

# London Reform Union.

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## THE COUNTY COUNCIL

AND

## THE VESTRIES.

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### *The Two Partners in London Government.*

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# THE COUNTY COUNCIL AND THE VESTRIES.

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## THE TWO PARTNERS IN LONDON GOVERNMENT.

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The Municipal Government of London is divided between

THE COUNTY COUNCIL, and

THE VESTRIES AND DISTRICT BOARDS.\*

The County Council stands most prominently before the public, but it is the Vestries and District Boards which—judging by the total net expenditure—have the most work to do. The County Council spends on its own services a little over two millions a year, whilst the 43 local bodies spend over two millions and a half. But in addition to its own expenditure the Council pays away some £600,000 a year as grants in aid of the work of other London governing bodies, chiefly the Boards of Guardians and the Vestries.†

### WHAT THE COUNTY COUNCIL DOES.

The County Council manages the Main Drainage system (but not the local sewers), the County Bridges, the Woolwich Ferry, and the Blackwall Tunnel, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, the County Asylums and Industrial Schools, the Parks, and the Thames Embankments. It executes all important street improvements, and the larger schemes under the Artisans' Dwellings Acts (but not the smaller ones). On these great administrative services it expends about £600,000 a year, comprising (with the interest, sinking fund, and charges for county debt) **nine-tenths of its total expenditure.**‡

The remaining tenth includes establishment charges and pensions, legal and Parliamentary expenses, and the cost of carrying out various statutes.

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\* In the City the local governing body exercising much the same powers as a Vestry, is styled "The Commissioners of Sewers," and in Woolwich it is the "Board of Health." The anomalous powers of the old Corporation of the City, with its Lord Mayor and Common Council, are not dealt with in this tract. See Leaflet, No. 30.

† This is irrespective of the new Equalisation Fund.

‡ Technical Education is entrusted in London to a special joint committee—the Technical Education Board—composed of representatives of the County Council, School Board, City and Guilds Technical Institute, Trustees of the City Parochial Charities, Head-Masters' Association, National Union of Teachers, and London Trades' Council. Besides aiding the Polytechnics and all efficient Science, Art, Domestic Economy, and Technology Classes, and Secondary Schools, wherever situated, its principal work has been the establishment of a great system of Scholarships, open without distinction to all parts of London.

The Council, for instance, deals with the tramways and the water supply, it tests the purity of gas and the accuracy of gas meters, it administers the Building Act, the Weights and Measures Act, and several other Acts; but these latter statutory duties make up less than one-twentieth of its work or expenditure.

The Council's expenses are met by a County Rate, which falls equally on all districts, rich and poor, from one end of London to the other.\* The Council, however, cannot levy this directly. It issues precepts to all the rating authorities, and each of these estimates the rate in the £ in its own way, so that the amounts put down in the rate-paper are sometimes misleading.

## WHAT THE VESTRIES DO.

The 43 local governing bodies of London manage the paving, cleaning and lighting of the streets, the local sewers, and the removal of dust and refuse. They are the Sanitary Authorities for their respective districts, and carry out the Public Health Acts. They provide (sometimes through their specially-appointed commissioners) the mortuaries, disinfecting chambers, cemeteries, public libraries, and baths and wash-houses. They execute all such street improvements as they choose to pay for, and any others of local importance to which the County Council contributes. In the same way they can carry out their own schemes under the Artisans' Dwellings Acts in addition to others for which they may seek the aid of the County Council. They are, in short, independent authorities, exercising full powers in their own spheres, and directly subject, like the County Council itself, to the Local Government Board.

The expenses of the Vestry fall upon the parish, and thus vary from parish to parish. This inequality may be the result of differences in economy, or of variations in vigour and excellence of administration. But it is mainly caused by differences in wealth. The City and Rotherhithe have much about the same area, and, therefore, much the same extent of street to pave and light. But an identical expenditure will result, on the high rateable value of the City, in a rate of only a penny in the pound, and, on the low rateable value of Rotherhithe, in a rate of eighteenpence. St. George's, Hanover Square, and Bermondsey, have approximately the same number of houses to drain and scavenger, but a given amount of sanitary expenditure will involve four times as high a rate in the one as in the other. The total rates in the poorer parishes, therefore, often run up to six or eight shillings in the pound, not because their Vestry is extravagant, but because the parish is poor, whilst the richer districts get more municipal services, and perhaps more local extravagance, for rates of only four or five shillings in the pound.†

## “Charters of Incorporation.”

The 43 Vestries and District Boards are thus important and independent municipal authorities. Under the Metropolis Management Act, 1855, they

\* Except the City, which is exempt from certain charges, and pays 2½d. in the pound less than the other districts.

