

WOMEN AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN ENGLAND AND WALES.

A Reprint, by kind permission, from "The International Woman Suffrage News" of January, 1918.

The motive which first impelled women to take an active part in modern local government was compassion, for it was compassion which made Miss Mary Carpenter (1807—1877) the pioneer in industrial schools for children, and Miss Louisa Twining the pioneer in humanising the management of our workhouses and Poor Law infirmaries. The motive has not lost its old potency, and added thereto is the compelling conviction, strongly felt by some early workers, that for the just and efficient administration of local government the co-operation of women with men as members of local authorities is essential.

Nothing can here be said of the various ancient rights of women in local government, unless it be that for centuries women took part in the local vestries, and had duties as well as rights; and that women burgesses could vote in municipal elections until the Parliament of 1835 took from women the municipal vote, restored to them by Parliament in 1869—a restitution not unrelated to the demand of that day for women's parliamentary enfranchisement.

The Education Act of 1870 established School Boards. To the first London School Board two women were elected, and some women to other Boards.

The Local Government Board was created in 1871, with Mr. Stansfeld as its first President. In January, 1873, Mr. Stansfeld appointed Mrs. Nassau Senior as the first woman Poor Law Inspector. Officials stood aghast; "she was the first woman who ever obtained a high salaried appointment among men, and on the same terms, in one of the most difficult departments of the State." Her report inaugurated a new era for pauper children, and to that beginning and to Miss Twining's exertions may be traced the movement in favour of women Poor Law Guardians, of whom the first was elected in 1875.

The year 1888, in which County Councils were by law established, saw the inception of the Women's Local Government Society as a committee for placing women on the London County Council. The women candidates, Lady Sandhurst and Miss Cobden, obtained good majorities, and the Council co-opted Miss Cons as Alderman. True, these three ladies served but a few months, for ere long the Court of Queen's Bench, and subsequently the Appeal Court, declared that, by the proper interpretation of the law, women were by implication ineligible; but the result of their good work, and of Miss Cons' continued aid, given informally, to the Housing and other Committees, was that the London County Council became the steadfast and powerful advocate of the eligibility of women.

District and Parish Councils were created by the Local Government Act, 1894, which altered the constitution of Boards of Guardians and gave to the London Vestries the status of District Councils. The new franchise created was manifestly unfair to women, for it was made by adding the Parliamentary Register to the Local Government Register of 1888. An excellent new feature was the provision of a purely residential qualification for candidates for all bodies under the Act. Mr. Walter McLaren succeeded in obtaining for married women a measure of relief from disability, both as to electing

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and as to being elected. Finally, the Act contained explicit provision for the eligibility of women to all bodies to which it related. The effect of these changes was to increase fivefold in one year the number of women Guardians (169 becoming 875), and to provide some Rural District Councillors; to place at least eighty-one women on Parish Councils, nine on Urban District Councils, and thirteen on the London Vestries.

Unfortunately, when the London Government Act of 1899 transformed the Vestries into London Borough Councils—making little change save in name—the Jockey Club determined that women should be excluded, and had their way, and the disability continued until 1907.

In 1907 and in 1914 two reforms promoted by the Women's Local Government Society were carried, which jointly achieved all that was needed to make complete, legally and practically, the eligibility of women, married and single, to all local government authorities. The former measure removed the remaining legal disqualifications, and the latter provided that the "residential qualification" should be available for members of County and Borough Councils. The indebtedness of women to Dr. J. G. Shipman, then M.P. for Northampton, can scarcely be over-rated. The Bill for 1907 had the unique distinction of being the only "women's Bill" ever mentioned in the King's Speech.

In August, 1914, the war broke out, and therefore the elections in which it had been hoped that the new residential qualification would be so useful did not take place, nor have there subsequently been any but by-elections.

When, after the war, elections of local authorities again are held, it should be possible to increase immensely the number of women councillors. (1) There will be the residential qualification. (2) Much new work has been, and is being, entrusted to the Councils, for which women's co-operation is especially needed—in the directions of public health, housing, education, employment, and "reconstruction" generally. (3) Public opinion is more enlightened. (4) The Representation of the People Bill will, we hope, become law; and, if the Local Government Franchise is that provided by the House of Commons, there will be a vast accession of women voters, so that the women electors may be two-fifths of the total electorate, and include for the first time a great number of mothers from thirty years of age upwards.

Very able women are serving on every type of Local Government Authority, but the number as yet is absurdly small. To place only one woman on each County, County Borough, (non-county) Borough, and Urban District Council that as yet has no woman member, would require not only women candidates, but work in 1,160 areas. In this reckoning, Rural District and Parish Councils are not included; nor are the 185 Unions with no women Guardian, some of which are not Rural.

There is scope for the work of all organisations which approach the task with the aim of increasing the efficiency of local government through the co-operation with men of women of high character and independent mind.

M. S. KILGOUR.

Published by the Women's Local Government Society. Office: 19, Tothill Street, Westminster, S.W. 1. Price 1d. each or 3d. per dozen, Postage extra.

PRINTED BY PERCY BROTHERS, LTD., MANCHESTER AND LONDON.

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