

**THE STORY OF THE LONDON
COUNTY COUNCIL, A SERIES
OF ARTICLES BY THE TIMES
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT**

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The story of the London County council, a series of articles by the Times special correspondent
by Various

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LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL

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BY
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The Story of the London County Council.

January 21, 1907.

I.

The London County Council has just completed 18 years of existence. It came into the world on January 17, 1889, when the first elections took place. Along with the other county councils it was brought into being by the Local Government Act, of 1888, which was the work of a Conservative Government, and more particularly of the late Lord Ritchie, who as Mr. Ritchie was in charge of the measure. When emphasis is laid upon the democratic mission of the London County Council and on its achievements for the benefit of London its origin should not be forgotten. The orators of the Progressive party, who at every possible opportunity dilate with so much eloquence and satisfaction upon their own record, might remember to whom they owe their municipal existence; but somehow they never do, unless it be to complain of the inadequate powers entrusted to them. Upon that head there will be something to say presently; but meantime, if these things are to be thrown, as Progressives insist, into the scales of party politics, they may be reminded that Radical Governments have been in power since the London County Council was created by Conservatives, yet the only large extension of power it has received was bestowed by the same party, which has been heartily abused for its pains.

The Act of 1888 was received with no popular enthusiasm. It is an exceedingly long and complicated measure, which no one, except Mr. Ritchie himself, took the trouble to master at the time. Lord Rosebery, when he stood for election under it, frankly confessed that he had not; and it is more than probable that to this day nobody has ever mastered it. Nevertheless it has been on the whole decidedly and even markedly successful. The county councils have added to the dignity and the efficiency

of that system of local government which is one of the most salient features of our political organization. As a rule, they do their work well and in a businesslike way, they enjoy the respect and confidence of the ratepayers in a far higher degree than the smaller units of local administration. But by the irony of history the London Council, which aroused more hopes and attracted more attention than any other, has proved an exception and has failed to satisfy public expectation. Public dissatisfaction with the Metropolitan Board of Works had grown so acute that the substitution of a more representative, important, and responsible body was felt to be inevitable. As a matter of fact, the Board of Works had done a great deal of good and lasting work during its 33 years of existence, and it left behind it some standing monuments of its activity which its successor has not yet equalled or even approached. It constructed the main drainage and the Thames Embankment, which is the finest thing that modern London has to show; it effected vast improvements by the clearing of insanitary areas and the laying-out of new streets; it freed the bridges from tolls, provided some thousands of acres of parks and open spaces, established the Fire Brigade, and maintained it in a state of efficiency which made it a model for other countries. That is not a bad record of positive achievement, and nothing was suggested against the integrity of the members as a whole. As *The Times* said, "They are honourable men, whose hands are absolutely pure in the sense of any direct or legal liability, but a very large number are not innocent of the negligence which tempts to official knavery." They were, no doubt, too small a body for the adequate discharge of their multifarious functions, their administration became weak, and with a slack control abuses crept in. It is wholesome to recall all this, because a similar situation is confronting their successors, who are more numerous, but whose duties have increased in a still greater ratio and are being relegated more and more to the real control of officials. And the members of the County Council are, as will be presently shown by the mouth of an unimpeachable witness, of very much the same character as those of the older body. The one difference is that they are directly responsible to the ratepayers; and what that is worth we shall see when they come up for judgment in the course of a few weeks.

There was, then, a real demand for a new authority in London, and much was hoped from it. No body ever came into existence with more general good will or fairer prospects. But from the first, and even before the first, expectation was disappointed. The hope generally entertained by all who were interested in the government of London was that advantage might be taken of the opportunity to obtain a body of men whose position, ability, and reputation would command popular confidence and respect. Newspapers of all shades of opinion expressed themselves in that sense and deprecated the introduction of party politics as alien

to the occasion. But when the candidates came forward it was perceived that, with the exception of Lord Rosebery and Sir John Lubbock, who stood for the City, and perhaps two or three others, they by no means answered to the character required. The Radical journals, in particular, were acutely disappointed and did not hesitate to say so in very blunt terms. The *Daily Chronicle* in an article published on January 7, 1889, said that the list of candidates was disappointing :—

Of the great bulk of the nominees we must frankly say they are most of them but slightly superior, while many of them are actually inferior, to the old-fashioned type of candidate who was sent up by the vestries to the moribund Board of Works . . . they will be found as a body less competent for the practical work of efficient and thrifty local administration than the justices of the peace. If the London County Council is to be composed of persons of this type it is very unlikely that in our time there will arise a popular demand for an extension of its powers or an elevation of its status. . . . It is perfectly certain that the Council need not expect to be entrusted with authority over us comparable with that which the municipal councils of Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham wield over their constituents.

