

Fabian Tract No. 190.

Metropolitan Borough Councils

THEIR CONSTITUTION, POWERS AND
DUTIES.

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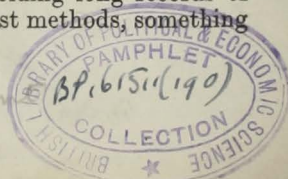
The Metropolitan Borough Councils, 28 in number, were constituted under the London Government Act 1899 to take the place of the chaotic collection of Boards of Works and Vestries, which covered the 120 square miles of London, that had grown up round the cities of London and Westminster. Of varying size, ranging from Holborn, with under 50,000, to Islington and Wandsworth, with over 300,000, they are of very different character. Some contain 90 per cent. of wage earners, others are almost entirely middle class. Some are natural units of government, others like Lambeth are amalgamations of a number of communities with little common interest to unite them. Some have a rateable value of only £5 or £6 a head while Westminster has over £40. Westminster is a City and Kensington a Royal Borough, while the City of London with its old constitution, long traditions, great wealth, and practical independence, stands apart from the London County Council on the one hand, and the Metropolitan Boroughs on the other.

The Metropolitan Borough differs from the municipal borough in the provinces in its powers and duties, which are more restricted, the London County Council, the Metropolitan Asylums Board, the Metropolitan Water Board, and the Port of London Authority performing some of the functions which in provincial boroughs of a similar size and population would fall to the Borough Council.

CONSTITUTION.

A Borough Council consists of a Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors. The Mayor is chosen by the Council, not necessarily from its members. He holds office for a year from November 9th, but may be re-elected any number of times. It naturally usually happens that the Mayor is selected from the predominant political party in the Council. In some cases, an honorarium, generally about £200, is paid by the Council towards the expenses of the office. Aldermen form one-sixth of the Council. They are selected by the Council, sometimes from its own members of long service or failing health, to whom the hard work of an election is an undue strain; sometimes from the unsuccessful candidates who secured the highest number of votes; sometimes from other persons of distinction or persons holding long records of social service locally. With regard to the two last methods, something

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may be said for each. On the one hand the selection of the most nearly successful of the rejected candidates is claimed as the more democratic expedient, as realising most nearly the ascertained wishes of the electorate. On the other hand, it is maintained by many, that all the best people will never be secured by the method of election, as the qualities that are valuable in administration are not necessarily those that are popular with an electorate, and, further, such persons may fail even to secure nomination, since their qualities make no strong appeal to the local political organisations, which naturally prefer a popular candidate and one who is committed heart and soul to their programme. Aldermen retain their seats for six years, one half retiring triennially but remaining eligible for re-election. Councillors may be either men or women, and must be local government electors or resident in the borough for twelve months, or be owners of property in the borough. They are elected on November 1st every three years by the local government electors. The qualifications to be on the electoral roll are :—

(a) A man who is on the last day of the qualifying period (six months), occupying as owner or tenant any land or premises and has so occupied it or them during the whole of the qualifying period. He must be 21 years of age.

(b) A woman as for a man and where she is the wife of a man so qualified. In the latter case she must be 30 years old.

The number of councillors varies with the size of the borough from 30 to 60.

The whole number retires every three years.

PROCEDURE.

The Council, like most other local authorities, transacts the greater part of its business through committees which meet fortnightly or monthly or when specially summoned. A committee is composed of from 10 to 24 members as a rule, and is presided over by a chairman, who is usually a member of the dominant party on the Council. Committees as a rule are composed in such a way as to reflect the composition of the Council as far as possible. They fix their own place and hour of meeting. Members of the Council may attend the meetings of any committee, but may only take part in the business by leave of the committee. The Mayor is *ex-officio* a member of all committees. Officials of the Council attend the various committees, but may be asked to withdraw at any time.

The only statutory committee is the Finance Committee, which has been given a very important position under Section 83 of the London Government Act, whereby no proposal to spend money can be considered by the Council except on an estimate submitted by this committee. The result of this provision is that all resolutions of a financial nature must pass the Finance Committee, and the most

important items of the agenda are those embodied in the recommendations of this committee. The proceedings of the various committees are circulated to the members, and at the council the Chairman of each Committee is responsible for moving any resolutions from his committee and explaining them.

