but the *Colonist* repeated its warning that electricity was still in its infancy and "like all infants should be handled carefully." On the platform, Noah Shakespeare, a councillor who was seeking the mayor's chair, favoured the electric light and expressed his hope that "no supporter of the gas company would be elected," a comment which provoked both applause and dissent. When retiring Mayor Turner, who supported the candidacy of Alex McLean, a defender of the Gas Company, alluded to "the electric light, great confusion ensued and the speaker was obliged to desist." Most arguments presented in the dispute related to the comparative efficiency of gas and electric lighting but the voters were not moved. They elected supporters of the electric light including Noah Shakespeare and John Boyd and also chose such advocates of the Gas Company as John Kinsman.<sup>19</sup>

Even before the election of 1882, council considered the two tenders for electric lighting. The McMicking-Baker offer was premature; Baker tried to lobby council to delay the letting of the contract. Moreover, the Brush Light Company offered lower maintenance costs. Thus council invited a Brush Company expert to come from San Francisco and, if he could guarantee satisfactory operating costs, to supervise the erection of the system. The expert reported that Nuttall had underestimated costs but Nuttall, having obtained the British Columbia franchise for the Brush Light, announced he would form a joint stock company to build the lighting system. Because his plan did not come to fruition, McMicking and Baker got a second chance.<sup>20</sup>

In the spring of 1883, McMicking offered to build three towers, each 150 feet high, and he promised they would provide a light fifty times more efficient than the gas lamps and capable of illuminating six times the area. McMicking and Baker proposed to install the system at their own expense and to give council the option of renting it for \$6,000 per year or buying it for \$12,500 (the amount already approved by the ratepayers) and

<sup>18</sup> *Colonist*, 20 October 1881, 2 November 1881, 3 November 1881.

<sup>19</sup> *Standard*, 17 December 1881; *Colonist*, 31 December 1881, 10 January 1882. The state of the sidewalks and drains appears to have been a more decisive issue.

<sup>20</sup> E. Crow Baker, *Diary*, 2 November 1881 (in PABC). *Daily Standard*, 11 November 1881; *Colonist*, 15 January 1882.

operating it themselves. Either way, the light would be much improved without increasing taxes. McMicking even suggested that if the city operated the lights itself there would be significant savings. Given another opportunity to express their opinions on the electric light, the ratepayers showed a decided preference for McMicking's scheme.

In December 1883, McMicking invited council to test the light according to the pre-arranged standard: sufficient illumination to read the Government Gazette at night. Although Mayor C. E. Redfern admitted a few areas of the city were in shadow, he claimed Victoria had fifty times the candlepower for only \$2,000 per annum more than the previous system of gas supplemented by coal oil lamps. When the "elegant and brilliant" light passed the test, council ratified the contract with McMicking and terminated its arrangement with the Gas Company, which now had to content itself with sales of gas for domestic and commercial lighting and heating. The electric light, which five years earlier had been merely a threat to the Gas Company's high rates and unsatisfactory service, was now an accomplished fact. Technology had provided a convenient weapon to check the Gas Company whose unpopularity had encouraged Victorians to investigate and adopt a still largely experimental lighting system. So entrenched was resentment of the Gas Company that when the electric system proved to be unsatisfactory, the city of Victoria decided to improve it by making it a municipal enterprise rather than return to gas lighting.<sup>21</sup>

### III

Complaints of black-outs, of shadows, of McMicking turning the lights off when the "moon was up," and of the failure of the light to pass the reading test quickly replaced enthusiastic early reports of the electric light. According to the *Colonist*, this dissatisfaction and the belief that civic ownership would save approximately \$3,000 per annum led council in June 1884 to notify McMicking of its intention to exercise its option to purchase the system. What the *Colonist* did not report was that Edgar Crow Baker, McMicking's partner, had been "buzzing" council members for over a month urging them to take over the plant. His motive, like that of similar entrepreneurs in other parts of Canada who favoured municipal ownership, was clear; he had over-extended himself in building the system

<sup>21</sup> *Colonist*, 21 April 1883, 22 July 1883, 25 July 1883, 11 December 1883, 22 December 1883; *Annual Report of Charles E. Redfern, Mayor of the City of Victoria for the Year Ending 31st December 1883* (Victoria, 1884), pp. 10-11.

and was in desperate financial straits.<sup>22</sup> Thus the immediate impetus for Victoria's experience with a publicly owned lighting utility came out not from an ideological commitment to collective ownership — though the idea was in the air — but from the need of a prominent citizen, Edgar Crow Baker, M.P., to be bailed out of an embarrassing financial situation.

