THE WORK OF THE LONDON COUNTY COUNCIL.

By

SIDNEY WEBB, LL.B., L.C.C.

(Chairman of the Technical Education Board).

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The London Reform Union includes among its members adherents of every political party, and belongs itself to none. It proceeds upon no abstract theory, but endeavours to deal with each subject as it arises from the point of view of the improvement of London, and the provision of a wider and better life for London's citizens. It aims at purity, unity, and simplicity of administration; at the management by the people of their own affairs, and a just distribution of the public burdens. In its local branches men and women of every religious denomination, economic creed, or political faith unite in the common work of disseminating a knowledge of local affairs, agitating for the specific reforms most urgently needed in each case, and co-operating with the local governing bodies in promoting efficient administration. By educational lectures, by public meetings, and by the circulation of literature, the Executive Committee of the Union, which is annually elected by its members, endeavours to foster and direct the growing sense of civic duty now stirring throughout the Metropolis.

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The Work of the London County Council.*

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SIDNEY WEBB, LL.B., L.C.C.

(Chairman of the Technical Education Board.)

IT is one of the curious drawbacks of London citizenship that very few people have any clear idea of what the County Council is, or what it really does.

I should be the very last person to complain of the great London dailies, which have from the first given the Council a quite unusual amount of space in their columns. But it unfortunately happens that, under the conditions of newspaper existence, the journalist's account of the Council's proceedings is almost certain to give a false view of its activity. From a report of half a column or so, the reader gathers that the Council has spent its time in a somewhat acrid discussion of a petty personal grievance, or in a sharp debate about a project of fiscal or legislative reform. A smart epigram by Mr. John Burns, or a reckless accusation against the Fire Brigade or Works Committee, makes better "copy" than the dry record of administrative work presented week by week, to be, in most cases, absolutely ignored by the reporters. The result is that the average citizen has not the faintest idea of what is the real work of the Council or of the manner in which it is performed.

Let us take, as a sample, the proceedings of a single week. The reader of the Times or the Daily Chronicle (the daily papers giving the fullest reports of the Council) had his attention drawn to between six and nine points which cropped up at the Tuesday meeting. The agenda-paper for that meeting, which is about of average length, is now before me. It consists of thirty-one pages of foolscap print, containing the recommendations of twenty-eight committees, upon which the Council is invited to pass no fewer than 128 separate resolutions. These vary in importance from financial transactions involving hundreds of thousands of pounds, or issues of policy affecting a whole department, down to the appointment of an extra clerk or the sanctioning of a sky-sign. They concern every branch of London's municipal government, from water-supply to weights and measures, from tunnelling the Thames to technical education, from cricket-pitches to taxation. On all these subjects, moreover, there are numerous paragraphs reporting the progress of works already ordered by the Council, or describing action taken, as to which no resolution is required.

This survey of "London Week by Week," it is literally as long as one volume of a thirty-one-and-sixpenny novel, which is delivered to every Councillor on Saturday night, and which forms the business of the

* Reprinted (abridged) from the Contemporary Review, January, 1895, by permission of the Editor.
ensuing Tuesday's meeting. To dispose of this agenda in a single sitting is no light task, even when the Council goes on, as it often does, for half an hour or an hour beyond its normal time of four hours by the clock. Critics, appalled at the length of the agenda, have sometimes suggested that the Council keeps too much in its own hands, and, by not delegating greater powers to its committees, compels much of its work to be done twice over. This, however, is not the fact. By far the majority of the committees' reports and recommendations are adopted without a word. When a committee is in the hands of a competent chairman and enjoys the confidence of the Council, its work is habitually left unchallenged, and it often happens, that for many weeks in succession, not a single criticism or objection is made about it in Council. When, however, a committee elects an injudicious chairman, or commits itself in any way—when, indeed, anything in its department goes wrong from any cause whatsoever—a feeling of uneasiness spreads among the other members of the Council. Every line of the reports of that committee is then scrutinised, and critics of all kinds, friendly or hostile, spring to their feet on Tuesday afternoon. Possibly the wisest go quietly to the committee itself and get their criticisms made where they can be properly sifted and considered. But there are always enough of those who prefer to move amendments to specific recommendations, even when their amendments express rather their general distrust of the committee's wisdom than any reasoned dissent from the particular proposal. Hence, it is not only the newspaper reports of the Council's proceedings that are misleading. Even the visitor in the Strangers' Gallery who listens to the debates is apt to carry away an altogether false impression unless he studies the agenda-paper more than the speeches. He will hear nothing whatever about the nineteen-twentieths of the work which is progressing so smoothly and so successfully that even the most carping critics of the Opposition party can find nothing to say about it. The whole meeting, on the other hand, will be taken up with the tiny fractions momentarily labouring with some of the manifold difficulties which beset the reformer's path.