† This inequality used to be worse before (1) the County Council distributed about £600,000 annually to the various authorities by way of grants in aid; (2) the passing of the Equalisation of Rates Act, 1894, which enabled the Council to raise an additional sixpenny rate, to be distributed among the Vestries in proportion to the population of their parishes.

are corporate bodies, with perpetual succession and a common seal. They can, for all their statutory purposes, acquire and hold land, promote and oppose bills in Parliament, sue and be sued in the Law Courts, borrow money, decide policy, manage their own business in their own way, bear their own burdens, make their own rates, appoint and dismiss their own staff, and even audit their own accounts. Some of them have passed resolutions in favour of obtaining from the Crown "Charters of Incorporation." But they are, by the Metropolis Management Act of 1855, already corporate bodies, with definitely prescribed constitutions, duties and titles. It is a fundamental principle of English law that no Royal Charter can alter or repeal an Act of Parliament, or confer powers which are by statute vested in other bodies.

## How the Work of London Government should be shared between the two Partners.

The Royal Commission on the Unification of London, after careful investigation, laid down certain broad principles. It was decided that there must be only one Central Municipal Authority for the work common to London as a whole. But it was no less clearly established that no powers or duties ought to be exercised by that Central Authority which could be equally well discharged by the local bodies; that the existing local bodies should be maintained, strengthened and made as dignified as possible; that the present areas should, as far as practicable, be preserved; and that the adjustments that will, in some of the smaller cases, be necessary, should aim at making the areas of the local bodies correspond with the present Parliamentary and County Council constituencies. This declaration in favour of the maintenance and improvement of the existing local bodies has been cordially and unreservedly accepted by the Progressive party in the County Council, and is heartily supported by the London Reform Union. The alternative policy of "tenification," or the "Creation of Local Municipal Corporations," which can only mean the abolition of the existing 43 Vestries and District Boards, and the establishment of 10 or 14 brand new municipalities, is supported by the City and its allies.

## The Re-adjustment of Powers.

But it is sometimes said that the County Council exercises powers and duties which ought to be given to the Vestries. Let us see what these are.

No one has ever suggested the distribution among the Vestries of the present County Debt, or the Main Drainage System, or the County Bridges, or the Asylums and Industrial Schools, or the Fire Brigade, or the costly Parks. These must, for reasons of administration, admittedly be created and managed by London for London, and not by any particular parish. But there is also an instructive financial argument in favour of the present unity. The Fire Brigade, for instance, which is equally distributed over the whole county, costs about a penny-farthing in the pound. If each Vestry maintained its own bit of the present Fire Brigade (assuming no increase in expenditure to be caused by splitting it up in proportion to population), St. George's, Hanover Square, would gain considerably. Its own little Fire Brigade would cost it less than a halfpenny in the pound. But St. George's-in-the-East would lose heavily by the change. Its own bit of the Brigade—though half the size of that of its Western namesake—would involve a local rate of at least twopence in the pound. And so with the Parks. Battersea, like other

parishes, pays at present three farthings in the pound for Parks: if it maintained its own Park, on its own low rateable value, it would need a rate of fourpence. In all such cases it would "pay" the few rich parishes to break up the County Council, and set up for themselves. They would in this way keep to themselves the advantage of their high rateable value, and get off the contribution which they at present make towards the cost of municipal government in the rest of London. But all the poorer parishes would find their rates go up. **Every transfer from central to local expenditure involves an increased inequality of rates—a lower rate in the City and the few rich parishes in the West End—and a greatly increased rate in all the rest of London.** This follows, as already explained, from the unequal value of the rateable property in the several parishes. It is therefore easy to understand why no representative of a poor parish has ever seriously advocated transferring any important service from the County Council to the Vestries. Whenever a proposal of this kind is made, it emanates either from the City or one of the richer parishes at the West End. **It is a device of the wealthy to escape their present share of the common burden.**

But there are, it is said, some statutory powers now vested in the County Council which might be transferred to the Vestries.