The meetings of the council but not those of committees are open to the public and the Press.

OFFICERS OF THE COUNCIL.

The chief officers of the council are the town clerk (always a lawyer), the borough treasurer, the surveyor, the medical officer of health (who is a qualified medical man and also generally holds the Diploma of Public Health), a number of sanitary inspectors, the borough librarian, and the heads of any public utility undertaking, such as electricity supply. Under the heads of departments work the rate collectors, assistant engineers, clerks, and other black-coated workers, and the council's workmen.

BOROUGH COUNCIL FINANCE.

The council derives the money required to carry out its administration from the following sources:—

- (1) Income from property or trading enterprises.
- (2) Grants from the Imperial Exchequer.
- (3) Rates.

(1) Will be considered later under the head of permissive legislation.

(2) **Grants in Aid.**—As far as the actual work of the boroughs is concerned but little assistance is obtained from grants in aid beyond certain small payments under the Public Health Acts, including the salary of the Medical Officer of Health, and some contributions from the Ministry of Transport to roads, but indirectly the borough finance is relieved by the more extensive grants made to the larger London authorities without which their rates would be much higher.

(3) Rates are the principal source of income and are collected in a different method from that in provincial boroughs. Whereas in the provinces the money is obtained by precepts addressed to the overseers of the poor who make the rate, in London except where the unions concerned are not wholly contained in one borough, the borough council is the overseer and the boards of guardians obtain their money by precepts on the borough council.

The rating and valuation committee prepare valuations for the assessment of rates and the assessment committee fixes the assessment and hears appeals from the ratepayers against their decisions, and there is a further appeal, if desired, to the Justices in Quarter Sessions.

The chief work of the assessment committee occurs at the quinquennial assessment, and it is necessary to find members who can give up a lot of time in the day to this work. The same persons cannot be members of both the valuation and assessment committees, but it is useful to attend meetings of both in order to appreciate properly both branches of the work. The borough councils, besides the amounts required for their own work, collect the rates for all the other London authorities.

Rates vary greatly in the different boroughs, partly owing to differences in rateable value, partly to forward or retrograde policy, and partly owing to special local burdens. These inequalities are met to a very limited extent by the equalisation of rates fund made up from a rate of 6d. in the £ on the assessable value of London to which all boroughs contribute but from which they draw in proportion to population. A similar device is that of the Common Poor Fund whereby some equalisation of Poor Law expenses is obtained. In each of these cases in effect the rich boroughs pay and the poor boroughs receive.

ADMINISTRATION.

The functions of a Metropolitan Borough Council fall into two main divisions.

(1) The local administration of various acts or the determination of their local application through the council's representatives on other bodies.

(2) The initiation of measures for increasing the welfare of the community by the adoption of certain permissive legislation and the passing of local bye-laws in certain defined spheres of action, subject to ratification by the Home Office or the Ministry of Health.

Housing and Public Health.—The borough council is responsible, concurrently with the London County Council, for the initiation and pursuance of a housing policy. The borough council is the administrative authority for the execution of other provisions of the Housing Acts, the Infectious Diseases Notification and Prevention Acts, the Food and Drugs Acts, the Notification of Births Act, the Maternity and Child Welfare Act, and the sanitary provisions of the Factory and Workshops Acts. Their duties in these matters are performed through the sanitary inspectors who patrol the district on the look-out for breaches of the law. Offenders are usually warned in the first place, and given a chance of complying with the law. Prosecutions are initiated in glaring cases of wilful ignorance or transgression of the law or recalcitrance in remedying the illegalities pointed out by the inspectors. The borough council must provide or contract for the removal and disposal of refuse. This is either carted to barges, emptied into the river, used to make up marshy ground, or destroyed in an incinerator. Land made up in this manner should not be used for