Baker's relief at council's decision to buy the plant was short-lived. The ratepayers rejected council's omnibus request for funds for various civic improvements, including the acquisition of the street lighting system. Eight months later, in April 1885, council reconsidered and, by a close five to four vote, decided to go to the ratepayers again. Several councillors objected to the city taking on additional administrative tasks and Mayor R. P. Rithet suggested it might still be possible to get a better light cheaper from the Gas Company which, to combat competition from electricity, had offered to negotiate lower rates. Nevertheless, on 29 September 1885 the ratepayers approved council's plan to borrow \$16,000 to pay for the lighting system and to improve it.<sup>23</sup>

The problems of the new technology were soon manifest. Since its Brush lights were not wholly satisfactory, the city rejected the bid of the California Electric Light Company to install more Brush lights and ordered three additional towers based on the system of the Sperry Electric Light Company of Chicago. The erection of these new towers and the adoption of the "intersectional principle," whereby the city placed a lamp at each main intersection and put the additional towers in the suburbs, led the *Colonist* to acclaim the "perfect lighting" of the city and Mayor Rithet to boast of the arrangement being a great bargain. The perfection proclamation was premature. The complicated Sperry lights blinked, lacked protection against the elements, produced shadows, were expensive to operate and were often out of order. As well, the cost of improving and enlarging the lighting plant was \$22,435.70 rather than the estimated \$13,000.<sup>24</sup>

The expense of this unsatisfactory system undoubtedly reinforced the belief that a small community such as Victoria could not afford to experiment with the new technology. Not until 1888-9 did the city again

<sup>22</sup> *Colonist*, 4 July 1884; E. C. Baker, *Diary*, 25 June 1884. When city council delayed completing the transaction, Baker tried to get Robert Dunsmuir to take over the electric light plant. The phenomenon of local promoters trying to dispose of their electric utilities was not confined to Victoria. The early history of electric street railways in Vancouver provides several such examples. See also H. V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), p. 252.

<sup>23</sup> *The Daily Times* (Victoria), 24 July 1884, 13 August 1884; *Colonist*, 30 April 1885.

<sup>24</sup> *Colonist*, 20 December 1885, 3 September 1886; *Annual Report of... Mayor... 1886* (Victoria, 1887), p. 18.

consider improving the street lights. Acting on the advice of the city electrician, R. B. McMicking, the city replaced the Sperry lights with lamps from the Ball Electric Company of Toronto, whose British Columbia agent was R. B. McMicking. The city's Electric Light Committee did not consider this to be a conflict of interest since McMicking was working as city electrician under contract rather than as an ordinary employee.<sup>25</sup> Only when a royal commission inquired generally into the state of municipal affairs in Victoria in 1891-2 was there any questioning of McMicking's dual role. In any case, once the new system was installed, the *Colonist* repeated its boast that Victoria had "in proportion to population the most complete and finest [lighting system] on the Pacific Coast." Mayor John Grant agreed that "although the service may not be entirely satisfactory to ourselves, those at a distance . . . speak of it in the highest terms." Dissatisfaction with the Electric Light Committee's management of the system soon overcame this initial enthusiasm. The committee, in turn, blamed the inadequacy of the plant and the poor insulation of the tramway company's electric wires for the unsteadiness of the light.<sup>26</sup>

