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December, 1928

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## THE POOR LAW PROPOSALS AND WOMEN GUARDIANS

By ELEANOR RATHBONE  
LONDON GUILDHALL UNIVERSITY  
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*The Nation and The Athenaeum*, of 24th November, 1928

Mr. Sidney Webb once remarked that the usual time-lag of a reform in this country was about nineteen years. It has taken just about that long to bring the "break-up of the Poor Law," for which he and Mrs. Webb waged so vigorous a campaign, to the stage of being incorporated in a Government measure. As so often happens, it is a Conservative Government that has rummaged out, recut and refashioned the laid-aside vesture till it shows little traces of the original web. The arguments by which it is being recommended for the country's wear are at least typically the Government's own. Their proposals with regard to the Poor Law are put forward frankly on financial grounds, as an indispensable part of the policy of "mitigating the existing inequalities of rate burden," and incidentally of promoting better classification and hence economies in institutional relief. Their effects on efficiency of administration and on the well-being of the recipients of poor relief are scarcely referred to.

For the transfer of the functions of Boards of Guardians to County authorities a strong case, even on administrative grounds, can undoubtedly be made out. But it is not my purpose here to discuss that case at large; merely to point out certain disadvantages incidental to the change which cannot be denied, though they may be overlooked or belittled.

The Boards of Guardians, of course, are protesting vigorously against their own abolition. But these being inconspicuous and dingy bodies, superior people naturally attribute their protests to self-importance and desire to magnify their office. Doubtless such motives play their part. But among the Guardians are many whose concern is genuinely less with their own exclusion from

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exacting duties which bring them neither fame nor praise, than with anxiety as to how those duties are going to be performed in future. Certainly they have cause for anxiety. Mr. Neville Chamberlain has repeatedly expressed a pious hope that the services of the best of the guardians will be retained within the new order. He extends this hope to the women guardians—as well he may. The verdict pronounced by the 1909 Poor Law Commission (Majority and Minority alike) upon Boards of Guardians was on the whole unflattering. But both Reports singled out the work of women guardians for special praise, as indeed often the bright spot on the darkest patches of Bumbledom. Even the most obdurate anti-feminists have not denied the special aptitude of women for the kind of meticulous case work and of sympathetic yet critical supervision of institutional management of which a large proportion of Poor Law administration is made up.

Where then, precisely, is the arithmetical basis of Mr. Chamberlain's pious hope that the services of those who have shown themselves real "guardians of the poor" will be retained? There are roughly 20,000 Guardians, of whom roughly 2,500 are women. Theoretically all these are free to offer themselves when the time comes for election to the County or County Borough Council of their respective areas and to serve if successful on its Public Assistance Committee. But obviously only a tiny fraction can be successful. The Councils have already their full quota of members, most of whom secure triennial re-election with or without a contest. Council elections are contested more hotly, on more strictly political lines, and more expensively than Guardians' elections. County Councils offer special difficulties. Their one-member areas decrease the likelihood of a woman being elected as sole representative. Further, service on them is specially exacting owing to the necessity of travelling long distances to the place of meeting and to visit widely scattered institutions; so that the possession of abundant leisure or a motor-car becomes almost essential. Many of the most effective women guardians are of the class that keeps one servant or no servant. The chances on County Borough Councils are slightly better, partly because of the concentration of work within a smaller area; partly because there are three Councillors to each ward, one of whom each year must face re-election.

The success of women in overcoming this double difficulty of election and of service is measured by the fact that last year there were only 130 women serving on all the County Councils of England and Wales, of whom 23 were on the L.C.C. Seventeen County Councils were without a single woman member. On all the County Borough Councils of England and Wales there were only 168 elected women.

There remains the chance of service through co-option or nomination. The Bill provides that a Council may (not must) provide for the inclusion on its Public Assistance Committee of a non-elected element, appointed by itself, and not exceeding one-third of the Committee's total membership. Such non-elected members, if they exist at all, must include women. In the case of a County, the scheme must also provide for local "Guardians' Committees" with a non-elected element not exceeding one-third of the membership and including men and women. A County Borough may (not must) appoint "Guardians sub-committees" of its Public Assistance Committee and may (not must) include on these a minority of non-elected members, men and women. It follows that it will be perfectly possible for a County Borough authority taking over the new functions to include not a single ex-Guardian, and not a single woman. It would be possible for a County authority to meet the requirements of the Act by including two men and two women on each of its Guardians committees. Local authorities have long had rights of co-option to a good many of their Standing Committees, but except when compelled to do so (*e.g.*, in the case of Education and Maternity and Child Welfare Committees, where the matter is compulsory), they have seldom exercised these rights.

It may be said that the displacement of existing Guardians, though in some cases unfortunate, is a temporary disadvantage. But what of the fitness of the new authorities, as now constituted, to perform their new functions? Lack of experience is soon remedied, though costly while it lasts. But it is less easy to extend the hours of a Councillor's working day. In one large City Council the sensible rule exists that each member must serve on neither more nor less than two Standing Committees. When the duties of the School Board were added to the functions of the Council it was agreed to regard these as an *hors d'œuvre* or extra. But the Education Committee being one of the heaviest of the Council, it follows that the appetite of its members is more or less satiated when they have partaken of the *hors d'œuvre*, and they have little to spare for other standing dishes. This tendency to indigestion will be considerably intensified by the addition to their duties of the functions of the Poor Law Guardians. No wonder that the Chairman of the L.C.C., noting that the amount spent on out-relief in London in 1926 exceeded £3,000,000, and that the Metropolitan Guardians and Asylums' Board administered 200 institutions containing over 100,000 beds was haunted by a vision of his County Council not only being swamped with work to which they had not been accustomed, but with work which would alter the centre of gravity of the duties of that body.

The prospect will not daunt those who hold the view that the less the elected representatives of the people meddle with real prob-



lems of administration the better; that the said representatives are useful as window dressing, but should leave the real work to the experts, *i.e.*, the paid officials. But to those who value democratic institutions as a reality, the prospect is perturbing.

Assuming that the change in its main features is inevitable, how can the above disadvantages be mitigated? There are several possibilities which may be summarized shortly:—

1. The size of the Councils might be increased by, say, one-fourth, with or without the stipulation that the first election of new members should be confined to ex-Guardians.

2. The electoral areas of the County Councils might be enlarged, each returning three members as in Boroughs.

3. Elections might be by Proportional Representation.  
(The above two changes would increase the probability of the election of women and others with specialized experience.)

4. Councils might be required, not permitted, to include one-third of non-elected members on their Public Assistance Committee and on their Guardians Committees and sub-Committees.

5. Some of the nominated members might be appointed by the Ministry of Health instead of by the Local Authority.

Those concerned to defend the Guardians, if defeated in their frontal attack on the Bill, might do well to concentrate on some such minor modifications of its structure.