building purposes. Some authorities classify their refuse and make a profit by selling the salvage. The drawback to this plan is the unsavoury and unhealthy raking over of the foul refuse by the workpeople at the destructor. In some districts it is found possible to utilise the heat of the incinerator for warming the water for the bathing and cleansing stations. Sometimes the sludge can be made into paving slabs. Refuse should be collected at least twice weekly. A daily collection is the ideal. Sanitary iron bins with air tight lids should be and are now used by the best authorities. Some authorities arrange for the separation of the refuse by the householder by the provision of three or more receptacles, one for dust, one for tins, and one for food refuse. If the sorting has to be done at the destructor, mechanical contrivances should be provided as far as possible and special clothing and baths at the destructor supplied for workmen. The preventive side of this work is also carried on by the publication of leaflets and the promotion of lectures, etc., on hygiene. The subjects of Housing and Public Health are dealt with in detail in other Tracts.

Highways.—The Borough Council is charged with the duty of maintaining the highways. This includes the provision and supervision of local drainage (the sewers of the main drainage system are managed by the London County Council), and the lighting, cleansing and paving of the streets. The occupier is responsible for cleansing the footway in front of his house. Some authorities have done much to brighten the streets by planting trees and cultivating flowering shrubs and hardy flowers in forecourts too small for use as public gardens, but there is still much room for improvement in the dinginess of the average London back street.

By the Private Street Works Act 1892 the Council may recover from the owners the expense of making private streets, and may decide to undertake this work wherever it is not satisfied with the condition of the street. The council may receive grants from the London County Council for widening main roads.

Tramway undertakings are under an obligation to keep in repair the surface of the road between and on either side of the track.

The borough council is also liable for the maintenance of footpaths, whether or not by the side of a road. Bridges are entrusted to the London County Council. Under the Development and Road Improvements Act of 1909 and 1910 for improving road facilities, grants are payable in relief of the large expense incurred by some authorities in the upkeep of roads over which there is very heavy traffic by extra-local vehicles, and for subsidising experiments in new materials. The expenditure on roads in the Metropolitan boroughs which contain the docks and markets, is of course altogether disproportionate to the benefit which they receive directly from the traffic which wears them out. Trams pay a contribution to the rates of the boroughs through which their lines are laid, but motor buses,

whose action is more devastating to the surface and who are free to choose and vary their routes and wear out one after another, at present make no direct local contribution except in respect of garages or other buildings in a borough. With the increasing number and weight of motor vehicles many serious difficulties of increasing urgency present themselves—the congestion of traffic during rush hours aggravated by lack of organisation for unloading vehicles from street to warehouse, the difficulty of securing a material which will withstand at once the sucking and grinding action of passenger and goods traffic. No doubt the new department of the Ministry of Transport will set to work on the relief of the congestion by laying out new routes and discovering new road material

REPRESENTATION ON OTHER BODIES.

Education in London devolves entirely on the London County Council, but the boroughs have the right to appoint one-third of the Managers of Provided Schools (those erected by the London County Council) and one-sixth of those of Non-provided (those erected and partially financed by a religious body in order to give sectarian religious instruction). The duties and rights of Managers are more apparent than real and are constantly being curtailed, but they provide an opportunity of becoming acquainted with the working and results of the elementary school system and limited facilities for gradual and slow penetration to the official mind and for the occasional initiation of minor improvements. It cannot be said, however, that the attitude of the London County Council to the suggestions of Managers offers much encouragement to an energetic person to devote himself to this work.

Distress Committees.—Under the Unemployed Workmen's Act, 1905, borough councils must appoint local distress committees which are to include co-opted persons, experienced in social work. The distress committee provides unskilled work for unemployed men and women and selects the applicants for it. Work is usually given to married people with large dependent families, for a few weeks at most, sometimes for a few days. It is difficult to devise work which does not still further depress the labour market by anticipating what would have been done on ordinary commercial lines at the fitting time, and owing to the inexperience of those assisted, such work proves more costly than when performed in the ordinary routine. Opinion is now favouring the provision of maintenance with training as successfully carried out in Queen Mary's Fund Workrooms during the period of distress at the beginning of the war. Those not in a position to profit by technical instruction can be taught the craft of a "handyman," or make things for themselves or other poor persons, who, as by reason of their poverty, they would not have the purchasing power to obtain them for themselves, will not disturb the stability of the labour market. Training can also be given in the elements of hygiene and the domestic

arts. The local distress committees are subordinate to the Central Unemployed Body for London on which they are represented.