The *Daily News* regretted that "more men of tried capacity and public distinction had not come forward" and thought that "it was hardly worth while to get rid of the Board of Works if mere vestrymen were to continue." The same authority said two days later "the list of candidates includes very few men of national reputation." It is worth while to reproduce these expressions of opinion because they explain the apathy of the electors and the failure of the Council to command the prestige which it was hoped would signalize the constitution of the new authority and strengthen its hands. Public confidence was further discouraged by the total failure of a great many candidates to grasp the nature of the functions which they were eager to undertake. As the *Daily Chronicle* said, what was wanted was to get "the best possible administration of local affairs," and to that end the electors "should endeavour to get the County Council composed of the best men of business whose services were attainable." But the candidates apparently thought the Council was to be a legislative body, and showed much less concern about administering the powers entrusted to them by Parliament than about obtaining other vast powers which had been withheld. Their election addresses teemed with large promises and ambitious programmes, which included such trifling matters as control of the police, the liquor traffic, the City companies and the metropolitan charities, absorption of the City Corporation, the acquisition of the water supply, gas, and the markets;

the taxation of ground-rents, equalization of rates and alteration of the incidence of rating from occupier to owner; Sunday closing, local option, and other things with which the Council had nothing whatever to do. In short, it was a grand display of fireworks by pure faddists and unpractical schemers. In vain Lord Rosebery, who delivered a number of extremely sensible speeches, rebuked all this foolish and ignorant nonsense. He said that politics were not the business of the County Council at all :—

It is no part of the duty of the London County Council to discuss what powers ought to be heaped on it; it will be mainly occupied in organization. The hands of the County Council will be too full for the next three years to undertake any more business than it has already, in fact I doubt rather whether it will be able to adequately discharge all the duties that will devolve upon it, and the question of the enlargement of its powers will rest not with the County Council but with the Imperial Parliament.

He pleaded for a practical view of the Council's functions, while *The Times* and other newspapers pointed out that the way for the Council to obtain sundry powers and prerogatives withheld was to prove to Parliament its right to fuller confidence by the excellent accomplishment of its actual work. But this good advice fell on deaf ears, and the consequence is that the Council has never obtained them, although those who most desired them have had a free hand in its affairs. Public dissatisfaction with the candidates and their misconception of the duties entrusted to them was further increased by the manoeuvring at the first election. In all the brazen annals of political electioneering there are few more cynical pages than this. The election was supposed to be non-political, and the introduction of party politics was strongly deprecated by public men of the greatest influence, including Mr. Gladstone and Lord Rosebery; and the same line was taken by the newspapers. Lord Rosebery declared in his election address to the City constituency that "absolute freedom from party politics was the only basis which he could accept," and he admitted that if the election were to be on party lines he would have no chance of election. Sir John Lubbock, his fellow-candidate for the same constituency, wrote to the *Daily Chronicle* protesting against being described as standing as a Liberal Unionist, and expressing "a strong feeling that the selection of representatives on the County Council ought not to be determined by party considerations." This plea was endorsed by a leading article, which expressed the view that "the duties which a county council has to perform are by no means political." The result of all this was that political considerations were largely

disregarded by the electors, who returned Sir John Lubbock and Lord Rosebery at the head of the poll, together with 69 other members professing Liberal or Radical politics against 47 Conservatives. There would have been nothing to regret in this—indeed the return of Sir John Lubbock and Lord Rosebery was a very fortunate thing for the Council—if the disregard of party politics had been maintained; but the temptation was too great. The Radical newspapers hailed the result as a great victory for the party, and Mr. John Morley in a speech at Sheffield claimed the elections as proof of London sympathy with Radical party politics.

