

The National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution.

President: THE VERY REV. THE DEAN OF NORWICH.

Treasurer: MR. J. A. DAWES, L.C.C., M.P.

Hon. Secretary: MRS. SIDNEY WEBB, D.LITT.

Offices: 37, NORFOLK STREET, STRAND, LONDON, W.C.

QUESTIONS FOR BOROUGH COUNCIL CANDIDATES.

SIR,

In connection with your candidature for the representation of this Ward in the Town Council, I should be obliged if you would be good enough to read the appended short statement as to the work of the Town Council; and inform me whether you find yourself in general agreement with it.

I fully appreciate the importance of candidates refraining from committing themselves in advance upon questions that will come before them in the Council, and, therefore, I do not ask you for any pledge as to the way you will vote.

I venture to hope, under these circumstances, that you will consider my request (for some indication of the present opinions of those who seek to become my representatives on questions which seem to me of vital importance) to be one with which you can properly comply. If you prefer not to express any opinion on the appended statement, may I, at any rate, ask what your views are with regard to the main proposals, so far as concerns this Borough, of the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission?

Awaiting the favour of an early answer, preferably by return of the form given on the last page,

I am,

Yours faithfully,

Name of Local Resident

Address

The National Committee for the Prevention
of Destitution
London, 27, Norfolk Street, Strand, W.C.
Telephone No. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 78, 79, 80, 81, 82, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100

QUESTIONS FOR BOROUGH COUNCIL CANDIDATES.

Further particulars, and prompt
answer to any enquiry, will be
sent on application to the Hon.
Secretary, National Committee
for the Prevention of Destitution,
37, Norfolk Street, London, W.C.

Your obedient servant,
The Secretary

WHAT HAS THE TOWN COUNCIL TO DO WITH THE PREVENTION OF DESTITUTION?

By "COUNCILLOR."

I was talking the other day with a candidate for a seat on the town council of his borough, when he startled me with the question, What has the town council to do with the prevention of destitution?

It seems that someone had "heckled" him at a meeting about the part that the town council had to play in the crusade against destitution—rather to the surprise of those who were thinking of the town council only as concerned with streets and sewers, and parks and police and rates. We have not always sufficiently borne in mind that Parliament has entrusted to the town council extraordinarily wide powers for the good order of the whole life of the borough. Thus, it is to the town council that is given the greater part of the duty of securing to every person within the borough what has been called the "national minimum" of the conditions of healthy and civilised life. This duty is, at present, very imperfectly performed.

Take, first, the national minimum of health. This is wholly confided to the town council, with powers more ample than any councillor dreams of. It is the bounden duty of the health committee, under the Public Health Acts, to see that every dwelling house within the borough is so constructed and maintained as to be healthy; that it is properly built, properly drained, and kept properly without nuisance; that it is provided with proper water-supply and sanitary accommodation; that the backyards are properly paved and properly kept; and that the ash-pits are kept in a proper state, and regularly emptied at proper intervals. It is the plain duty of the committee to have a sufficient staff to do all this work with efficiency and despatch. It may not be easy to cope instantaneously with the results of past neglect of duty. Moreover, there are occasionally insanitary conditions which the law does not yet prohibit. But, speaking broadly, *there is no excuse, in any municipal borough, for the continued existence of any positively insanitary conditions even in the poorest streets or houses.* It means only that the town councillors are not fully doing their duty.