The council is also represented on two committees which have been recently established as the result of the War—the Local Food Committee and the Local Profiteering Committee. Both of these are composed partly of members of the council, partly of representatives of special interests, women, labour and discharged soldiers. The duty of the former is concerned mainly with considering prices and supply of food in the area and in giving permission to retailers to open shops. The latter is an attempt to check the exploitation of the consumer by the local retailers and restitution of improper charges can be ordered. Representations can also be made as to profiteering by wholesalers and producers.

Metropolitan Water Board.—This body, set up by the Metropolitan Water Act, 1902, provides for the water supply of London and a large area of the environment (previously in the hands of a number of private companies). It has 68 members, 14 appointed by the London County Council, 2 from the City Corporation, 14 from outlying boroughs and urban district councils, 5 from other adjacent county councils and 29 from the metropolitan borough councils (Westminster sends 2). The Chairman and Vice-Chairman are co-opted and paid by the Board.

Old Age Pensions.—The borough councils take part in the administration of old age pensions through their representatives on the local pensions committees.

Police.—The police in London occupy an anomalous position over which the Londoner is apt to feel himself somewhat aggrieved. In the provinces the police are appointed and controlled by the standing joint committees of justices of the peace and county council members in the case of the county constabulary, and the watch committee (about one-third of members of the council and the mayor) in the case of borough police. One-half of the cost is defrayed by the Home Office, which inspects the efficiency of the force. In London, however, the police force is directly under the management of the Home Office and the local authorities have no control whatever over it, although they furnish half the cost of its maintenance.

London Traffic Advisory Committee.—As a result of representations by the Metropolitan Boroughs Standing Joint Committee, the Transport Minister has agreed to the appointment on the London Traffic Advisory Committee of a representative of the borough councils.

ADOPTIVE ACTS.

Open Spaces, etc.—Apart from the Royal Parks and those belonging to the City Corporation, the London County Council is the general authority for the maintenance of London's parks. By the Open Spaces Act, 1906, the local authorities may take over open spaces and burial

grounds (including those disused) from trustees or corporations. Local authorities may also acquire and maintain open spaces and burial grounds and make bye-laws for their management. Many parts of London are very inadequately supplied with open spaces. Here, as usual, the bugbear of the rates blocks the path. The initial cost of laying out the space is considerable, though, in some cases, the cost could be diminished by having the work done through the unemployed under the distress committee. The maintenance, besides the cost of planting, would in most districts, have to include the payment of at least one and probably two park-keepers. Mention should be made of the use of the town hall, baths or other public buildings of the council for recreational purposes. It has been the custom in some boroughs to allow certain individuals to book up the halls, etc., for a number of dates, thus restricting the opportunities of other citizens for using them for recreational, political or educational meetings, while the hirer of the hall doubtless makes his profit. Councillors should be on the watch against this. There is no reason why the Council should not make its halls real civic centres and give free concerts, etc., there. In the same way, bands could be provided in the parks and open-air dances and organised games for the children arranged.

Libraries.—By the Public Libraries Acts, 1902–1919, the borough council can provide and maintain a library or libraries with reference and lending departments. Formerly owing to the restriction of expenditure to the product of a penny rate, now removed by the 1919 Act, councils were much restricted in their action and were often indebted to private philanthropists for the provision of libraries. The annual expenditure in the poorer boroughs was insufficient to admit of paying proper salaries and keeping the library in an efficient condition. With the removal of this obstacle considerable development should be possible.

Wherever possible, the “open access system” should be adopted. Where this obtains, borrowers may walk through to the shelves and examine and choose books at their leisure. In some cases, structural alterations to counters and passages would be costly, and opposition is sometimes raised on the ground of the difficulties of supervision and the chance of a dishonest reader decamping with several books. However, districts which have the system do not appear to find their losses appreciably increased. The names and addresses of borrowers are, of course, registered, and it should be possible to trace systematic theft. The system should encourage the growth of serious study and wide research—habits at present unfamiliar to the English temperament. Many councils have a special juvenile section, in which children still at school are allowed to have boxes of books kept during term at the school under the supervision of the teachers and lent by them to the children. It is thought that this system encourages the children to become library readers when they leave school. It is usual to keep a Suggestion Book, in which readers may ask for special books to

be purchased. This arrangement does not appear to be so widely known to the public as might be expected. Library committees nearly always purchase a book asked for in this way unless its appeal would be to a very diminutive portion of ratepayers or its cost prohibitive, and in this way many students of navigation, engineering and other technical subjects may be helped to read books which it would be quite beyond their means to buy.

