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inform: Local Government

352: 396.5

THE LOCAL ELECTIONS.

A vote-weary public may turn aside from any suggestion that they should again attempt the sifting of policies and promises in the near future. Yet we take the hazard and venture to focus their attention on a matter of telling import. We refer, of course, to the Local Authority Elections, which take place within the next few weeks.

Those of us who believe that the nation did well on December 14th to record its votes for the Coalition confidently hope for reconstructive vigour at the centre of the national life. But never in our history have affairs so demanded the election of forceful, far-seeing Local Authorities. The present local bodies are out of date and no longer represent the will of the constituents. Elections have been continuously postponed from year to year, and at last comes the opportunity for us to make good. But are we preparing for a vigorous campaign, and have we, as electors, already thought out our future needs? Have we conned in our minds such local men and women as we should urge to stand for election? We should not delay. March and April are upon us; November is not far off. A compelling desire towards the future good of the community should urge us to immediate consideration.

Present-day Local Government in England is a historically continuous outgrowth from early local control in the parish, the hundred, and the shire. The central authority has mainly what has been called censorial control. Speaking generally, local authorities have, within the limits of the law, freedom of action. That is at once their weakness and their strength. We cannot look for real progress unless there is a live local public opinion.

Administration is twin to legislation. They fare ill or well together. For good governance each must be vigorous. If local authorities be as little unafraid as in the past, as inalert—indolent we had almost said—it will profit us little to have a strong new-visioned government at the centre.

The Franchise Act has greatly broadened the local electorate, and it is upon the community that the duty falls of

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broadening the basis of selection, so that women and labour may be adequately represented, and no section of the whole fail to give of its best thus to the common weal. Not only do we want women of tried capacity in really sufficient numbers, but we want electors to be alive to the urgency of the choice that is upon them of both men and women. Assuredly a right choice will mean a fair future garnering.

Women in the past have disastrously neglected their opportunities both as electors and as candidates for election. Except in regard to the Poor Law, women have left local government almost untouched. There were in England and Wales in 1917, 1,588 women guardians, 206 holding the double office of Guardian and Rural District Councillor. But there were in January only 12 women on County Councils (six of these on the London County Council), 28 on County Borough Councils, 18 on Town Councils (in non-County Boroughs), 33 on Metropolitan Borough Councils, and 25 on Urban District Councils. Those women who have taken up the burden have shown a splendid example of insight and practical idealism. But it is not enough, just as it is not enough that there should be a few Bradfords among local authorities.

The Borough Elections cannot now take place until next autumn, but there is some hopeful indication of progress. We are told that, at a recent bye-election in a Municipal Borough, a woman could have headed the poll had any association of women been sufficiently alive to put forward a candidate, and we note that Southampton Borough Council, for example, welcomed last autumn its first woman councillor.

There remain for our immediate concern the County Council, the Urban and Rural District Council, and the Board of Guardians Elections. It is, we fear, too sanguine to hope that legislation will, before 15th April, have abolished the Boards of Guardians. Ten long years have passed since their abolition was advocated by the Minority Report of the Royal Commission. We have the greatest respect for the men and women who have often cleverly handled so inconstructive and late-arriving a machinery of help. For years we have watched the sad overlapping of administration in matters of tuberculosis treatment, the care of the mentally defective, and of the aged; and the abolition of the Boards of Guardians is now acknowledged as a preliminary essential to the establishment of a Ministry of Health, for which we all impatiently clamour. If, as we suppose,

Boards of Guardians must continue in the interim, the experience gained as members of these Boards will stand women in good stead for other future activities.

We are apt sometimes to take for granted that up and down the country women are awake to the vast changes in administration that have been gradually coming upon the community, but we must not forget that the backward locality is a laggard in knowledge. The spread of political knowledge can no longer be left to chance, when every household is vitally concerned in the concrete effect of legislation. It is for women to organise by their Women Citizen or other Associations, so that not ten, not twenty years hence, but now, our England may be renewed. Side by side with knowledge and opportunity will go desire for the sign of citizenship-service.

To come to the practical translation of the nation's needs. First and foremost stands the question of the health of the community. A vast improvement is being noted in the health of infants attending the Welfare Centres, and when we see the genuine desire among mothers for help as to the care of the child, we are aghast at the ignorant fumbling of the past.

In July, 1918 (the last date for which figures are available), there were 1,278 Infant Welfare Centres in the country, of which 700 were Municipal and 578 supported by voluntary effort. This number shows an encouraging increase of 436 during the year 1917-18, but there are still far too few of these centres to supply the need.

The Maternity Act, 1918, empowering County Councils to maintain Maternity Centres, makes it imperative that every effort should be made to elect men and women eager to develop a Mother and Child Care adequate to the necessity. Looking back, do we see any local activity—except education—that can compare with this in vital importance? No less essential, too, is the due inter-relation of all health assistance, so that under the Ministry of Health one local administration may have the care of the health of the mother and infant, the school child, the tuberculous adult, the mentally and physically deficient, and the aged.

Further, as to Education, the Education Act of 1918 is but the foundation stone of a new building—the builders are the local authorities. In a few cases the months of waiting since the first Education Bill was introduced have been well used, and whole schemes for local needs are already being completed, but

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for the most part nothing has yet been done to formulate a workable future for the Act. In many areas the real operation of the Act will therefore be tardy. Women should put forward as a first principle that the Act should be interpreted in the very widest possible sense, so that the clauses which Mr. Fisher, with statesmanlike prescience, has drafted so unrestrictingly may be interpreted with noble generosity. We refer to such clauses as demand "practical instruction, suitable to the ages, abilities, and requirements of the children," or adequate provision being made "in order to secure that, through poverty, no children and young persons shall be debarred from receiving the benefits of any form of education by which they are capable of profiting," or again such a clause as makes optional, for "the purpose of supplementing and reinforcing the instruction and social and physical training," holiday or school camps, playing fields, swimming baths and day or evening social facilities. O Women of England, see to it that this Education Act fulfils itself and revitalises every corner of the land!

In other directions there will be need of careful watchfulness. Among the constructive duties of the local authorities will be the control of the drink traffic, as to which the Prime Minister has promised that War experience will not be ignored, the imperative increase in the number of public libraries, whether in village or urban districts, the furtherance of the essential good already accomplished by women Police Patrols, and lastly, and not less urgently, the rehousing of the large number of people who are either badly housed or who have no houses at all.

Important as has been the part of women in the economics of the nation, their concern in the housing of the people is still more important. The Government Housing Scheme estimates that 400,000 to 500,000 houses will be required in order to provide the necessary accommodation for the people. But if these houses are to meet the needs of the women they must be of better standards as regards convenience, comfort and labour-saving than those we have had in the past.

There are certain activities of the community which we have come to regard as gains not to wealth so much as to well-being. Until we all in our hearts subscribe to the truth that Housing, Health, Education are not key-industries, but arteries of life, we shall fail—fail miserably. Success is to our hand—potently in the election of local authorities determined to make the utmost possible use of their powers.