### The Building Act.

The London Building Act is administered by District Surveyors under the County Council. The districts of the surveyors (who are paid by fees) do not correspond with those of the local authorities, and, varying as they must with the amount of building, could hardly be made to do so without considerable compensation and expense. The Dangerous Structures branch of the work employs a permanent staff, besides the surveyors, of eight officials—an establishment which could hardly be distributed without increased expense among 43 district authorities. The inspection and licensing of sky signs—a temporary duty—costs £320 a year, a sum on which 43 separate staffs would not be likely to economise. And, in the same way, the inspection of the larger factories for fire protection, at present carried out from the centre for £700 a year, would probably cost more if done by 43 local surveyors. As regards the construction of new buildings and the fixing of lines of frontage, moreover, it appears of the utmost importance that the administration of the Building Act should be rigidly uniform all over London, and absolutely free from local influence. On these grounds the very experienced Chairman of the Building Act Committee, Dr. Longstaff (Moderate Member for Wandsworth), has repeatedly declared it to be impossible to transfer the work.

### The Weights and Measures Act.

At present the County Council maintains, at a cost of £14,000 a year, 6 testing stations, 16 inspectors, 14 coal officers, 13 assistants, and 34 subordinates, to pass the weights and measures made by all the London scale-makers, and to test those in use all over the county. The six testing stations are placed so as to be convenient to the premises of the small number of scale-makers, who alone, in practice, use them. If each Vestry or District Board had its own testing station it would involve increasing the present 6 to 43, with many more inspectors, at a large and unnecessary cost. Local inspectors, too, soon become well known in their own district, and unable to

discover fraud. The central inspectors are able to swoop down on one district after another without being recognised. "It must be remembered," declared the Unification Commission, "that there is often an administrative advantage "in dissociating from local influences officers entrusted with the enforcement "of penal statutes."

Next come a group of services of trifling extent, which are conveniently worked in combination by a single staff of inspectors.

### **The Infant Life Protection Act.**

It has sometimes been suggested that the local authority should inspect and license "baby farms." This is a trivial matter, costing, for all London, £490 a year. No doubt the inspection of the few score of registered places might be undertaken by the 43 separate local authorities if desired, but the bulk of the work is detective in its nature, and could hardly be carried out except by a specially trained officer able to go all over London.

### **The Shop Hours Act.**

It has been suggested by some that the Vestries ought to carry out the Shop Hours Act—a very imperfect measure, which costs the County Council only £350 a year. At present it is worked by six inspectors, who combine this duty with others. It could hardly cost less if carried out by 43 separate staffs: its enforcement might even be made more difficult, or paralysed altogether, by local considerations.

### **The Petroleum and Explosives Acts.**

For these there are five inspectors, costing £1,070 a year. No doubt the 43 local authorities might each have their own trained inspectors for this work, but at some increase of cost. Moreover, the work is largely concerned with the transport of explosives from district to district. The Unification Commission expressed its strong opinion that "the administration of the "Petroleum and Explosives Acts, involving as it does the superintendence of "their removal from place to place, as well as of their storage, should, we "think, for convenience sake, be in the hands of the central authority."

### **The Overhead Wires Act.**

The Council only makes bye-laws which the Vestries enforce. Overhead wires have no respect for parish boundaries, and uniformity of bye-laws throughout London seems essential.

### **Licenses.**

The County Council inspects and licenses (1) offensive trades, (2) slaughter-houses, (3) cow-houses and dairies. This costs £1,330 a year. Here freedom from local influences seems important.

### **Inspection of Common Lodging Houses.**

This is an important new duty, lately transferred from the police to the Council. A staff of 12 inspectors is required, costing £2,000 a year. To divide the duty among 43 separate authorities does not seem likely to promote economy. The poor parishes have the most common lodging houses, and would therefore have to bear most of the burden.