If the Council were as loquacious or as disputatious over all its business, as it is about the proposals of any committee which has temporarily excited its distrust, the colossal and never-ending work of governing five millions of people would inevitably fall into arrear. I venture to assert, on the contrary, that there never has been an important public body which is so habitually free from arrears of work as the Council. It is, indeed, a frequent occurrence for an important subject to be allowed to stand over for a week or a fortnight, either because this is required by statute or by standing order, or because, by common consent, it is felt that extra notice should be given. But it is a rare event for any recommendation of a committee to remain for more than a fortnight on the paper, and four times a year, before adjourning for even the slightest recess, the Council invariably disposes of every item, great or small, standing on its agenda. The extraordinary celerity and smoothness with which so great a mass of complicated business is disposed of is to be ascribed first to the assiduity and skill with which Sir John Hutton presides over the Council, and, secondly, to a simple mechanical device which is destined, I believe, to play a large part in the democratic assemblies of the future. From the very outset of its career the Council has made a free use of the printing-press. The agenda-paper does not consist merely
of bald notices of motion, requiring speeches of explanation, and inviting endless inquiries about the facts. Every proposal is prefaced by a detailed statement of the circumstances and reasons which have led the committee to that particular conclusion. This prefatory matter varies, according to the importance and complication of the subject, from a couple of lines to a couple of pages. It stands on the authority of the chairman of the committee alone, and neither the Council nor the committee is responsible for its terms. No doubt it increases the printing bill. But the result is that speeches of explanation are almost unknown in the Council. Every member is kept fully aware of what is going on, and nineteen-twentieths of the resolutions proposed commend themselves without a word of debate to the unanimous approval of the whole assembly.

But the weekly public meeting of the Council comprises, it need scarcely be said, only a small part of its work. To prepare the weekly agenda there are, on an average, forty meetings of committees or sub-committees filling up every hour of the daytime, from ten or eleven on Monday morning to five or six on Friday evening, and often terminating with a "view" or inspection of a park, a sewer, or a slaughter-house on Saturday morning.

The work done by these committees falls into two classes. By far the largest amount is disposed of by the committee on its own authority, and never comes before the Council at all. Whole sections of administration, indeed, such as asylums, industrial schools, and technical education, are delegated *en bloc* to particular committees, and are heard of in Council only by quarterly or annual reports, which usually go through without a single word of comment. Even where no such express and complete delegation has taken place, the great bulk of the work of administration goes on quietly in the committee room, and is never heard of outside. The Fire Brigade Committee, for instance, has a brief report in the Council's agenda every week, with perhaps a dozen proposals of one kind or another. But these are merely the residuum out of a committee agenda which habitually contains over a hundred separate items, nearly all of which the committee decides on its own responsibility. For the week to which I am referring, when 128 resolutions were submitted to the Council, no fewer than 900 separate items came before committees, and sub-committees, who spent, in the aggregate, over 60 hours in dealing with this business. It is, I suppose, inevitable that these 900 items dealt with in committee; the thirty-one pages of agenda containing 120 proposals laid before the Council; and the 60 hours spent during the week in the steady grind of the committee-room, should make far less impression on the mind of the average citizen than the half a dozen speeches, often on insignificant details, which are reported on the Tuesday afternoon. Yet it is not on those speeches, but on the unseen and unrecorded work which I have described, that the good government of London depends.

The very multifariousness of the Council's work makes any exposition of it within the limits of an article an almost impossible task. There is no literary artifice by which the reader can be given, for instance, any idea of the patient, silent devotion of the Asylums Committee, which never gets into the papers at all. The annual report of this committee makes, by itself, a volume of 147 foolscap pages, in which are summarised the results of 181 sittings, of ten distinct sub-committees, mostly meeting at the several asylums. Week after week the members of these sub-committees journey out to Cane Hill or Claybury, Hanwell or
Banstead, to go through the thousand-and-one details involved in the management of five colossal institutions, the admission of over 3,000 lunatics every year, the careful scrutiny of those fit to be restored to the world, the vigilant investigation of every complaint or accident. And whilst London owes a special debt of gratitude to all the members of this committee, there are four men upon it to whose incessant labours during the past five years vast improvements are due. It is no light task to spend a third of your days inspecting lunatic asylums, and Messrs. McDougall, Strong, P. M. Martineau, and Leon can scarcely get off with less than this proportion. An annual expenditure exceeding £300,000 passes through their hands, and it is not too much to say that under their zealous care the London lunatic asylums have become models for the world. The new asylum at Claybury, which was opened in 1893, with its magnificent pathological laboratory, now nearing completion, will take rank, indeed, among the greatest of the many advances in the provision for the insane which this generation has witnessed. And, to quote only one of the many instances of the thought that is now lavished on these unfortunates in our midst, the latest innovation is the appointment of an interpreter, able to converse in five foreign tongues. There is, it should be explained, no system of repatriation of lunatics, and many foreigners are accordingly doomed to remain permanently in our London asylums. Some of these can neither speak nor understand a word of English, and it is a kindly thought of the Asylums Committee to seek in some slight degree to mitigate the awful mental loneliness of confinement in a foreign land by, at any rate, providing some means of occasional communication.

Duties of similar, though less onerous, character fall upon the Industrial and Reformatory Schools Committee, which conducts schools at Feltham and Maybury, where 600 boys, rescued from premature vice or crime, are boarded, lodged, clothed, educated and started out in the world. Here, again, the committee is practically supreme, it being the rarest possible occurrence for even a question to be asked in Council as to their patiently laborious work.

