

3D. MUNICIPAL SOCIALISM

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W. C. CROFTS

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By W. C. CROFTS.

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Municipal Socialism.

WHILE the attention of Parliament, the press, and the public is concentrated upon legislation of general interest to the country, each succeeding session witnesses the unobtrusive growth of a class of measures of no less importance than those which are styled imperial. It is not alone in "Committees of the whole House," and in "Grand Committees," that questions of liberty and property are discussed and decided. The "Select Committee" is nowadays a tribunal which practically, as far as the public is concerned, sits with closed doors, and adjudicates *in camera* upon matters that affect the daily existence of large sections of the community. Amongst the varieties of private

bill legislation upon which these committees have to pass verdicts, no class is more numerous, certainly none more important, than that which comprises what are called "Improvement" Bills. In the review of the Bills of the session issued annually by the Parliamentary Committee of the League, attention has on each occasion been called to the growing abuses of this department of legislation. The dimensions to which the evil had attained, induced the Committee last year to devote a considerable portion of "Overlegislation in 1884" to criticising in detail the peculiarities of this species of piecemeal "reform."

Following upon these efforts to awaken the alarm of the public at the insidious encroachments upon their persons and pockets, promoted by this class of measures, it is gratifying to note the attempt that *has been made in the dying throes of the expiring*

Parliament to confine this fussy legislation within some sort of strait-waistcoat. Alluding to the abortive Private Bill Legislation Bill of last session, one of the leading Scotch papers at the time remarked:—“The public will not be surprised to know that the Home Office has at last come in to scrutinise the Private Bills which Town Councils, Police Commissions, and other local authorities are promoting in Parliament. It appears that Sir William Harcourt has been amazed by the multitude of offences which these measures create, and being of opinion that there is no “local crime,” is bent on limiting the power of local authorities to set police traps for their unwary constituents. It is, therefore, expected that some kinds of sanitary and police legislation which have been much in fashion, if not in favour, during the last few years, will this year and in future years receive a check. The work of damping the zeal of local authorities, and of their sanitary,

police, and medical inspectors, has hitherto been left to the Liberty Defence Leagues, like those which are represented by Lord Bramwell and Mr. Hopwood."

Whatever may be the disturbing cause, it is at any rate, satisfactory to know that the department over which the Secretary of State presides, has at length been aroused to a sense of its responsibility in this matter. The object which this Bill has in view (for it is safe to assume that it is only in a state of suspended animation, and will be revived in the new Parliament), is "to amend the system of Private Bill Legislation in the United Kingdom," and "to provide more effectually for the conduct of enquiries" relating to private Bills. This is to be effected by the substitution, in place of the unprofessional machinery of the Select *Committee*, of three "Justices of the High Court

of Parliament " specially elected for the purpose, who, as the draughtsman of the Bill puts it, " shall rank *pari passu (sic)* with judges of the High Court of Justice." Every private Bill, which under the present system would come before a Select Committee, will in future be referred to one of these judges, who will ultimately report to the House his decision thereon. If the House should be dissatisfied with the way in which the judge has dealt with the Bill, it will be able to amend it there, or refer it back to him with special instructions. The sittings of the judges will not be confined to the Parliamentary session, but will be continuous. Powers are to be given to the judges, if they see fit, to transfer their work every year—for a month to Edinburgh, and for a similar period to Dublin, in order to consider on the spot the private Bills relating to Scotland and Ireland respectively.

The extension of local self-government has been persistently harped upon in some quarters, as one of the first and most important questions with which the new Parliament will have to deal. The direction which this extension is likely to take, is a matter of no small concern to the political development of the country. Its probable course in the near future will be best inferred from an examination of the latest tendencies and aspirations of local authorities, as embodied in their applications to Parliament for further powers during the recent session. The completest estimate of these will be obtained by a survey of the demands and pretensions of municipalities in their original and natural exuberance, and not in the more or less docked state in which they occasionally emerge from the Select Committee. The enquiry has been purposely confined to the measures promoted by urban *authorities*, because it is in this quarter that the