

THE BLOW TO SELF-GOVERNMENT IN SCOTLAND

Political Effects of the Tory Act

(From the Radio Talk by Dr James Devon, broadcast on 28th June to all Scottish Stations.)

[Dr James Devon speaks from Edinburgh on the wireless once a quarter on "Recent Events in Scotland." On 28th June he discussed, among other matters, the working of the Local Government Act of the Tory Government and had something instructive to say, well in tune with democratic thought. The *political* aspects of that "De-rating" Act deserve close attention, always bearing in mind the grave and unjust *economic* effects of the Treasury subventions collected by indirect taxation to give relief of rates and hand over an enormous dole to the landed interest. With these increased subventions has come, inevitably, increased control by central departments and the undermining of local self-government itself.—EDITOR, *Land & Liberty*.]

Dr Devon said :

On the 15th May of this year the machinery of Scottish Local Government underwent a profound change. The consequence cannot be forecast, but the character of the change may be examined with advantage. Boards elected for the special purposes of dealing with education and with the care of the poor, have been abolished. Small burghs have lost their power of self-government; in some cases after a long and honourable exercise of it. Their powers have been handed over to Councils elected by larger areas for other purposes. There are now more voters on the rolls than ever, as a result of extensions of the franchise. On the other hand, they have fewer representatives; for the number of elected representatives to the Glasgow Town Council—any instance would do equally well—has not been increased by the number of Parish Council and Education Authority representatives whose work is taken over. A new element has been introduced in the shape of co-opted members. It is the re-adoption of a principle long ago abolished in favour of representative government; for whomsoever the co-opted members may represent, they do *not* represent the electors, but only some favoured parties of them.

There are other new features that should not pass unobserved. In the Counties, the electors in the absorbed Burghs do not vote on equal terms with those in the landward areas. The County is divided into areas unequal in population and rating value. The result is that those who pay full rates have less voting power in some Counties than those who do not pay full rates and the ratepaying elector is, to that extent, in a minority, so far as representation is concerned.

One effect of the De-rating Act is to free certain electors from their equal burden of the rates. It is an approach to a condition where one set of electors will determine the expenditure of rates, and another section will pay them. In order to prevent an increase of rates, the Treasury will give a subsidy to the Councils. That is to say, that rates will be supplemented by grants from taxes; or, to put it another way, ratepayers will be subsidized at the expense of the taxpayer. It is claimed that the change will promote efficiency and economy. Already there have been increases in salaries intimated.

One thing is certain, and that is that the change was not asked for by the electors, and the proposals for it were never placed before them.

Occasion has been taken to give the Central Authority a power over the local authorities that it did not have before. The Central Authority is in London. Nominally, it is the Secretary for Scotland. Actually

it is the permanent officials. Now they may be able men or they may not. They are not removable, as elected representatives are; and they are not supervised by elected representatives, as local officials are. It may be the case that the less you control your servants the better you will be served, but it has not hitherto proved generally true in household or business matters; and if it is true, why bother about electing representatives? Why not let your servants co-opt one another?

I am one of a rapidly diminishing number of Scots who went to school in the days before the law compelled people to send their children there. Not that we went willingly, for school was then a place where the belief was held that attention could be excited through integuments, and where there was always a risk of getting a hot hide; but the law did not compel our attendance. Some children never got schooling. School Boards were instituted, and they did good work. Better work was to be done by the Education Authorities which replaced them; though most people were satisfied with what they had done and were doing. The movement for change did not come from the electors but from the officials. The Boards were still elected by those who paid for their work; and were elected for the special purpose of attending to the instruction of the young. Now that is left to be supervised by men who have to attend to drainage, and lighting and health, and police and all the rest of it.

I remember when the Parochial Boards treated the poor with a Spartan hand. They were elected on a fancy franchise which gave a man votes in proportion to the property he owned. They were replaced by Parish Councils, elected on the broadest franchise. Their work bears testimony to their efficiency. If there is a hospital system in the kingdom that is superior to that of the late Glasgow Parish Council, I have not heard of it. The members of the Council had as much work to do as any body of men could manage, but now it is handed over to the Town Council, which had already quite enough to do.

I have lived through a period in which devolution of powers, from close bodies to representative bodies of citizens, was demanded and obtained; to the great advantage of the community. Now we have reached a time when centralisation is the cry; and so far as it has gone it has resulted in confusion, extravagant expenditure, and paralysis of individual effort. In the papers the other day one gentleman was mentioned as director of 43 companies, and some of them large ones. It would seem that the bigger a business is, the easier it is to direct it; and so, the more work you give to your representatives the better it will be done! We shall see.

Our Press correspondents in different parts of the country are ever active, and news clippings reaching this office show many opportunities have lately been taken of putting the case for land value taxation and free trade through the medium of "Letters to the Editor." Especially active in this connection has been Mr Eric Jones, of Liverpool, who has debated the case at considerable length in the *Liverpool Evening Express*, the *Cheshire Observer* and other journals. Recent letters have also appeared over the signatures of Mr Fred Skirrow (*Yorkshire Observer* and *Keighley News*) Councilor William Noble (*Stockport Express*), Mr Jabez Crabtree (*Yorkshire Observer*), Mr D. J. J. Owen (*Manchester City News*), "J. S." (*Aberdeen Express*), Mr Harry Edwards (*South London Press*), Dr Percy McDougall (*Manchester Guardian*).