

THE PUBLIC HEALTH.

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BILL.

The House of Commons during the last Session of Parliament was largely occupied in the consideration of that much-discussed measure the "Local Government Bill." Enthusiastically supported, and as greatly detested, it is impossible in the brief space at our disposal to enumerate the pros and cons of a Bill the discussion of which takes up a large portion of space in many issues of the Parliamentary Debates, or even to give a résumé of its provisions, which we recommend all interested to study in the Debates for themselves.

Its import was thus summarised by the Minister of Health (the Right Hon. Neville Chamberlain, M.P.), when he moved the Second Reading of the Bill on November 26th:—

"When you consider the magnitude of the changes which it proposes, the variety of the interests that are affected and its possible results upon the prosperity of the country, and indeed the social welfare of the whole people, I think it must be reckoned among the greatest Measures which have been presented to any Parliament for many years." He said further:—

"During the four years that I have sat in the chair of the Presidents of the old Local Government Board it has been dawning upon me with ever-increasing force that, splendid as is our system of local government, it is to-day in many respects obsolete and out of date. Sitting there at the centre of things, I can see the cracks and the flaws in the machinery; I can hear its creaks and groans. I can note how in one place the load has been growing and growing, until it has become far greater than the shaft that was originally designed can hoist. In another place I can see remnants of old gears designed long ago which now only serve to weaken and to hamper the working of the more modern plant. It seems to me that local government to-day cries aloud for reform, and in this Measure which I am presenting to the House this afternoon we have a great scheme which is divided into various parts, some of which, perhaps, may seem to have little reference to one another, yet they are all parts of a whole, and in their turn each of them will do something to oil the wheels, to ease the way and to bring up the output of the machine both in quantity and quality to something far superior to what we are able to get to-day.

"This Measure will have to be thoroughly and critically examined, but before we can examine the remedy it is necessary to diagnose the disease, and I would like, before I begin my examination of the Bill, to lay before the House what seem to me after the experience—the almost unique experience—I have had in my present office, to be the main defects from which local government in this country is suffering to-day. . . . First of all, I put the continued existence of the guardians among other local authorities with functions that overlap one another, and presiding over areas the boundaries of which cross the boundaries of the other local authorities, giving rise to confusion, to waste and to inefficiency. . . .

"Let me now begin with the Poor Law, and see how this Bill proposes to deal in turn with that and the other defects to which I have alluded. The trouble with the Poor Law is the same to-day as it was in 1834 in respect of the fact that the charges for Poor Law, which fluctuate violently from time to time and which are largely beyond the control of the authorities who have to meet them, fall upon areas so small that the burden is apt to become suddenly and completely crushing.

"There is the question of the overlapping. From time to time Parliament has entrusted to the major local authorities a responsibility for the prevention or the treat-

ment of various diseases. There is tuberculosis. There is the charge of lunatics and mental deficient. There are the great maternity and child welfare services. And yet every one of those things has to be dealt with also by the guardians in the discharge of their duties, and we have this remarkable and paradoxical circumstance, that the question of whether a person shall receive treatment at the hands of the county borough or the county council, or whether he shall receive it under the Poor Law from the guardians, depends not upon the nature or need of his infirmities, but merely upon whether he is destitute or not. Hon. Members who are not familiar with the history of this subject might almost suppose, from some of the criticisms that have been made in the country, that a proposal to abolish the boards of guardians and transfer their functions to the councils of counties and county boroughs was some invention of the present Minister of Health. I cannot claim the authorship of any such idea as that, but I may say this. I have inherited it, because I have been interested to discover, and perhaps it might interest the House to know also, that in the year 1888, when the Local Government Bill was under discussion, Mr. Joseph Chamberlain called the attention of the House to the omission from the Bill of any proposal to hand over to the county council the functions of the guardians. . . .

"I would that Conservative Governments had lent a more ready ear to the counsels of my forbear. It would have saved his son a world of trouble, and it would have saved the House a good many debates which have certainly been trying to the temper and have been singularly futile in results."

If the Bill becomes law, and there appears to be every likelihood that it will, it cannot fail to affect profoundly Nurses working in Poor Law Institutions. They should therefore keep themselves acquainted with the progress of the Bill, and its bearing on themselves individually.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF TROPICAL MEDICINE.

At the International Congress of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, held in Cairo last month, convened by the Egyptian Government, and opened by the King of Egypt, on the occasion of the centenary of the foundation of the Kasr el Aini School of Medicine, the following resolution was unanimously carried.

(1) That in view of the importance of anthropometric and morphological studies, not only to the classification of human races, but also to the ethnological aptitude of individuals, faculties and schools of medicine in tropical countries should specially study this question;

(2) That in view of the fact that leprosy is a disease menacing humanity, the Governments of all nations represented in the Congress should be invited to co-operate in systematic fashion to combat leprosy on the lines of discovering persons suffering from the disease, of organising intensive ambulation treatment for early cases not discharging any organisms, of isolating comfortably lepers in an infectious stage, and of periodically inspecting their relatives.

THE HEALTH COMMITTEE OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS.

The Report of the Health Committee of the League of Nations, presented at a meeting of the Council at Lugano last month, dealt principally with alcoholism and the proper attitude of the League in dealing with it. Another interesting Report was that on the work of the International Conference on sleepy sickness, which had been charged with the work of framing a programme of research and preventive measures.

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