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STUDIES IN ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

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**NATIONAL AND LOCAL
FINANCE**

NATIONAL AND LOCAL FINANCE

A REVIEW OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN
THE CENTRAL AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES
IN ENGLAND, FRANCE, BELGIUM, AND
PRUSSIA, DURING THE NINETEENTH
CENTURY

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WITH A PREFACE BY

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PREFACE.

To the "man in the street" and the average Member of Parliament, what looms largest in the political haze of the moment is no doubt some manipulation of our bicameral legislative machinery.

In reality, the most important of the political problems that confront the nation, if it only knew it, is how best to organise the relation between central and local administration, so as to ensure that enforcement of "the National Minimum" in the conditions of existence without which the nation itself cannot permanently survive. This relation, it is clear, hinges in no small degree upon finance; and of all the departments of public finance, that of local government is, in this country, at once the least studied and the most needing scientific investigation. Here, then, we have ample justification for the careful essay that Mr. Watson Grice presents to the public.

We have in England an apparently invincible prejudice not only that our English local government is the best in the world, but also that no other country has anything to teach us on the subject. At least, we seem to care so little for learning from the experience of our neighbours that the students of political science at our universities are hardly ever encouraged to make themselves acquainted with the organisation of local administration in France or Germany, Belgium or Austria; though one cannot help thinking that,

had it been in existence in his own day, Aristotle would not have left unexplored so rich a field of political experiment. Our county councillors and our municipal officials not unnaturally follow the example of indifference to foreign local government that is set by the professors and students of political science. The publishers (with whom, after all, some of the influence and responsibility of patronage now rests), though they make much of a mere geographical intruder into unfamiliar lands, have as yet scarcely discovered the field of sociological exploration—at any rate so long as it is veiled in the decent obscurity of contemporary life. Hence the literature in the English language relating to foreign local government is of the scantiest; and the exact relation between national and local finance in the different countries of Europe has been very little compared.

That there should be any connection at all between the central executive departments of the nation and those elected local bodies to which so much of its internal administration is entrusted has first to be demonstrated. Prior to 1832 there was, in England, practically no such connection. Each municipal corporation or other local governing body was as independent of executive control, and expected as little financial aid from the National Exchequer, as the little social clubs of tradesmen that gathered in the taverns of the time. Nor did any scheme of executive control, or plan of financial aid, enter into the conception of the framers of the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, upon which, by successive derivations, the whole of our local government is now founded.

If we look over the world of highly-developed nations of the beginning of the twentieth century, we

see three main types of relation between local and central government. In France and Germany, Belgium and Austria, and generally throughout the Continent of Europe, we find the local administration entrusted, in the main, to salaried officials of special training and high professional qualifications, whose work is closely supervised by, and completely subordinate to the various departments of the executive Government. There are, it is true, representative local councils of various grades, and formed in various ways, by which the consent of the inhabitants of the several localities is more or less adequately expressed, and some more or less imperfect degree of local control is secured. But the functions and powers of these local councils are narrowly limited; and their actual interferences with the day by day administration are, in almost all cases, subject to the control and approval of the central executive departments. This particular relation between central and local government may be conveniently termed the Bureaucratic System.

At the other extreme stands the organisation of local government in the United States, where the cities and townships are, broadly speaking, autonomous corporations, not in the least subordinate to the State or federal executive departments, and standing even to the State legislatures in no more intimate or subordinate a relation than the Government departments themselves. There is, accordingly, in such a country, nothing in the nature of an administrative hierarchy, and nothing in the nature of a national system, whether in education, sanitation, or means of communication. This, which has its merits as well as its characteristic drawbacks, may be termed the Anarchy of Local Autonomy. It has given the United States

the worst local government of any State claiming to be civilized.

In England we have, by characteristic good luck, stumbled on a third arrangement. Between 1590 and 1640, we bade fair to develop an organised national system, in which the Lords of the Council, the Judges of Assize, the Justices of the Peace and such corporate unities as the Parish and the Borough would all have their places. When this (with much else) got knocked on the head in 1642-9, there remained only an Anarchy of Local Autonomy, lasting from 1660 to 1835, which was strictly comparable with much in the United States of to-day. Gradually, however, it was perceived that it was desirable that there should be, at any rate, some external audit of local government accounts, and that some external approval should be required before the members of a local governing body were permitted, not merely to spend the rates paid by those who elected the councillors, but also to embark on enterprises mortgaging the future. Presently it was realised that the government of a town was not merely a matter of interest to the inhabitants of that particular town, but that, whether in respect of roads and bridges or infectious disease, whether in the health or in the education of its citizens, the nation as a whole had something at stake. John Stuart Mill drew pointed attention to the fact that the central executive departments could hardly fail to have at their command a wider experience and a greater knowledge than any local body could possess. This, however, did not mean that we began to adopt what has been termed the Bureaucratic System. What we had to find was some way of securing national inspection and audit, and the amount of

national supervision and control that was required in the interest of the community as a whole, without offending the susceptibilities of local autonomy, and without losing the very real advantages of local initiative and local freedom to experiment. Without theory, almost without the notice of political students, a solution has been found in the device of the Grant in Aid. The National Government, in the course of the past three-quarters of a century, has successively "bought" the rights of inspection, audit, supervision, initiative, criticism and control in respect of one local service after another, and of one kind of local governing body after another, by the grant in aid of the local finances, and therefore of the local rate-payers, of annual subventions from the National Exchequer.