But the health committee has much more to do. *It is its duty to see that sickness is prevented.* It is a mistake to suppose that its powers are limited to what are called the infectious diseases. The medical officer of health is responsible for preventing *all* preventable diseases within the borough. The health committee ought to be seeing to it, in every town, by using its supervisory powers under the Midwives Act (and, like Liverpool and Manchester, Cardiff and St. Helens, paying for the doctor compulsorily sent for in emergencies), that all women in childbirth are properly attended to; it ought to be insisting that the medical officer of health and his staff (by using the birth notifications, the organised visits of volunteer health visitors, the municipal "milk clinic," and its adjunct, the "school for mothers") are responsible for preventing any infant in the whole borough from being improperly treated, or allowed to pine away; it ought to be taking care—again by its health visitors, its school notifications, and its sanitary inspections—that no person who begins to be ill goes without proper medical attendance, proper skilled nursing, suitable hospital treatment where expedient, and any necessary stay in a convalescent home. Parliament has expressly given the town council power to see to these things. These powers are not limited to the infectious diseases, but even in the infectious diseases town councils are failing as yet to put them in force (notably as regards consumption, measles, and whooping cough). There are no such words of limitation in the Public Health Acts. A town council is as free to provide municipal hospitals (as Barry and Widnes have done) for one disease as for another; and where it has already a hospital, it is as free to take in patients suffering from one disease as those suffering from another. If any persons are needing hospital treatment and unable to get it, the town council is at fault.

Moreover, its powers are not limited to hospital treatment. Town councils up and down the country are here and there providing, in some cases, outdoor patients' departments or dispensaries; in other cases domiciliary medical attendance and medicine; in others, the services of skilled nurses in the patients' own homes. It is the fundamental business of the health committee to prevent all disease—to prevent its occurrence, to prevent its continuance, to prevent its recurrence in the same person or in others, and to prevent its communication to anyone else. What steps a town council will take for this purpose are very largely within its discretion. If the lack of skilled attendance or nursing is causing preventable disease and death to occur within the

borough, if such a lack is *causing disease to continue* or to recur when its continuance or recurrence could be prevented (and where is the town in which this is not the case?), the town councillor should be asked to show cause why he is not to be condemned for failing to exercise his legal powers of prevention. Why has not the medical officer of health been set to work? A person suffering from any serious illness, who is not actually getting the medical attendance or nursing *necessary to prevent him from getting worse*, is a danger not only to himself, but to the community to which his services are due; and he presents a case of emergency in which all the wide general powers of the statutes may be used by the medical officer of health, as a matter really of saving life. It is not sufficient to refer the case to the poor law. The board of guardians is not charged to prevent either the occurrence or the continuance of disease, and has no sanitary duty beyond "medical relief." It is not even its business to cure the patient, still less to prevent the recurrence of disease, or to lower the town's death rate. All this is the duty of the medical officer of health and his assistants, of the health committee, and of the town council itself. We have been too apt to assume that everybody can afford to pay for his own doctor. It is the business of a town councillor to press for the fullest possible use of the Public Health Acts as regards even the incipient stage of disease—*any disease or ailment whatsoever*—so that no person within the borough, old or young, rich or poor, shall be allowed to fall into a state of ill-health without such help as the municipal doctor and the municipal nurse, and where necessary the municipal hospital and the municipal sanatorium, can (whether gratuitously or at such a fee as his means will allow) afford to his case.

Consider next the children of school age. The ordinary town councillor is still apt to think of the education committee as merely providing instruction. But under the statutes of the last five years, culminating in the Children Act of 1908, it is the duty of the local education authority to see that no child within the borough between 5 (or even 3) and 13 or 14 (or even, in some cases, 16) falls below what may be called the national minimum of child nurture. If any child is in such a way as to cause or to be likely to cause injury to its health, being ill-used or neglected; if it is being underfed or improperly fed; if it is not adequately clothed; if it is living in an over-crowded tenement; if its little ailments are not being medically attended to—just as much as if any such child is not receiving proper instruction—the education committee is not putting in force the ample powers with which Parliament