No less difficult is it to convey to the average citizen any conception of the enormous amount and importance of the work done by the Building Act Committee. This is no mere matter of street nomenclature, or lines of frontage, sky-signs or the thickness of party-walls, important though these things are in the life of a great city. It is no exaggeration to say that it is to the past neglect in this department, more than to any other cause, that we owe the existence of London's slums and rookeries, with all their evil outcome of intemperance, disease, and crime. London has already spent millions in clearing out the worst of these plague-spots. But until the other day slum-making was still permitted by the law. Under the vigilant scrutiny of the Building Act Committee, with its weekly agenda containing over a hundred separate cases, an ever-tighter grasp is being kept on the jerry-builder and the house-farmer. And during the session of 1894, with a dead-lift effort that hardly any one appreciates, the Council carried through Parliament its long-desired new Building Act, which, though sadly weakened in committee, constitutes one of the most important triumphs for London's progress that this generation has seen. I venture to say that if the Council had won no other victory against those who take advantage of London's weakness and London's poverty than this new Building Act it would have amply deserved the gratitude of London's citizens.
No less gratitude is due to the Public Health and Housing Committee, for its unceasing, patient struggle to deal with the slums which past neglect has created. With 386,973 persons registered at the census as living in one-roomed homes, and no fewer than 828,941 in the officially recognised overcrowded condition of two or more to a room; with over 30,000 men and women nightly destitute of any other abode than the common lodging-house or the casual ward, the problem of re-housing London’s poor is the most gigantic that the world has ever seen. This, by the way, is one of the duties which Lord Salisbury airily proposes to entrust to the tender mercies of the parish authorities. Meanwhile, however, Lord Salisbury’s own Government has placed the duty on the broader shoulders of the County Council, and even these groan under the load. But a valiant effort has been made. The Council’s common lodging-house at Shelton Street, Drury Lane, has become a model for the world; whole colonies of working-class dwellings are rising up in Bethnal Green, Deptford, Greenwich, and ten acres of the Millbank Prison site have been secured for the same purpose. Even more important, perhaps, in ultimate effect has been the committee’s partly successful struggle to increase the facilities for working men and women to live in the suburban belt. The inquiry which is now being conducted into the facilities for locomotion from one part of London to another promises to open up an altogether new vista of hope, whilst the concessions in the way of workmen’s trains and cheap fares which the pertinacity of Mr. Beachcroft and the Rev. Fleming Williams has already extracted from some of the railway companies, are among the Council’s greatest triumphs. Still greater triumphs, which can never be recounted, have been won in the improvement of sanitary administration all over London. Here the Council has no direct power. But by quietly and persistently “pegging away” at the somnolent vestries; by expert criticism and tactful handling; above all, by the devoted zeal and service of Dr. Shirley Murphy and his staff, the standard of sanitation in every corner of London has risen in the last five years to an almost incredible degree. Two pieces of statistical evidence are typical of much that is incapable of reduction to figures. The enforcement of the public health laws in a crowded city depends, in the main, on the number of sanitary inspectors. These officers are appointed by the parochial authorities. When the Council came into existence, there were, in all London, only about 100 such inspectors. Under the Council’s patient pressure the number has been doubled, and to-day there are 219 at work. No less important is the provision of a constant water supply, instead of an intermittently filled and usually foul cistern. In March, 1889, only 423,561 houses out of 748,773 in the Metropolitan water companies’ districts enjoyed this boon. In March last, the number had risen to 613,187. Of all the houses in London 78.7 per cent. are now on constant supply, over 100,000 having been added in the past three years.

The most popular of all the departments of the Council’s work is undoubtedly that of the Parks Committee, and in this great branch of administration the Council—to the bewilderment of the West End, which knows only the Royal parks managed by “George, Ranger”—has won universal approval. In no department is the comparison with the work of the Metropolitan Board of Works more striking. The following interesting statistics show that during the five and three-quarter years of the Council’s administration, a new open space has been secured, on an average, every two months. Every week that the Council has lived it
has added between three and four acres to London's breathing-grounds and playing-fields.

London's Open Spaces under the Metropolitan Board of Works.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year ending 31st December</th>
<th>Number of separate Open Spaces</th>
<th>Acreage</th>
<th>Annual Expenditure</th>
<th>Permanent Outdoor Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1884*</td>
<td>31 5</td>
<td>1808 436</td>
<td>£21,851 18,301</td>
<td>95 122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885*</td>
<td>32 5</td>
<td>1834 436</td>
<td>£23,222 18,301</td>
<td>100 122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886*</td>
<td>33 5</td>
<td>1856 436</td>
<td>£17,573 18,301</td>
<td>100 122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>2,506</td>
<td>£40,905</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2,578</td>
<td>£42,396</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total increase in four years (not counting the parks transferred in 1887)</td>
<td>7 334</td>
<td>2,244</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The five parks transferred from the Office of Works in 1887 are separately stated for 1884-86.

London's Open Spaces under the County Council.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year ending 31st March</th>
<th>Number of separate Open Spaces</th>
<th>Acreage</th>
<th>Annual Expenditure</th>
<th>Permanent Outdoor Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>48 2,985</td>
<td>£52,751</td>
<td>400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>60 3,007</td>
<td>£58,900</td>
<td>438</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>64 3,112</td>
<td>£67,249</td>
<td>548</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>67 3,228</td>
<td>£82,992</td>
<td>608</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>73 3,594</td>
<td>£87,496</td>
<td>650</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec., 1894</td>
<td>75 3,647</td>
<td>*99,965</td>
<td>679</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total increase in six years from Dec. 31, 1888, to Dec. 1894</td>
<td>32 1,069</td>
<td>£57,569</td>
<td>401</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual increase during last four years of M.B.W.</td>
<td>1\frac{2}{3} 83\frac{1}{3}</td>
<td>£561</td>
<td>15\frac{1}{3}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual increase during first six years of L.C.C.</td>
<td>7 178\frac{1}{3}</td>
<td>£9,594\frac{5}{6}</td>
<td>66\frac{5}{6}</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Estimate.