It is unfortunate that there is not more co-operation between borough councils in the provision of libraries. If boroughs would agree to specialize on certain subjects and allow the residents of other boroughs to use their libraries, a much wider selection of books would be provided.

Museums.—Where a part of the library can be used as a museum local patriotism, unfortunately, as a rule, so lacking in London as compared with the Midlands and the North, may be much stimulated. Many districts in London have sunk to their present mean aspect from a noble and stately origin, and past and civic pride may be again implanted by the remembrance of their former high estate. The museum would include any relics, coins preserved or excavated, old pictures and prints of old buildings or celebrities, the first railway trains used in the district, models of early sailing ships, etc.

Allotments.—Under the Small Holdings and Allotments Act, 1914, a Borough Council may provide allotments (the provision of Small Holdings—one acre to fifty acres—is in the hands of the County Council). An allotment must not exceed five acres, but is usually, of course, very much smaller—generally about ten poles. Any six registered Parliamentary electors or ratepayers may bring the matter to the notice of the Council, who must enquire into the extent of the demand. A considerable impetus was given by the war to the allotment movement, but now that the danger of actual starvation is past, it is to be feared that many Councils are seeking to revoke their grants of land or refuse further applicants. There are, of course, many districts where it is very difficult to find land for this purpose. The Vacant Lots Cultivation Society has done a great deal to make vacant building land temporarily available for agriculture. Experience has shown that crops will grow on the most unlikely-looking spots in London, and there is scope for valuable work in this direction.

Baths and Washhouses.—By the Baths and Washhouses Acts, 1846, 1878, 1882, and 1899, any ten electors may petition the Council to provide the foregoing. The buildings usually include swimming baths, private hot and cold baths, including soap, towels, etc.,—usually termed slipper baths—and washhouses for family laundry work. The general supervision of the machinery, etc., is in the hands of the borough engineer; under him are the superintendent and matron, usually a joint appointment held by a man and wife. The superintendent is generally an engineer or naval stoker, or someone experienced in such matters. He and the matron are responsible for the routine efficiency

and order of the baths, control the staff and arrange for the visits of other swimming clubs, galas, etc. It has lately been recognised that swimming baths may be a source of infection for diphtheria, typhoid and other diseases, and some authorities use a disinfectant in the water. The charge for swimming and private baths is usually from 2d. to 1s., according to the facilities and amenities provided. The charge at the washhouse section is usually 1½d. per hour. This generally includes continuous hot water, a trough sink for washing, mangle and wringer, hot air drying cupboard—one for the use of each person—which dries the clothes in about twenty minutes, and hot irons to complete the process. The washhouse is unquestionably an immense boon to those who have to live in a house with one kitchen-living-room almost totally devoid of facilities for laundry work, which makes the room hot and unhealthy and often causes bronchitis and chills to the children of the family. A difficulty is sometimes experienced in preventing the professional laundress from plying her trade by means of this subsidy from the ratepayers, and some authorities, in order to check this practice, limit the number of hours that may be worked by any one washer to what is supposed to suffice only for family washing.

Some authorities now provide facilities for mixed bathing at the swimming baths. This is generally much appreciated, opportunities for healthy athletics in London being all too few.

Baths and washhouses are now finding themselves in a difficult position owing to the high price and shortage of coal. Londoners do not usually appreciate a swimming bath under 70 deg., and the cost of raising a large volume of cold water to this temperature and maintaining a continuous flow of hot water in the washhouses is considerable. Some authorities are meeting it by opening only for a limited number of days per week.

MUNICIPAL TRADING.