These are all the duties which it has even seriously been suggested could possibly be transferred from the central to the 43 local authorities. They cost the County Council altogether about £29,000 a year, out of a total of two millions. Their transfer would relieve the Council of about one-twentieth of its work, and would add about one-twentyfifth to the expenditure of the Vestries. If there should be any general desire to effect the transfer or any general conviction that better administration would result, no doubt the change will be made. But the financial effect of the transfer must be borne in mind. At present these services cost annually, in the aggregate, a farthing in the pound. To divide the work among 43 separate authorities can hardly fail to increase the total expense; but even leaving this increase out of account, every such transfer must, for the reasons already explained, necessarily

## RAISE THE RATES

in three out of every four parishes. The City, St. George's (Hanover Square), Westminster and Marylebone would save what they at present contribute to the poorer parishes. But every transfer, however small, must, for this very reason, inevitably raise the rates in—

BATTERSEA.	HAMMERSMITH.	ST. GEORGE'S AND ST.
BERMONDSEY.	ISLINGTON.	SAVIOURS, SOUTH-
BETHNAL GREEN.	LAMBETH.	WARK.
BROMLEY AND BOW.	LEE.	ST. GEORGE'S-IN-THE-
CAMBERWELL.	LEWISHAM.	EAST.
CHARLTON.	LIMEHOUSE.	SHOREDITCH.
CHELSEA.	MILE END.	ST. PANCRAS.
CLAPHAM.	PLUMSTEAD.	WANDSWORTH.
DEPTFORD.	POPLAR.	WHITECHAPEL.
FULHAM.	ROTHERHITHE.	WOOLWICH.
GREENWICH.	ST. GEORGE'S AND ST.	
HACKNEY.	GILES'.	

If these parishes wish to have their rates quite unnecessarily raised, they may fall in with the proposals for transfer made from Marylebone and Kensington. But if they do not wish to increase the present inequality of rates, by which three-quarters of London suffers for the benefit of the City and a few rich West-End parishes, they will oppose any shifting of expenditure from the Central Municipal Authority to the Local Bodies.

## “Tenification.”

We see, therefore, that there is very little chance of the City and the West-end inducing the rest of London to let them escape their present contribution to the common burden. Even if the whole of the foregoing duties were taken away from the County Council, whilst it would considerably raise the rates in the poorer parishes it would only save the richer ones less than a farthing in the pound. This is the real origin of the bolder schemes of “tenification,” according to which the 43 Vestries and District Boards would be merged in ten or fourteen new municipalities. In this way, it is hoped, the City and Westminster might keep their money to themselves.

Under these schemes every Vestry and District Board would be swept away,\* and new bodies, acting for huge unwieldy areas, approximately corresponding to the existing eleven School Board divisions, would take over their duties. This preposterous idea would mean a serious rise in rates for three-fourths of London, the dismissal of five-sixths of the existing vestrymen from all share in public affairs, and the destruction of the present local life.

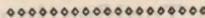
### Reform of the Vestries.

The real direction for the reform of London Government is—not the creation of any brand-new governing bodies, nor yet the breaking-up of London's unity, but **the strengthening, simplifying and elevating of the existing Vestries and District Boards.** We want these transformed into efficient District Councils, equipped with the fullest possible powers, invested with the utmost dignity—able both to retain their own experienced local administrators and to fill vacancies by new men of worth and position. Whatever dignities, names and titles will conduce towards this end should certainly be given, including the status of a Mayor and Corporation wherever the areas are suitable. Two or three of the small central parishes must be re-grouped, preserving local independence as far as practicable. On the other hand, where, as at Deptford, large parishes, comprising whole Parliamentary constituencies, desire to set up for themselves, this must be acceded to. In this way, and in this way only, can we get for London government effective **Unity** for all central affairs, real local **Independence** as regards local matters, and, as far as practicable, **Equality** in our sharing of the common burden.

\* See, for instance, the map prepared by Mr. Brooke Hitchings, a member of the City Corporation. (L. R. U. Leaflet No. 51.)

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