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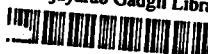
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**THE HISTORY OF LOCAL RATES
IN ENGLAND**

THE
HISTORY OF LOCAL RATES
IN ENGLAND

IN RELATION TO THE PROPER DISTRIBUTION
OF THE BURDEN OF TAXATION

BY
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SECOND EDITION

MUCH ENLARGED.

LONDON:
P. S. KING & SON,
ORCHARD HOUSE,
WESTMINSTER.

1912.

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PREFACE

THE whole of the first edition of this book, published in 1896, with a few corrections and the omission of the last five pages, reappears in the first five chapters of the present edition. To the original title, "The History of Local Rates in England," I have now added the words, "in relation to the proper distribution of the burden of taxation," to indicate the particular limitation of the scope of the work which I have always had in my mind.

The purpose of the five original chapters and of the lectures founded on them which were delivered at the London School of Economics at the end of 1895, soon after the foundation of that institution, was to explain why and how local taxation in England came to be confined to immovable property.

After that was settled in 1840, efforts soon began to be made to shift some of the expenses borne by local rates on to national funds. The powerful agrarian interest, smarting under the loss of Protection, supported these efforts, and a struggle between those who are regarded as predominantly local rate-payers and those who are regarded as predominantly national taxpayers set in, and has continued to our own time. In the sixth chapter I have endeavoured to give a sketch of the results of this struggle which shall be accurate and sufficient without being overloaded with detail. This is an extraordinarily difficult

task. There are probably not a dozen persons in England who could pass an examination on the principles which determine the distribution between the various localities of the proceeds of the national taxes allocated to them by the Local Government Act, 1888, and the Acts which have followed it; there are probably several thousand practical local administrators who believe that if the cost of paying and clothing the local police force is increased, the locality will recover half the cost from the imperial exchequer—which has not been true ever since 1888.

In the first edition I scarcely discussed the merits of the system of rating, and indeed rather rashly expressed the opinion that the inferences to be drawn from the history were obvious. As it turned out, many readers drew inferences which seem to me neither obvious nor correct. In particular, some of them appeared to draw the astonishing conclusion that a system which grew up, as the phrase is, "of itself," that is, was established by the practice of thousands of communities, and their experience through several centuries, must necessarily be bad, and ought forthwith to be abolished in favour of some fanciful modernised "restoration" of the primitive arrangements which it gradually displaced. I have therefore, in the seventh chapter, tried to answer the question whether the existing system fits in with our ideas of justice, and in the eighth chapter I have discussed at greater length its advantages from an economic point of view. I fear that some readers will be shocked to find that I can speak as favourably as I do of an institution which causes so much grumbling. I would ask them to remember that it is

impossible to make omelettes without breaking eggs. No single tax ever raised as much money as local rates do in this country at the present time, and though the grumbling is great in the aggregate, it is probably less per pound sterling raised than the grumbling against any other tax, except perhaps some few which are well-concealed from their ultimate payers by being administered in small doses wrapped up in prices. It should be remembered too that a grumble about rates is for the most part merely a compendious method of complaining of the extravagance and mismanagement of the particular local authority whose operations the grumbler has opportunities for watching closely. The spirit of partisanship in which national politics are almost always discussed, joined with the alternation of power between the two parties, prevents the national taxes from being treated, in the same easy manner, as a measure of the incompetence of the national government.

Members of local councils often speak as if there was a general demand for a transference of expense from local rates to national taxes. It is only natural that they should do so, the magnitude of the rates being the measure of their own unpopularity; the strange thing is that politicians should be apparently so ready to believe them. Many an assembly of ratepayers which would pass with acclamation a simple resolution in favour of the relief of rates would melt away in depression if this resolution were coupled with another stating exactly the new taxation which would in fact be caused by the necessity of providing for the relief. Local councils themselves might hesitate in putting