This term is applied to the provision by a local authority of any service which shows a profit and loss account—as distinct from such services as public health or street paving, which, although necessary and beneficial, cannot be expressed in such terms. The advantages claimed are: the provision of a better and cheaper service, while profits go to the relief of the rates instead of to private employers and shareholders. The chief service provided in this way by the Metropolitan Borough Councils is electric power, lighting and heating, at a cost much below that of private companies. Another service provided in two or three cases is that of a municipal market. Since the outbreak of profiteering during the war many authorities have encouraged the promotion and semi-formalising of street markets, for which they charge a small rent per stall and afford protection and guarantee continuity of tenure.

Some authorities now give a bonus to all officials and workmen in the electricity undertaking. It is claimed that this gives them

an "interest" in the success of the scheme and prevents slacking, carelessness with tools and machinery, and so forth. On the other hand it is manifestly unfair to employees in other departments—*e.g.*, public health, roads—which show no profit, and is thought to lead to quarrelling and jealousy among the workmen, every one watching his neighbour to see that he does his bit and pressing for his discharge if he seems likely to lower the standard of the fastest and cleverest workers. Labour representatives usually oppose this innovation.

THE BOROUGH COUNCIL AS AN EMPLOYER.

Labour and Socialist representatives have always been quick to see the value of the borough council as an agent in levelling up wages and conditions of labour. In many districts the borough council is about the largest employer of labour, and thus has the pick of the working population, and other employers must offer as good, or better, terms if they are to secure good workpeople. The wages of practically all the skilled or semi-skilled grades of workers are now fixed by conciliation agreements, and the only cases that are likely to prove difficult are those of employees who have no recognised occupational rate and are not organised in one union such as bath and lavatory attendants, dustmen, etc. It is very desirable that councils should get together and fix definite rates rather than that each should follow its own sweet will. Owing to London Government having been in reactionary hands so long there has grown up among municipal workers a habit of playing one authority off against the other, very understandable but very inconvenient for Labour Councillors. While it is, of course, necessary to give good conditions of labour, the rates paid should not, in general, exceed those paid to similar workers by the best firms in private undertakings. Most authorities, too, now have a "Fair Wages Clause" inserted in their contracts, by which all work executed for them must conform to Trade Union conditions, or, failing a Trade Union, to those customarily in force under good employers in the district. This is a powerful lever in improving conditions and in diffusing knowledge of the wages and hours obtainable. A word of warning must here be given on the position of the middle-grade and higher officials of the Council. Most Labour and Socialist representatives are ready to strain every nerve to obtain advances in wages for workmen, but are apt to think that officials should be paid the lowest sum for which anyone to fill the post can be obtained. Whatever the ethics of the case and the ideal desirability of a simpler and cheaper life for such officials, it must be insisted that it is impossible to have municipal work satisfactorily and successfully performed unless salaries are paid approximating to those obtaining in the private business world. Nor will the work of the Council run smoothly if its officials do it under a sense of injury and lack of appreciation. It is even more important that councils where labour is in control should secure the services of the very best

men as officials since extended municipal enterprise, which they have advocated on the platform for so many years, is now on its trial, and if it fails, through lack of directive ability, may be discredited and get no similar chance of development, since high rates must be justified by high efficiency—for many years to come.

A rule has sometimes been made by local authorities that all their employees must live in the borough. The reasons given for this proviso are that those primarily interested in the borough as residents and ratepayers should have the first claim to employment there, and that a district deteriorates financially and socially if its more prosperous inhabitants in good regular work move away to be replaced by a poorer class of resident. It is doubtful how far this is a wise provision. It tends to check the natural flow of population, presses hardly in individual cases and, where the employee can afford it, can be easily evaded by renting one room in the borough but actually residing elsewhere. It is, of course, necessary that certain employees—*e.g.*, in the electricity undertakings—should live in the borough near to the work to attend to breakdowns, as a condition of their employment.