But the vigour, intelligence, and ingenuity of the Council's park administration have been even greater than its success in adding to the open-space area. By the wonderful liberal provision of cricket-pitches, football-grounds, tennis-courts, and gymnasias for girls as well as for boys; by the supply of lavatories and free public conveniences for both sexes;
by the very successful regulation of the refreshment tariffs; by the abolition of the charge for chairs; and, above all, the plentiful supply of music in the summer months by the Council’s own uniform band, the use and popularity of the Council’s parks among the masses has enormously increased. Other classes are no less loud in their praise. Bank clerks are not usually very “advanced” in their political views, but I have been more than once thanked in City banking houses by enthusiastic skaters for the care taken by the Council to promote the greatest possible enjoyment of the ice. The Council, in short, by common consent, has proved itself a wise and successful administrator of London’s treasure in open spaces, and, though there is nothing for which money is more liberally voted, it has all been accomplished at an infinitesimal extra cost. The increase of charge in six years does not amount to a rate of a halfpenny in the pound, and comes almost exactly to threepence per head per annum on the whole population. Once in four months every Londoner is invited, in effect, to “put a penny in the slot” of the Council’s money-box, and to obtain, in return, nicer walks for his wife and himself, more playing fields for the babies, cricket and football for his boys, a free gymnasium for his girls, and music for the family party just at the times that they can enjoy it.

Second only to the Parks for vigorous growth and successful administration, the Council may be proud of the record of its Fire Brigade. Oddly enough, it is just in this department that the Council has been, ever since the retirement of Sir Eyre Massey Shaw, most bitterly attacked. Lord Salisbury supposes, as do many frequenters of West-end drawing-rooms, that the Council’s quarrel with that distinguished diner-out was due to his insistence, against ignorant and meddlesome opposition, on the efficiency of his department. It is time that the truth should be known. Under Captain Shaw’s régime the Fire Brigade failed altogether to keep pace with the growing needs of London; the Metropolitan Board of Works, engaged in a futile struggle with the insurance companies, allowed their expenditure on the Fire Brigade amid a rapidly growing population positively to decline; the Superintendent acquiesced, year after year, in an inadequacy which was a standing danger to the Metropolis; and under his lax rule, moreover, there grew up a system of officers accepting presents from contractors and undertaking work for private employers, such as no diligent administrator would have endured and no vigilant committee would have permitted. It was high time that a change was made. How great has been the progress since Sir Eyre Massey Shaw threw up his place in disgust at the Council’s innovations, the following table will show:

### The Metropolitan Fire Brigade under the Metropolitan Board of Works.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>119,937</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>117,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>672</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>115,360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>674</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>112,697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>674</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>119,460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total increase in four years</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>4</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>(decrease)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Along with this increase has gone a no less satisfactory growth in the supply of those ingenious but expensive mechanical contrivances which enable the fireman's hose to be affixed directly to the high-pressure water-mains. When the Council came into existence there were only 8,807 of these "hydrants" in all London. At the present time there are 18,711. The result of all this increased efficiency is strikingly demonstrated in the statistics of fires. The total number of outbreaks, which no fire brigade can diminish, goes steadily up. In 1884 there were every day six outbreaks; in 1893, nearly nine. But the proportion of these outbreaks which are allowed to reach any considerable dimensions has, under the Council's rule, steadily fallen. In the five years between 1884 and 1888, when Captain Shaw and the Metropolitan Board of Works were in power, seventy-two out of every 1,000 fires grew to such an extent as to be classified as "serious." Between 1889 and 1893, the corresponding proportion was only sixty; a reduction of no less than 16 per cent. Ten years ago one-eleventh of the outbreaks became "serious"; to-day the proportion is one-twentieth. Lord Salisbury, at Hatfield, may not appreciate this diminution in the chance of his being burnt in his bed, but the great majority of Londoners, who dwell in crowded tenement houses, do not fail to realise its importance.

But the protection of London from fire can never attain perfection so long as four distinct authorities jostle each other at every outbreak. The Council's fire brigade has to secure the co-operation, not only of Mr. Asquith's police and of the insurance companies' "London Salvage Corps," but also of the eight competing water companies. This brings us to a further problem. For over two years the Council's Water Committee has been quietly grappling with its colossal task, the difficulties of which cannot all be publicly stated, and are consequently not realised by
impatient reformers outside. Now, at last, after much anxious inquiry and
deliberation, the committee sees its labours near fruition in the presenta-
tion to Parliament of eight Bills for the purchase of the water companies' 
undertakings, on terms equitable alike to the shareholders and the public.
During the next few months the battle will be fought in the committee-
room of the House of Commons, against all the forensic talent and expert 
ergy which wealth can enrol in the defence of monopoly rights. But 
the Council has no intention of putting its head helplessly in the lion's 
mouth. The water companies have been beaten before, and may, in a
democratic Parliament, be beaten again. The Thames is not the only, 
nor the best, source of London's supply, and when the time comes the 
Water Committee will show that its prolonged investigations for the 
protection of the ratepayers have not been thrown away.