forward demands for relief if they realised that increase of taxes is not the only probable consequence of an immediate relief of rates. The English people are said to have bought their liberties—chiefly through the municipalities—but if the demand for a transference of expense from the localities to the State is successful, they are likely to sell them again, and to sell them for a mess of pottage. It is true that the Government offices, with perhaps one or two exceptions, are sufficiently intelligent to distrust their own capacity to administer the whole of England in detail, and honest enough not to wish to do what they know they will do badly. But unsought powers may be thrust upon them by politicians who despair of moving local councils in what they believe to be the proper direction either by their arguments or their votes. The unofficial bureaucrat is abroad in the land, bringing before men's eyes glowing pictures of a country governed by experts who will create efficiency in every branch of national life—regardless of expense. The New Chadwickianity which is being preached is not founded on a crude system of centralisation involving the disappearance of the organs of local self-government, nor on coercion enforced by reluctant law courts. It leaves all the old forms intact and proposes to lay no rude hands on the persons of recalcitrant councillors. It is founded on the ingenious expedient of inducing the nation to allow itself to be taxed to supply funds which are to be redistributed between the various localities according to general regulations laid down by parliament, one of which is that the locality must satisfy the inspectors of some Government department that the service in respect of which

the grant is made is "efficient." By this expedient the citizen delivers himself bound hand and foot into the custody of the official expert, who is able, by declining to regard the service as efficient, to compel him to raise more money in rates under penalty of "losing the grant." It is seldom that we meet an expert who does not think that more money ought to be spent in his own particular department: the local authority or the individual ratepayer who hopes for a reduction of rates from "efficiency grants" is only to be likened to the proverbial donkey induced to proceed by a wisp of hay hung in front of his nose.

"What matter," some will say, "if rates and taxes increase, provided efficiency is obtained?" Of course if efficiency is to be judged simply by amount expended, this plan of giving control of the purse to experts in each department is an excellent one. But if it is to be measured by more reasonable standards, we may well doubt. The means of the community are limited, and a certain proportion between the different kinds of expense, both public and private, must be observed in order to make these limited means go as far as possible. There is nothing in the scheme to provide for this requirement, and if we suppose the difficulty to be got over by the establishment of real parliamentary control of expenditure, we have still to prove that the rule of the experts will be beneficent in each of the departments taken separately.

Doubtless expert opinion is exceedingly valuable, and nothing can be more desirable than that the national government should maintain an adequate force of inspectors, drawn from various classes and trained in various institutions, and that these inspectors should

be constantly advising and criticising local elected authorities both privately and in particular reports published in the locality concerned as well as in general reports which appear in bulky blue books inaccessible to the ordinary citizen. From my own experience of ten years service on the council of a small county-borough, ending in 1908, I feel sure that the activity of the national government might be greatly extended in this direction with immense advantage. But the same experience convinces me that the more the inspectors and the departments represented by them have to rely on argument and persuasion, and the less they have absolute power of control the better is the work likely to be performed. Perhaps I may be allowed to give an example of the kind of dispute which often occurs between local authorities and the experts in Whitehall who write in the name of bogus "Boards." During the last great epidemic of smallpox it was recognised that the disease was gradually creeping from the seat of government towards our county-borough and we desired to prepare for the onslaught. We proposed to take down an already existing iron building which was in an unsuitable situation and put it, with an entirely new one, in an isolated place to which no objection could possibly be taken. The expenditure was obviously capital expenditure, and therefore in the ordinary course the council applied to the Local Government Board for leave to borrow the sum required, spreading repayment over a few years. The official who for this purpose personified the Board, however, being an expert in building, did not think wood and iron good enough for smallpox patients; the iron would rust in