To improve the system, the Electric Light Committee recommended \$35,000 worth of extensions and the purchase of both the Gas Company and the Victoria Electric Illuminating Company. The latter company, a small unincorporated firm using Sperry equipment, supplied electric light to businesses in the city from the first incandescent electric light station in Canada. Its manager was E. Crow Baker; Alderman McKillican, chairman of the Electric Light Committee, was one of its shareholders. The Light Committee suggested economies of scale would provide good street lighting, offer the opportunity of underground wiring, guarantee "to every citizen a choice of lights at a moderate and uniform cost" and "become a source of wealth to the city." The brief discussion of the proposal during

<sup>25</sup> McMicking himself was aware of the conflict. On 16 February 1889 he wrote to the Ball Company: "I have contracted to deliver the goods here for you not however representing myself as your agent. I thought that inasmuch as I was acting for them as Electrician, there would be better chance of making a sale, by keeping aloof, and I have not therefore, advertised myself here, as your representative pending the action of the Council, but will do so fully, as soon as the contract is complete. Kindly invoice the goods to me at the figure chargeable to me and I will re-invoice to the Corporation on one of your letterheads. Address these to me as City Electrician and send me a power of attorney to receive the money and receipt to your name." PABC, McMicking Correspondence, Outward, 1888-1890, p. 100. See also Royal Commission in the Matter of an Inquiry into the Conduct of the Affairs of the Municipal Corporation of Victoria, *Report*, British Columbia Legislative Assembly, *Sessional Papers*, 1892 (Victoria: Queen's Printer, 1892), p. 488, p. ciii.

<sup>26</sup> *Colonist*, 7 July 1889, 2 May 1890, 30 September 1890. *Annual Report of . . . Mayor . . . 1889* (Victoria, 1890), p. 7.

the municipal election of 1891 concentrated on the inefficiency of the existing system rather than on the principle of municipal ownership. "Let the corporation confine its lighting operations to the streets, and let private enterprise look after the rest," declared the *Colonist*. "When the Corporation proves its efficiency by having the streets well lighted at all proper seasons it will be time enough to talk of adding to the duties and responsibilities of the lighting department." Despite this indictment, McKillican won his seat. In the mayoralty campaign, the voters soundly rejected Alex Wilson, a moral reformer who advocated municipal ownership, but they may also have opposed his call for temperance and Sunday closing.<sup>27</sup>

The new council did nothing about acquiring further lighting operations until the summer of 1891, when it asked the ratepayers to authorize the borrowing of \$50,000 to improve the street lights. Repeating its earlier charge of civic inefficiency, the *Colonist* preferred "to give the work to a private company" but agreed with the *Times*' assessment of false economy in not improving the lights. However, the 15 per cent of the ratepayers who bothered to vote rejected the bylaw almost two to one. When the Electric Light Committee repeated its request for funds to improve the lighting system in 1892 and again in 1893, the citizens were again apathetic. On both occasions a small turnout of voters refused to authorize the necessary expenditure.<sup>28</sup>

When the deteriorating system continued to cause complaints, the Electric Light Company suggested the city might save approximately \$14,000 per annum by purchasing the lighting system of the National Electric Tramway and Lighting Company<sup>29</sup> and amalgamating it with the city system. A civic investigation revealing the company's assets to be worth less than it claimed ended that idea. Apparently without considering the Tramway Company's offer to supply electricity for street lighting from its new plant and proposed Goldstream hydro-electric development, the Light Committee simply decided to change the distribution of its lamps and replace the Ball lights with Brush lights at an estimated cost of \$2,000 as soon as the necessary funds were on hand. Although the modesty of this proposal seemed to reflect the wishes of the ratepayers in depressed times, dissatisfaction with the street lights contributed to the defeat of

<sup>27</sup> *Colonist*, 11 January 1891, 19 January 1891; *Times*, 10 January 1891; *Annual Report of . . . Mayor . . . 1890* (Victoria, 1891), p. 54.

<sup>28</sup> *Colonist*, 14 August 1891; *Times*, 17 August 1891, 19 August 1892, 20 August 1892, 23 August 1892.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to the street railway franchise, the city guaranteed \$40,000 worth of tramway bonds.