I must pass over with a mere mention some of the other committees, 
whose work, though often less exciting, is no less onerous and important. 
The Parliamentary Committee, where the devotion and ingenuity of Mr. 
Charles Harrison and Mr. McKinnon Wood daily and hourly struggle to 
safeguard London's interests against the railway and ground landlord 
monopolists; the Bridges Committee, with its colossal engineering 
experiment of driving a tunnel under the Thames in compressed air; the 
Improvements Committee, struggling with its scanty resources to cope 
with London's ever-growing traffic; the Thames Conservancy (now the 
Rivers) Committee, which has won for London the right to representation 
on the Thames Conservancy Board, and incidentally revolutionised that 
anomalous body; the Main Drainage Committee, which has purified the 
river itself; the Corporate Property Committee, managing the Council's 
estates worth over two millions, and keeping up a vigilant scrutiny of all 
charitable endowments; the Finance Committee, whose admirable 
administration, praised even by the City and the purists at the Treasury, 
leaves not a single point for criticism in the Council's financial trans-
actions, and has carried Metropolitan Stock up to within a few points of 
Consols; the Local Government and Taxation Committee, fighting 
incessantly to secure a uniform basis of valuation for London, and 
converting even the local assessment committees to its views; the Public 
Control Committee, wielding a heterogeneous collection of municipal 
powers over baby-farms and coal-supply, shop hours and petroleum; the 
Stores Committee, with its 1,800 separate annual contracts; the High-
ways Committee, whose battle for the tramways has put at least a 
million sterling into the pockets of the London ratepayer; the General 
Purpose Committee—half revising Cabinet, half "maid-of-all-work" to 
the others—all these, not to speak of special committees for particular 
purposes, take their part in the great organisation by which London rules 
its corporate life.

If it be asked what new thing the present Council has done, apart 
from extending the first Council's work, I think we may with some 
confidence refer to the starting of its department of Technical Education. 
The circumstances of London differ so much from those of other cities 
and counties, the difficulties and complications of its educational 
problems are so great, the chaos of unco-ordinated authorities is so 
bewildering, that the first Council may well be excused for not 
immediately adding Technical Education to all its other duties. But the 
second Council grappled with the problem in its very first summer. 
Having been, from the outset, Chairman of the Special Committee and 
then of the Technical Education Board, to which the Council has

delegated its educational functions, I am disqualified from expressing any opinion as to the success of this new departure. But I think it will be admitted that we have made good use of our time. The Technical Education Board, which carries on this part of the Council's work, has already established a comprehensive "scholarship ladder" from the Board School right up to the highest technical college, the best art schools, and the university; it has done much, by its liberal grants and skilled inspection, to develop and improve the various "Polytechnics" now growing all over the Metropolis; under the expert guidance of Dr. Garnett it has worked a beneficent revolution in the evening science and technology classes, and made more practical the instruction in these subjects given in the public secondary schools; whilst the London Schools of Art are, under its fostering care, springing into new life. By the appointment, as its art advisers, of such expert craftsmen as Mr. George Frampton, A.R.A., and Mr. William Lethaby, a distinguished sculptor and a no less distinguished architect, the Board has shown how keenly it is alive to the need for a thorough reorganisation of the "arts and crafts" side, and we need not now despair of London one day possessing a Municipal Art School to rival that of Birmingham. Nor have the women and girls been forgotten. Besides sharing in all the preceding advantages, they enjoy a special department of their own. The Board has set up three "Schools of Domestic Economy" (shortly to be increased to five) which intercept the maidens of thirteen who would otherwise be leaving school to "take a little place"; it has started at Battersea a Domestic Economy Training School, which is already turning out skilled teachers accustomed to the housekeeping of the London poor; and, by a permanent staff of qualified instructors in cookery, dressmaking, laundry work and hygiene, it has given thousands of lessons in these subjects to groups of working women in all parts of London, who are too old or too poor, too hard-worked or too apathetic to take advantage of any existing institutions.

But the branch of the Council's work which has attracted the greatest interest has undoubtedly been its labour policy, and its establishment of a separate Works Committee. Here the present Council has, in the short space of under three years, done much to settle, by actual experience, some of the most difficult problems of public administration.

Let us take first what is known as the "Fair Wages Movement," which was, for several years, constantly made a ground of ridicule and denunciation by the Council's critics. Seldom has a policy so bitterly abused been so quickly and triumphantly successful. After prolonged discussion, repeated at intervals during four years, it has become settled policy to pay, in each trade, the recognised trade union rate of wages, and in no case less than 6d. an hour to adult men, or 18s. a week to adult women. At first this was thought a dreadful business. Many persons unfamiliar with the actual practice of industrial life imagined that the common phrase, "trade union wages," involved something quite new in wage adjustments. Even Lord Farrer tried to rouse the public to believe that, in adopting the principle of trade union wages the Council "will lose its independence, it will be run by the trades unions, and will be bound hand and foot to obey their orders."*

It is difficult to realise that Lord Farrer believed—or certainly made his readers believe—that "trade union wages" meant just whatever the trade unions might choose to ask for. Every one who has any personal acquaintance with industrial life knows that "trade union wages" is, in every organised industry, a well-understood expression, denoting not any visionary demand, but the actual rate agreed to, more or less explicitly, by the representatives of the associated employers on the one hand, and the trade union executives on the other. What was proposed, and what has been done, is the insertion, in the Council's own standard list of wages, of the rates proved, after exhaustive inquiry, to be actually recognised and adopted by the leading employers in each particular trade within the London district. In the whole of the building trades, for instance, which comprise three-fourths of the Council's work, the trade union rates of wages were found embodied in an elaborate formal treaty concluded between the London Master Builders' Association and the London Building Trades' Federation.