Many councils have a scheme of pensions and superannuations. There is much to be said for and against this plan. It is undoubtedly pleasant to think that the workman may look forward to old age without undue apprehension and may feel secure from the storms of the ordinary labour market. But a pension scheme aggravates the tendency to engage only young workers in the prime of life (in order to keep it actuarially sound), and thus adds to the already serious difficulty of the middle-aged man or woman in obtaining work if he has lost a permanent job through any misfortune. Further, it may lead to the retention of a comparatively slack or incompetent workman, because no one likes to be hard-hearted enough to deprive him of his expectation. And it may prevent a workman, discontented and believing himself capable of greater things, from leaving because "he doesn't want to give up something he has paid for."

Problems facing a Borough Councillor.—Probably all Labour representatives have observed the efforts made to promote the supply of electricity centrally by a company instead of through the machinery of the borough councils. It is claimed that a cheaper and more efficient service could be provided, and that this, as in the case of the provision of water by the Metropolitan Water Board, furnishes an instance of different authorities combining through representation to supply a service over a whole area which they jointly control. It may be doubted whether in the case of this or of the electricity proposals a case of the wisdom of each at the disposal of all would be illustrated, but pressure on these lines is threatening in the immediate future, and Labour representatives must study the question and take a definite stand on one side or the other. The present quality and price of gas supply a warning against trusting such services to a private company, even with the safeguards provided by special legislation.

Analogous to this is the conflict of opinion between the Local Government Devolution Party and the Centralisers. One may remember in this connection the recent proposal of the London County Council to take over all the public health powers of the borough councils, leaving them only those now exercised by the Poor Law Guardians. The Centralisers will point to certain backward local bodies, to the greater risk of bribery, corruption and intimidation in "parish politics" where secrets leak out more easily and interested parties know each other more intimately and can more readily exert influence; to the duplication of officials and administration. The devolutionist will point to the scandals and long overdue reforms to be found even in great central authorities, to the congestion of their business, which is almost a byword, and may claim that on the large scale on which their operations are conducted large frauds also are possible. On his behalf, too, it may be urged that the humbler sphere of the borough council provides a testing station for isolating and proving experiments which would not be attempted by a body with a larger area and greater responsibilities; that the control by the County Council, Ministry of Health and Home Office should suffice to keep their feet fairly well in the path of duty, and that the greater local knowledge and local interest available in a small district may be an advantage as well as a disadvantage.

THE BOROUGH COUNCIL AS A TRAINING GROUND.

The borough council is by no means to be despised as a training ground for the social reformer or the aspirant to Parliamentary honours. Perhaps had every legislator had the experience of following his laws home to roost, seeing the difficulties of enforcing them, the hardships involved to the conscientious, the loopholes through which the hardened lawbreaker will successfully slip, he would think at least twice before voting for the next new law. Local administration at least teaches the inability of an act of Parliament to make human nature good—unless it has been very skilfully framed! On the other hand, his respect for the adaptability of the human brain would be greatly strengthened by seeing the success which attends the efforts, guided, of course, by their officials, and schemes of grocers, small manufacturers, labourers and those whom he would generally regard as "uneducated and ignorant" people. He would also gain the very human satisfaction of "getting things done" and "seeing them work," which is possible in a small area and the absence of which is the most depressing element in "national" work. Anyone with the time and interest for local problems will find his ambitions fulfilled in the work of a borough councillor. Sometimes in the past, no doubt from being only in an ineffective minority, Labour men have been inclined to interest themselves rather in securing better wages and conditions for workers than in mastering the larger problems with which they are faced. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of a councillor's

taking a real interest in the work that he controls—not only in the committee room and council chamber, but in the generating station, the disinfecting station, the work department. If he has a personal knowledge of the working out of the proposals he puts forward, he will be far more likely to carry his committee with him than if he had advanced them merely academically, and if he can convince officials that he has a genuine interest in their work for its own sake, and that he is not using his position simply as a vantage ground in the game of local politics, he will find that they will make it easy for him to acquire that personal knowledge. It is true that before any important alteration to the council's property can be carried out, the committee is taken to view the property—in a comfortable way in motor cars—but though this is important it is not nearly so valuable as a visit paid in the course of a normal working day.

A word should be added on the importance of a councillor attending committee meetings with regularity and being determined not to leave a meeting until the subject in which he is interested has been dealt with satisfactorily. Many a proposal has been carried in committee or council because its advocates were prepared to forfeit their suppers and its opponents were not.

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