

But there was another form of government which had existed previously in some of the provinces, and which has been continued right through. I refer to the Road Board system; the intention being that while the county form of government should provide for the larger affairs of the rural districts, the Road Boards should attend to the district roads and the smaller parochial matters of government.

As the Dominion has developed, fresh local bodies have been called into existence, including River Protection Boards, Land Drainage Boards, Water-supply Boards, City and Suburban Drainage Boards, Harbour Boards, Education Boards, Hospital and Charitable Aid Boards, and so on. Besides the moneys that have been expended by these bodies, of which I shall give particulars later on, there has also been a large annual expenditure by the Central Government upon roads and bridges. This has continued uninterruptedly to date, and the stream of expenditure upon roads and bridges is flowing as full and fast as ever.

AN OUTCRY FOR REFORM.

For a number of years there has been a loud outcry for reform in local government, but those who have been most active in raising the cry have not been precise in their statement of what they considered was wanting. There has simply been a general outcry for reform; but when the speakers have been asked to state in what directions they considered reform could most effectively be introduced the oracles have been silent. What have those who have cried out for local-government reform meant? Have they wanted fewer local bodies with enlarged powers, and cheaper administration? Or has it been merely a desire to get higher subsidies from the State?

ESSENTIALS OF SOUND LOCAL GOVERNMENT.

And here let me ask the question, What are the essentials of sound local government? I would define them as follow:—

- (1.) Simplicity of form and method;
- (2.) Efficiency as regards local and district needs;
- (3.) Economy of administration;
- (4.) Sound and assured finance;
- (5.) Capacity for promoting local development;
- (6.) Power to group contiguous districts for common purposes.

That there is room for effort in the direction of simplification and economy goes without saying. The work of Education Boards, Harbour Boards, and Hospital and Charitable Aid Boards covers, in many cases, practically the same territory. In not a few instances gentlemen occupy seats on all these bodies, meeting in different places in the same town, having different staffs of officers, and sometimes having divergent or even opposite interests. Surely there is here a waste of power, ability, and money, which the united common-sense of the country should be able to stop.

The same thing applies in the smaller centres. It frequently happens that the County Council, the Road Board, Town Board, Hospital Board, Education Board, Domain Board, Cemetery Board, and School Committee all meet in the same town or village. Sometimes a Land Drainage Board, a Water-supply Board, or a River Protection Board is added to the list. Can we not unitedly devise a means by which some of these can be absorbed, and one strong body created that will, like Aaron's historical rod, swallow up the rest?

That there has been an enormous increase in the number of local bodies during recent years is well known. Between the 31st March, 1906, and the 31st March, 1911, the number of counties increased from 98 to 119—an increase of 21 in five years. Presumably the same process will go on, unless some steps are taken to put an end to this wholesale subdivision of existing public authorities. With regard to a number of these new counties, it is doubtful if they should ever have been allowed to come into existence. No standard of population or rateable value has been applied; and so long as no opposition was raised in Parliament the process of multiplication has been allowed to continue, and the result has been that instead of strong county governments being established it has been found in many cases that the new bodies are merely Road Boards under the glorified name of County Councils. There can be little doubt that Government subsidies had a good deal to do with encouraging the creation of new counties.