With regard to unskilled labour, the case is otherwise. Here, in most cases, no generally recognised trade union rate exists. The Council, fortified by an unanimous vote of the House of Commons to the same effect, has taken the position that it is undesirable, whatever the petition, that any of its employes should receive less than the minimum required for efficient and decent existence. Seeing that Mr. Charles Booth places the actual "poverty line" in London at regular earnings of 21s. per week, it cannot be said that the Council's "moral minimum" of 24s. for men and 18s. for women errs on the side of luxury and extravagance. This labour policy is now a matter of common consent that it has worked smoothly and with marked success. Nor has it led to any ruinous increase in the labour bill. In 1889 the average pay of the wage-staff taken over from the Metropolitan Board of Works was £75 per annum. In 1894, after five years, this average had risen to £78, or exactly four per cent. The wage statistics of the Government Labour Gazette show many trades which have secured a far greater advance from private employers in the same period.

The principle involved in this policy is easily stated. Public offices may be filled in one of two ways. We may, on the one hand, practically put the places up to auction, taking those candidates who offer to do the work for the lowest wages. Or, on the other hand, we may first fix the emoluments, and then pick the best of the candidates coming forward on those terms. When we want brain-workers of any kind, every one agrees that the latter policy is the only safe one. We do not appoint as a judge the lawyer who offers to take the place at the lowest rate. No one would think of inviting competitive tenders from clergymen as to the price at which they would fill a vacant bishopric. A town or county council which bought its engineer or its medical officer in the cheapest market would, by common consent, make a very bad bargain. In all these cases we have learnt, by long and painful experience, that there is so much difference between competence and incompetence, that we do not dream of seeking to save money by taking the candidate who offers his services at the lowest rate. No one would think of inviting competitive tenders from clergymen as to the price at which they would fill a vacant bishopric. A town or county council which bought its engineer or its medical officer in the cheapest market would, by common consent, make a very bad bargain. In all these cases we have learnt, by long and painful experience, that there is so much difference between competence and incompetence, that we do not dream of seeking to save money by taking the candidate who offers his services at the lowest rate. Unfortunately, many worthy people who realise this aspect of brain-work, because they belong themselves to the brain-working class, are unconscious that it applies no less forcibly to mechanical labour. They will pay any price for a good architect, but are apt to regard bricklayers and masons as all equally "common workmen." But, as a matter of fact, there is as great a
relative difference between one painter or plasterer and another, as there is between one architect or manager and another. If the pressure of competition is shifted from the plane of quality to the plane of cheapness, all economic experience tells us that the result is incompetency, scamped work, the steady demoralisation of the craftsman, and all the degradation of sweating. When a man engages a coachman or a gardener, he understands this well enough, and never for a moment thinks of hiring the cheapest who presents himself. Even the sharpest-pressed employer does not entrust expensive machinery to the mechanic who offers to take the least wages. The London County Council, realising it more vividly than some bodies less in touch with the actual facts of industrial life, applies the principle all round. Whether the post to be filled be that of an architect or a carpenter, the wage to be paid is first fixed at a rate sufficient to attract the best class of men in the particular occupation. Then the most competent candidate that can be found is chosen. Competition among the candidates works no less keenly than before; but it is competition tending not to reduce the price, thereby lowering the standard of life throughout the nation, but to enhance efficiency, and thus really to lessen the cost of production.

With regard to the lowlier grades of labour a further consideration enters in. When a Board of Poor Law Guardians finds itself rescuing from starvation, out of the Poor Rate, women actually employed by one of its own contractors to make up workhouse clothing, at wages insufficient to keep body and soul together, even the most rigorous economist would admit that something was wrong. The London County Council, responsible as it is for the health of the people of London, declines to use its position as an employer deliberately to degrade that health by paying wages obviously and flagrantly insufficient for maintenance, even if competition drives down rates to that pitch.

So far, indeed, is the Council's action from being economically heretical, as is commonly supposed in West-end drawing-rooms, that it is exactly what the instructed "orthodox" economist recommends. When the issue was explicitly raised last August at the Economic Section of the British Association there was not a single dissentient voice. Even the Times now holds its peace. The economic heretics, in fact, are those who, in flat defiance of Adam Smith, McCulloch, Mill, and Marshall alike, persist in assuming that there is some obligatory "law" that the pressure of competition ought, without interference from man, to be allowed so to act as to degrade the standard of life of the whole community.

It must equally be put to the credit of the present Council that it has settled the "Fair Wages" question for its contractors as well as for itself. Many town councils up and down the country are still labouring with this issue, which London has at last got rid of. All firms tendering for the Council's work are required to specify the wages they pay for each particular craft. If the work is to be executed within the London district, it is an easy matter to see whether these rates correspond with those in the Council's Standard List. If the work is to be done elsewhere, it is found, in practice, quite possible to ascertain, by inquiry of the proper local officers of the associations of employers on the one hand and the trades unions on the others, whether the proposed rates are really those current in the district. Firms accusing themselves of paying less than these rates are informed of the fact, as a reason why their tenders are not accepted, and have, therefore, full opportunity of
correcting any injustice. This system works smoothly and well. The
good contractors fall easily into line with it, and most of the minority of
Councillors who honestly believed it to be impossible of execution, now
recognise that they were mistaken. Here, again, the key-note of the
Council’s policy is, not the abolition of competition, but the shifting of
its plane from mere cheapness to that of industrial efficiency. The
speeding up of machinery, the better organisation of labour, the greater
competency of manager, clerk, or craftsman, are all stimulated and
encouraged by the deliberate closing-up to the contractor of less legitimate
means of making profit. Just as the Factory Acts, the Mines Regulation
Acts, and the Education Acts “rule out” of industrial competition the
cheapness brought about by the overwork of women and children, or the
neglect of sanitary precautions, so the London County Council, repre­
senting the people of London, declines to take advantage of any cheap­
ness that is got by merely beating down the standard of life of particular
sections of the wage-earners. And just as the Factory Acts have won
their way to economic approval, not merely on humanitarian grounds, but
as positively conducive to industrial efficiency, so, too, it may confidently
be predicted, will the now widely-adopted fair wages clauses.*