time, and the wood might catch fire, and then the patients would have to be carried out and tents hurriedly erected for them; he would sanction nothing but brick or stone. Fortunately, the central control here was weak. The council already had the land (though it was acquired for another purpose) and the expenditure proposed only amounted to about twopence in the pound; some slight risks of illegality were run, and the buildings were put up promptly. Before they had been finished a week the first case of smallpox occurred, and they were soon well-occupied. They have neither rusted away nor been burnt. If the expert had possessed real control, a brick building would have been finished about six months after the outbreak was entirely over—unless, of course, the absence of any buildings had caused it to last much longer than it did. Since then the whole number of cases of smallpox has amounted, I think, to about a twentieth of those which occurred during the outbreak, so that the brick buildings, costing several times as much as the iron, would up to now have done less than a twentieth of the work done by the iron buildings. That is the measure of the efficiency which would have been secured in this instance by central control, and the instance is by no means exceptional. The universal desire of the expert to have the best possible article regardless of time and cost does not lead to prudent conduct. No one of experience and common sense in private life places the control of his expenditure in any single department in the hands of the expert in that department. He hears what the expert has to say, and then decides for himself.

The advocates of the so-called "efficiency grant" system rely largely on the experience furnished by the old grant of a proportion of the cost of county and borough police forces pronounced "efficient" by Home Office inspectors. Though the grant itself was discontinued after 1888, the Home Office retains the power of causing an equivalent deduction to be made from the probate or estate duty grant, if the police are found inefficient, so that the central control given by the old grant is still preserved. The whole progress effected in the last sixty years in the efficiency of the county and borough police forces is attributed to the working of this central control by grant. No attention is drawn to the facts that the Metropolitan Police, managed directly by the State with a rigid parliamentary limit of total expenditure, is also admired, and that the Corporation of the City of London, which, with fine independence, - never demanded a share of the police grant with its accompaniment of central control, manages to maintain what is usually described as the finest police force in the world. Members of Watch Committees must smile at the idyllic picture of the annual inspection drawn by the Minority on the recent Poor Law Commission. The inspector can see whether buttons are missing from tunics and whether the account-books look in good order; he can even smell the station cells. But he is not likely to know much about the real efficiency of the force. It is true that even in recent years scandals in some of the greatest towns of the kingdom have occasionally led to a threat that the pecuniary penalty which the Home Office commands would be enforced, but this has happened

when the scandal had already been unearthed by local public spirit, and when publicity was all that was required to cause it to be speedily abated.

The Home Office yoke has been light, partly, perhaps, because it cannot graduate the penalty according to the supposed offence, but must exact the full fine of half the cost of pay and clothing or nothing. A much stronger and more important example of the so-called "efficiency" grant is to be found in the financial arrangements providing for education. Here there is no question of giving or withholding the whole of the State's contribution; the grants are made piecemeal, so that one portion can be withdrawn when the inspector is dissatisfied with one detail and another when he is dissatisfied with another. This makes the control far more powerful, and the power it gives has been ruthlessly exercised. According to the theory which I am criticising, education ought to be the best of all our services, and it ought to be better in England than anywhere else in the world. It is not usually regarded as such. Capable local administrators may well think twice before accepting an apparent relief of local rates which is likely to be coupled with an extension to other departments of a control like that wielded by the inspectors and secretaries who exercise the powers of the Board of Education.

I have not thought it necessary to follow the current fashion of appending a bibliography or even a list of authorities. The footnotes are sufficient to put the reader on the track of further information when he requires it. But it may perhaps be useful to say here that Dr. J. Watson Grice's recent work, *National and Local Finance*, contains a fuller history of the subject

of my sixth chapter and a valuable account of the corresponding relations between the State and the localities in France, Belgium and Prussia. It is to be hoped Dr. Grice's example will be followed by other inquirers, so that we may soon have better knowledge than at present of the public administration of foreign countries. This might, at any rate, shake the absurd self-satisfaction which makes us pride ourselves that we are not, like the unfortunate peoples of continental Europe, governed by a bureaucracy. A few months ago a distinguished continental professor, who had been commissioned by his government to inquire into local taxation abroad, assured me that he, like others, had been brought up in the belief that England was the home of local self-government, but that he found that we enjoyed less of it than any of the countries he knew.

EDWIN CANNAN.

London School of Economics and Political Science.

January, 1912.

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