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Parochial Self-Government
in Rural Districts.

ARGUMENT AND PLAN

BY

HENRY C. STEPHENS, M.P.

SPECIAL ISSUE.

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BY

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION.

THIS edition of the Author's treatise on Parochial Self-Government has been published in compliance with the suggestion made by most of the reviewers of the first edition—that the work should be issued in a cheaper and more convenient form.

Since the first edition appeared, the Government have introduced into the House of Commons a Bill concerning Parish Councils, and it might naturally be inferred that it is a Bill having objects similar to those aimed at by the draft Bill for Parish Government contained in the present work, but first printed more than four years ago.

In fact, however, there is no resemblance at all between the two Bills. Their principles and machinery are as distinct from and as strange to one another as the Equator and the Poles.

The Author's object is to refer, for as many purposes as practicable, the action required upon parish affairs in rural parishes to the general body of the inhabitants, who are the individuals personally affected, and are in contact with and have under their eyes the facts upon which action has to be taken. The machinery proposed by the Author's Bill practically amounts to a restoration of the old liberty of and powers for administration possessed by the inhabitants in vestry assembled. In those popular assemblies personal rights and property interests balanced their claims if they were found to clash, and, with free discussion and common consent founded upon it, the inhabitants, for at least a century and a half, carried on their parish business with striking and quite incontestable success. Nor did any indications of decay appear until, through the effects of centralizing aggressions, all parochial independence had been gradually extinguished.

On the other hand, the "Bill for Local Government in England and Wales," introduced by the Government, is conceived in a totally different spirit and unfolds an apparently op-

posite intention to that of the Author. It deprives the Parish of important and responsible powers, and confers none which are not trivial in value or in extent. The effective powers for direct parish management, now possessed collectively by the inhabitants, and the understanding and personal guard of their interests which they obtain from direct management would disappear. As the Bill stands the inhabitants would be forced to transfer their powers for direct management to a very few elected persons, called a Parish Council.

Under such rule the mind and information of the inhabitants as a body cannot be utilized for local welfare. The Parish Council, if elected as proposed for a long *fixed term*, would be lifted beyond the reach of the inhabitants, whose influence upon it could only be occasional and dubious, while on the other hand, a control over parish affairs of an overwhelming character and immediate and continuous in its action, would, under the Bill, be acquired by centralized authorities.

Parish Councils so constituted would not confer authority upon the inhabitants, but would

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really withdraw it from them, at the same time providing a veil for concealing the advance of centralizing methods into Local Government. It is a change of this description which appears to be contemplated by the Government measure.

If the Bill should be passed upon its present basis, it will certainly disappoint the existing expectations of relief and reform. On the one side, the centralization it introduces is of a kind which, far from relieving, must increase the load upon Parliament, and on the other its irritating and wasteful meddling at the root of local administration must weaken instead of developing local faculty.

September, 1893.

P R E F A C E .

For some years past the Author has worked at the proposal for establishing rural self-government which is embodied in the following pages. He has been impelled to do so from a strong conviction that very great advantages in the past have been, and in the future might be, obtained from the administration of local affairs upon a system which would at once inform the mind, and engage the responsibility, of ratepayers through their practical participation in the work of local management.

A careful study of Poor Law Administration from its commencement to our own day shows how self-government, when confined to areas within which it had the effective understanding conferred by the sight of local facts, achieved most striking successes, while the centralized administration which superseded Parish Management, being dependent upon Report, could not acquire the intimate complete and living knowledge necessary to make its action safe, and thus drifted into a corruption and wastefulness threatening national bankruptcy.

A desire to afford a clear explanation has prompted the Author to present his suggestions for Parish Government in the form of a Bill. The errors and omissions in such a Bill must of necessity be very numerous, but, notwithstanding these inevitable shortcomings this mode of treatment is preferable for clearness of explanation, to methods of a more abstract character in which terms of merely general description are employed.

The Author may at once anticipate some criticism by admitting that he is quite aware of the tolerably obvious risks connected with this mode of handling so large a subject. He is also conscious of having no plea to excuse his presumption, beyond the qualification of much practical experience, gathered from unofficial service over a long period of time in nearly every branch of local administration.

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