Thenceforward the Council was committed to party procedure, which has had a very bad effect upon its conduct. The majority, which consisted chiefly of those who had made the most lavish promises to their constituents, were confirmed by success at the polls in their intentions, and in order to be in a position to give effect to them they promptly proceeded to treat the minority in a spirit of the narrowest partisanship. The first duty of the new body was to elect 19 aldermen, and here again a trick was played. The majority, who had already formed themselves into a compact body, made some feint of inviting the rest to confer with them and of considering a list of aldermen to be proposed by the minority. The latter accordingly drew up a list, not on party lines, but containing the names of three gentlemen agreeable to the majority; but when the matter came to voting, the majority simply elected their own list and ignored the nominees of the minority with one exception. A few Liberal members voted for Lord Meath in preference to some obscure candidate on their own list, and he was elected. The political character of their proceeding was placed beyond doubt by the fact that it followed the advice of the party organs which urged that the election of aldermen should be carried out on party lines. The full Council, thus constituted, then proceeded to complete its organization in the same spirit by electing the Chairman, vice-chairman, and deputy chairman all from the same party. Lord Rosebery was doubtless elected Chairman instead of Sir John Lubbock—who had headed the poll, acted as provisional chairman, and enjoyed equal confidence—simply because Lord Rosebery was then a Home Ruler and supposed to be a more "advanced" politician than Sir John, who was a Liberal Unionist.

But why rake up all this ancient history? Because the past gives the key to the present; the position of the Council can only be understood in the light of its history. As it began so it has continued. It has never enjoyed the prestige or secured the general confidence which are necessary to make it the efficient, dignified, and representative body that it ought to be. In fact it has lost ground. Its failure is reflected in the elections. On the first occasion, 18 years ago, the electors in general displayed,

for the reasons given, much less interest than had been expected. Sir John Lubbock and Lord Rosebery, who were the most distinguished candidates and openly standing for good administration dissociated from politics, received more than 8,000 votes apiece; but no other successful candidate approached that number. Few exceeded 3,000, and many had less than 2,000 votes cast for them. "Little excitement was shown in any part of London," says the cold chronicle of the Annual Register, "and in few cases did more than one-half of the electors go to the poll." In 1895 a rally was made. Dissatisfaction with the party in power, which had in the first Council been checked in its exuberant aspirations and kept to business by the influence of Lord Rosebery, Sir John Lubbock, Lord Lingen, and other men of experience, became acute, and a serious contest took place, in which 540,000 votes were cast and the Moderate party secured a majority of 30,000, but only an equal number of seats with the other side; and this equality was nullified by the preponderant votes of Progressive aldermen. In the last two elections only 40 and 45 per cent. of the voters went to the poll. In the last of all the highest proportion in any constituency was 64 per cent.; in six constituencies less than one-third of the electors took the trouble to vote, and in many others the number was not much greater. The thing had become a farce.

And all this time the same party has been in power. It gradually acquired the name "Progressive," how, nobody knows. These names come by some indefinable process and gradually attach themselves. Some candidates at the first election called themselves Progressive Reformers; probably they took the term from the Radical "Progress" party in Germany. For some time they were called indifferently Progressists and Progressives, until the latter word won general acceptance. But they certainly identified themselves, as has been shown, with the Radical party in politics. The term "Moderate," applied to the other Municipal party, arose in a similar manner. It is to be observed that candidates of both parties appealed to the electors in 1889 as municipal reformers; but some were progressive or theoretical, others moderate or practical, reformers. So the names arose. As municipal politics stand at present, the honoured chiefs of the first County Council, to whom it owed whatever prestige it had, would certainly be moderate reformers, whereas the Progressives have become more and more closely identified with Socialism, wherein they have merely anticipated, by very little, the course of their party in Parliament. But, in any case, the one party has been in power from the first. For a few years following 1895 it had the salutary experience of an opposition as powerful as itself, and the influence of this period is seen in the Council's records; but for the rest it has held undisputed sway, which has grown less and less balanced of late years. Now this is not good for any party. The theory of