These "Grants in Aid," as they are called, are seldom properly understood. The local bodies demanding them, and the complacent Ministries according them, think of them, often, as mere "doles" in relief of local burdens. To old-fashioned Radicals they often seem to represent attempts to escape from hereditary burdens on land—in fact, nothing but raids by the land-owning and farming class on the payers of customs and excise duties. To Mr. Gladstone—who never to the end of his days realised either the importance of local government or the superiority in social value of administration over House of Commons "politics"—these "doles" were mere vexation of spirit, raids on the Exchequer by the landed interest, a sheer encouragement of "extravagance" (by which term he meant merely any increase of expenditure by public authorities). In reality, the Grant in Aid is the necessary hinge in the flap. The elected local

council, administering its own business in its own way, is far too valuable an element in British freedom to be superseded. On the other hand, the poorer localities need aid to prevent the cost of government falling upon them as a crushing burden; the smaller authorities require the counsel and information of wider experience; the negligent or apathetic authorities have to be incited to bring their administration up to the national minimum that is called for by the interests of the community as a whole, and all local authorities are the better for an entirely independent audit of their accounts. How to get these advantages is still an insoluble problem in the United States. How to secure the desirable local initiative, the local independence and the local sense of responsibility is still an unsolved problem in France. We, in Great Britain, have, by our unselfconscious invention of the Grant in Aid—seen at its best in the old Police Grant or in the modern Education Grants—gone far to combine local autonomy with the necessary protection of the interests of the community as a whole.

It may be convenient to quote here a significant passage from the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission on this aspect of the Grant in Aid:—

“Finally, we have to consider these Grants in Aid . . . from the standpoint of their effect on the suggestions, criticism and authoritative instructions by which the Central Authority seeks to secure greater efficiency and economy of administration. This, indeed, is by far the most important aspect of Grants in Aid. The verdict of administrative experience is that, properly devised, they afford a basis for the best of all relations between the National Government and the Local Authorities. A century of experience has demonstrated that it is undesirable for Local Authorities to be subject to no administrative control whatsoever from a Central Authority, for them to be left without independent inspection or audit, without access to centralised experience and

specialist knowledge, without any enforcement of the minimum indispensably required for the common weal, and without mitigation of the stupendous inequality of local rates that complete autonomy involves. On the other hand, the grant to a Government Department of arbitrary powers to sanction or disallow, or peremptorily to order this or that, is felt, in this country, to be derogatory to the independence, the dignity and the spontaneous activity of freely elected representatives of local ratepayers, spending their own funds. Such mandatory instructions from a Government Office in Whitehall can be enforced only by cumbrous legal processes; and they have proved, in practice, to give the Government Department little real power over recalcitrant local bodies. It is in vain that Parliament endows the Local Government Board with ample statutory powers—on paper—to compel typhoid-smitten Little Pedlington to provide itself with a proper drainage system and water-supply. Little Pedlington flatly refuses, or stubbornly neglects to do so. The Local Government Board, for all its paper powers of coercing Little Pedlington by Mandamus or by independent action in default, finds itself practically impotent; and hundreds of Little Pedlingtons retain to this day their primitive insanitation triumphantly. Very different has been the experience of the influence of a Central Authority wielding the instrument of a well-devised Grant in Aid. Between 1830 and 1856 there was felt to be urgent need of a well-organised constabulary force in the provincial boroughs and counties. By the Act of 1835 Parliament attempted to make it compulsory on the Municipal Boroughs to establish such a force. In the Counties the Justices were empowered to establish one. In both Boroughs and Counties the constabulary remained weak and inefficient. By an Act of 1856 the establishment of an efficient force was not only made everywhere obligatory, but what was far more important, the Government agreed to contribute one-fourth—after 1874, one-half—of whatever expense the locality incurred on its police force, provided that the Home Office was satisfied, after inspection, that the force was adequate and efficient. Under this combination of pressure and inducement, all the provincial police forces have steadily improved, rapidly rising, indeed, to a common level of adequacy and efficiency. At every inspection the defects have been pointed out in a way that could not be ignored. The mere intimation that, unless these shortcomings were, somehow or another, remedied before the next annual inspection came round, the

administered service which is of concern simply to the community as a whole, exclusive of the particular locality. There is thus no service which is entirely "onerous." On the other hand, we realise now that we are members one of another. There is no service of interest only to the locality concerned. There is thus none exclusively "beneficial." There is certainly none in which the community as a whole has not an interest, and therefore a duty, to prescribe a "National Minimum," below which no locality can safely be permitted to fall. The interest of the community as a whole may be more or less apparent, more or less direct, more or less certain; and the amount and conditions of the Grant in Aid will vary accordingly. The expediency and practicability of legally enforcing a "National Minimum" will differ from time, from place to place, and from service to service. These are the problems for the Political Science of the twentieth century. Mr. Watson Grice's book supplies us with valuable material for their study.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE.

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