as endowed it. Every morning the children of all but the well-to-do classes parade before the officers of the education committee. It is the duty of the committee to insist that these officers shall notice and report the first patent signs of incipient neglect of every child. It is then for the education committee (by the fullest possible use of its machinery of children's care committees or school managers, medical inspection and school doctors, school clinics and school nurses, school dinners and open-air schools for delicate children, vacation schools and industrial or day-feeding schools) to see that immediate inquiry is made into every case in which a child shows signs of suffering or neglect, with the object of discovering the cause; it is the business of the committee to ensure that prompt steps are taken to stop any neglect or ill-treatment; to arrange (one way or another, not necessarily out of the education rate) for any necessary food, clothing, or medical treatment to be supplied; and in the worst cases wholly to rescue the children from surroundings amid which they cannot possibly grow up to be healthy and civilised citizens. The town councillor ought clearly to press for the fullest possible enforcement of all the Acts administered by the education committee, in such a way that no child within the borough shall be allowed to grow up without, at any rate, those minimum conditions in the absence of which no healthy development is possible.

Turn now to the asylums committee (I speak here of a "county borough"). It is charged with enforcing the national minimum of sanity; with seeing that all mentally defective persons falling below a certain standard of mental health are withdrawn from the competitive struggle, and ensured proper care and custody, to prevent them from injuring themselves or the community. At the same time it is responsible for seeing that all such unfortunate persons are not kept in the workhouse or elsewhere but that they have the best possible treatment, if only as a mere matter of economy, in order that such of them as are curable may as quickly as possible be restored to health and free citizenship.

With regard to the aged, the pensions committee has to see to it that all such as can be brought within the rules of the Old Age Pensions Act get the national minimum of subsistence that Parliament has decreed for the veterans of industry.

Finally, there is the daily tragedy of the able-bodied, able-minded man or woman, anxious for work but unable to find an opportunity of earning a livelihood. Here, too, the town council has been the organ of the community for dealing, through the

distress committee, with the social disease of unemployment. This, however, is now recognised as manifestly beyond the power of any local authority, and the national Government is slowly assuming the task. The national Government, by its labour exchanges, is now registering the unemployed, and will, of course, soon be driven (as the Minority Report proposes) to take over the whole duty of securing to every able-bodied person, under appropriate conditions of training and family provision, the national minimum of subsistence. Meanwhile the town councillor must demand that the distress committee shall, as a matter of emergency, make the best use it can of the scanty powers it possesses, and that it shall importune the Cabinet, in season and out of season, promptly to grapple with the task.

We have latterly thought too much in our town councils of the pleasures and advantages of the prosperous citizen, whether artizan or shopkeeper—of his parks and his museums, of his art galleries and his municipal concerts. Town councillors—themselves usually prosperous citizens—have left too much out of sight the fact that it is the business of the town council, not only to increase the amenity of the borough, but also to *prevent the occurrence of destitution*—so far, at any rate, as all that destitution is concerned (perhaps three-fourths of the whole) which is caused by preventable sickness and premature death; by the failure to provide proper conditions for infants and children of school age; or from leaving mentally defective persons without proper care and control.

Most people will think that it is high time, as both *Majority and Minority Reports of the Poor Law Commission* agree, that the boards of guardians (which are not allowed to “prevent”) were abolished, and their pitiful duties transferred to the supervision of the directly elected town councils, which are at least as “democratic” as boards of guardians. Meanwhile, town councillors may, at any rate, be expected to see that the council *puts in force its existing powers* to prevent the occurrence of destitution, so as to secure to every person, whether prosperous or not—especially those actually sick or in danger of sickness, those labouring with child, those in the tender years of infancy, those of school age, those in the perilous stage of adolescence, those who are afflicted, and those bowed down with years—the national minimum of civilised life.

COUNCILLOR.

You are requested to detach this page
and return it, filled up and signed, to the
person whose name and address is given on
the front page.

QUESTIONS FOR BOROUGH COUNCIL CANDIDATES.

<i>QUESTION.</i>	<i>ANSWER.</i>
<p>Are you in general agreement with the policy outlined in the foregoing statement by "COUNCILLOR," entitled "What has the Town Council to do with the Prevention of Destitution"?</p>	
<p>Do you find yourself in general agreement with the proposals (so far as the Town Council is concerned) of the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission?</p>	

Signature of Candidate