We come to an altogether different range of criticism when we con­
sider the Council’s determination to dispense, wherever possible, with the
contractor, and execute its works by engaging a staff of workmen under
the supervision of its own salaried officers. This has been fiercely attacked
as being palpably and obviously opposed to political economy and
business experience. It is worth while to place on record the facts. The
first case is that of watering and cleaning the bridges over the Thames,
a service which the Metropolitan Board of Works let out to a contractor.
The new Council perversely went into calculations which led the mem­
bers to believe that the contractor was making a very good thing out of the
job, and finally to decide upon engaging labour direct. There has now
been over three years’ experience of the new system, with the result that,
whereas the contractor charged 4s. 7½d., to 4s. 10½d. per square yard,
the work is now done at an average cost of 3s. 2d. a square yard, every­
thing included.

This, however, was merely a matter of hiring labour, no constructive
work being involved. It is interesting to trace the stages by which the
Council was driven, by force of circumstances, to its present position of
builder. The first piece of actual building executed by the Council was
the schoolhouse at Crossness. The architect’s estimate was for £1,800,
and tenders were invited in due course. The lowest tender proved to be
£2,300. After considerable hesitation the Main Drainage Committee
resolved to try to save this large excess over the estimate, and set to
work to do the job under its own officers. The result was the completion
of the work for less than the architect’s estimate, and for £536 less than
the lowest tender. But the case which finally convinced three out of
every four members of the Council of the desirability of executing their
own works was the York Road Sewer. The engineer estimated the cost
at £7,000, and tenders were invited in the usual manner. Only two were

* Over 150 local governing bodies have adopted some kind of fair wages clause in
their contracts (see H. C. 189, of 1892; compare also the House of Commons’
unanimous resolutions of February 13th, 1891, and March 6th, 1893, imposing the
principle for Government contracts.
sent in, one for £11,588, and the other for £11,608. The Council determined to do the work itself, with the result that a net saving of £4,477 was made.*

This remarkable result naturally created a sensation among the contracting world, and attempts were made to impugn the engineer's figures. In his crushing reply he pointed out that the contractors had reckoned out their tenders at absurdly high prices in nearly every detail, charging, for instance, 60s. and 70s. respectively, per cubic yard of brickwork and cement, whereas the work was done at 39s. It is clear from the other particulars given, and from facts notorious at the time, that an agreement had been come to by the contractors not to compete with one another for this job, in order to induce the Council to abandon its fair wages clause. The Council preferred to abandon the contractor,†

The outcome was the establishment, in the spring of 1893, of a Works Committee to execute works required by the other committees in precisely the same manner as a contractor. The Works Committee has an entirely distinct staff, and keeps its own separate accounts. The committee requiring any work prepares its own estimate, as if tenders were going to be invited, and the Works Committee is asked whether it is prepared to undertake the work upon that estimate.

Up to the present time the Works Committee has completed and rendered accounts for twenty-nine separate jobs, varying from £100 to £18,785. Sometimes the expenditure works out below the estimate, sometimes above, but in the aggregate the total cost of these twenty-nine works—undertaken at the very outset of a new business, with insufficient plant and under manifold disadvantages—comes to the very satisfactory figure of £63,061, against the architect's and engineer's detailed and independent prior estimates, amounting to £66,061.

It is, of course, too soon to base any arguments upon these figures. It is not to be expected that the Works Committee can make a profit on every job that is undertaken, and it would not be surprising if, in the first year or two of the experiment, the result frequently came out on the wrong side. What we have to do is, not to draw any inferences from the necessarily imperfect statistics of so short a trial, whether they appear momentarily to tell on one side or the other, but to rest the argument on a broader basis.

It is often taken for granted that the Council's policy of eliminating the contractor is an unparalleled innovation, unknown outside London. A little knowledge of the action of local governing bodies elsewhere would prevent this mistake. To take, for instance, the Town Council of Birmingham, which is dominated by the straightest sect of the Individualists, and which, being run strictly on business principles, is held up by Mr. Chamberlain as a pattern and a model to the silly Socialists of London. It is, of course, unnecessary to remind the reader that Birmingham has municipalised its water and its gas, which are in London still left to private enterprise. What is not so well known is that the Town Council of Birmingham is by no means enamoured of the contractor, and that it dispenses with him whenever it can. The Public Works Committee, which looks after the thoroughfares, and the Health Committee, which is responsible for sanitation, have not only entirely eliminated the contractor from the cleaning and the repairing of the streets and the removal of the refuse, but even from the laying down