Mayor Beaven, who blamed the inadequacies of the light on a tardy supplier, and of Alderman McKillican, the chairman of the Light Committee, when they presented themselves for re-election early in 1894.<sup>30</sup>

After the new council took office, the N.E.T. & L. Company again offered to light the city and even hinted it might negotiate terms for taking over the city's plant. At the same time, the Victoria Electric Illuminating Company and the Gas Company also offered their services. At a special meeting to consider these offers, the Electric Light Committee, acting on the advice of an expert electrician, C. H. Stickles, announced the city could produce light more cheaply than the companies because it had greater borrowing powers and did not have to pay dividends or taxes. The committee recommended replacing most of the city's lighting plant at an estimated minimum cost of \$49,000 to improve efficiency, to prevent a breakdown of the overtaxed system and to allow for expansion. Both the *Times* and the *Colonist* endorsed council's decision to seek the ratepayers' permission to borrow the necessary \$55,000 as "a measure of real economy" since these improvements would double capacity at little additional operating cost. For the first time in years, the voters showed some interest in a lighting bylaw and voted three to one in favour of it.<sup>31</sup>

What had caused this change in attitude? The improved lighting system, of course, promised economy and efficiency and had been presented as a carefully prepared and specific proposal. Confirmation of the city scheme may also have reflected opposition to the N.E.T. & L. Company's related tramway operations and its effective monopoly of them as much as it demonstrated a positive interest in public ownership. In an editorial written shortly after the passage of the bylaw, the *Times* suggested the vote was "a protest, effective and complete, against the presumptuous attempt of a private interest to defeat the well understood wishes of the public" by actively campaigning against the bylaw. Arguing that the public should control monopolies, the *Times* warned that if Victoria had defeated the bylaw it would soon be giving the "ambitious" tramway company the right to provide street lights on as exclusive a basis as that on which it operated the street cars. Despite continuing problems with the street lights and controversy over the site for a new plant, the voters reconfirmed their belief in the civic project in 1895 by agreeing to transfer \$10,000 from

<sup>30</sup> *Colonist*, 18 May 1893, 8 August 1893, 4 January 1894, 11 January 1894.

<sup>31</sup> C. T. Dupont, president, N.E.T. & L. Company to H. A. Munn, chairman, Electric Light Committee, 26 February 1894, PABC, N.E.T. & L. Company, Correspondence Outward. *Times*, 3 March 1894, 5 March 1894, 17 March 1894, 21 March 1894; *Colonist*, 9 March 1894.

funds set aside for a crematorium to meet unexpected additional costs in improving the street lights. Though objecting to the diversion of these funds, the *Times* summed up the essence of the ratepayers' position when it said, "the completion of the electric light system is an absolute necessity."<sup>32</sup>

Victoria had been slow to adopt gas street lighting and was prepared to turn it off to force concessions from the Gas Company. The prospects of electricity, the growth of the city and its aspirations to remain Canada's leading Pacific Coast city convinced Victorians to retain electric street lighting. Hostility to the Gas Company made them especially receptive to experimentation with a new technology. They were among the first Canadians to have electric lighting and they were among the first to treat electric street lighting as a municipally owned public work. In this they showed greater sympathy to British than to American ideas but their adoption of municipal ownership had pragmatic rather than ideological motives. They had been unhappy with the rates and services of the Gas Company, whose profits they believed to be exorbitant. In addition, local entrepreneurs who took the initial risk but who lacked operating capital promoted the idea of municipal ownership. As well, persuasive arguments were presented from time to time suggesting the city could operate the street lighting plant more economically than any profit-making concern. The difficulties with the city plant and the never-ending expense and dissatisfaction of working with an experimental technology did not encourage the city to venture further into the field of municipal ownership of electrical utilities. By getting the electric street light early and by buying out the plant, Victoria accomplished its original goal of checking the Gas Company. The pride of being in the vanguard of cities enjoying the latest nineteenth century technological development was incidental.

<sup>32</sup> *Times*, 21 March 1894, 18 March 1895.