* Minutes, June 27th, 1893, p. 683. † Ibid., 17th October, 1893.
of granite paving and flagging, once a most profitable item of his business. The Gas Committee is not content with employing hundreds of men to make gas, but also keeps its own staff of carpenters, bricklayers, blacksmiths, tinmen, painters, fitters, &c., to execute its numerous works. The Improvements Committee, like the Estates Committee, has its own carpenters and fitters, bricklayers and paper-hangers, plasterers and zinc-workers,* whilst the Water Committee, besides a regular staff of mechanics of all kinds, is now actually engaged in constructing several huge dams and reservoirs near Rhayader, two tunnels and various water towers and siphons, together with workmen’s dwellings to accommodate a thousand people, stables, stores, workshops, a public hall and recreation room, a school. two hospitals, and a public-house—all without the intervention of a contractor. “The construction of all the buildings on the works is being carried out by the workmen of the Corporation, under the superintendence of the resident engineer and his assistant. The timber and other material is being purchased by tender. This method,” reports the Water Committee, “of using material supplied by contract, and constructing by the direct employees of the Corporation, the Committee consider, under the circumstances of the case, to be the most economical, as well as calculated to secure the best results.” But this is not all. The Water Committee, finding that the village would have beer, has decided also in this matter to dispense with any entrepreneur, and has “resolved that a canteen shall be established in the village” out of the capital of the Birmingham citizens, and “that the person managing it shall have no interest whatever in the quantity sold.”"† The Corporation of Birmingham, in fact, is going far beyond the London County Council. To use the words employed by a great authority, it “enters into direct competition with private industry, and undertakes work which individuals are equally able to perform; it has become its own builder, its own engineer, its own manufacturer,” and positively, too, “its own shopkeeper.”‡ And if we turn to Liverpool we learn that “almost all the city engineer’s work is done by men directly employed by the Corporation. . . . . The construction of sewers is now done entirely by the Corporation themselves. . . . . They had such a cruel experience of doing the work of sewering by contractors that they have given it up.” § It appears that in the old days, when the contractor agreed and charged for two courses of brickwork, no amount of inspection sufficed to prevent him putting in one only. “What happened was this, that whenever the inspector came round, or the clerk of the works, to watch the contractors, they found the two rings of brickwork going on very well; as soon as the inspector went away . . . . the second ring of brickwork was left out . . . . and so the sewer got weak. . . . . You could trace the visits of the inspector by the double rings” which were found here and there at intervals when the sewers were subsequently uncovered for repairs. ||

* Return of Hours of Labour, Wages, &c. (Appendix to Birmingham General Purposes Committee’s Report, July 29, 1893).
† Report of the Birmingham Water Committee, presented February 6, 1894.
‖ Ibid., p. 328.
It is, therefore, no wonder that, when the Liverpool Town Council undertook its great Vyrnwy dam and waterworks, this, like its sewerage, scavengering, and cleaning, was done by directly employed labour.

Nor is it in municipal boroughs alone that we see the change in policy. Nothing was more common a few years ago than for highway authorities to get their roads kept in order by contractors. An interesting return obtained in 1892 by the County Surveyors' Society shows that this practice has been almost entirely abandoned in favour of direct employment of labour by the county surveyor. Only in one or two counties out of thirty-five furnishing particulars does the old custom linger. The county surveyor for Gloucestershire indignantly denies the allegation that he favours the contract system. "It does not commend itself to me in any way," he writes, "and encourages a low form of sweating. My own experience of road-contracting is that it does very well for five years, then the roads go to pieces, and you have to spend all your previous savings to put them to rights." *

When we thus find even rural districts giving up the contractor, it ceases to be surprising that the Town Council of Manchester now manufactures its own bass-brooms, or even that the ultra-conservative Commissioners of Sewers of the City of London actually set the County Council an example by manufacturing their own waggons, harness, and horse-shoes, all, as they proudly declare, "by their own staff."† The superiority of direct municipal employment, under salaried supervision, to the system of letting out works to contractors has, in fact, been slowly borne in on the best municipal authorities all over the country by their own administrative experience, quite irrespective of social or political theories.

All this time the impatient ratepayer may, perhaps, have been thinking ruefully of the heavy burden which the Council's vigorous activity must have laid upon his shoulders. I have no doubt that, at the coming election, we shall hear a great many reckless assertions about the rise of the Council's rate. Nothing is easier than to point out that the Council's precept for 1894-5 has been 1¼d. in the pound, whilst the last precept of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1888-9 was only for 10½d. But these two figures can no more be fairly placed in comparison than the budget of a lone widow with that of the mother of a large and growing family. The Council's precept includes not only the old charges of the Metropolitan Board of Works, but also several other rates which used formerly to be levied in other ways. The old County Justices' rate, for instance, which amounted to 1·25d. in the Middlesex part of London, 1·375d. in the Surrey part, and no less than 2d. in the corner which was formerly in Kent, or an average throughout London of 1·72d. in the pound, in 1888-9, the last year of its separate existence, now

* "Particulars of Management of Main Roads in England and Wales," a report compiled for the County Surveyors' Society, by Mr. Heslop, County Surveyor for Norfolk. See Builder, March 19 and 26, 1892.

† Statement of the Commissioners of Sewers, presented to the Royal Commission on London Unification, p. 171 of c. 7493—II.

‡ This change of policy is not confined to public authorities. It has been the most characteristic feature of private industry in the United Kingdom during the last twenty years. The history of nearly every successful business enterprise would show, on examination, a change from the old policy of rigid specialisation to one expressed by the maxim "Never buy anything that you can possibly make yourself." In a paper read at the British Association last August, I gave typical instances of this growing "integration of processes" in many different industries.
accounts for 1·73d. of the Council's expenditure. Then there are the portions of the old Poor Rate, and local Vestry rates, which the Council, for the sake of efficiency and better equalisation of the burden, has had placed on its own shoulders. These items, which are actually paid by the Council to the local Vestries and the Boards of Guardians, and do not form part of its own expenditure at all, amount to no less than 3·72d. out of its levy upon London. If we add these to the last Metropolitan Board of Works precept of 10·16d., as in all fairness we should do, we shall see that, instead of there being any increase of burden in the Council's precept, there is a positive decrease of 1·61d. in the pound. This paradoxical result is due, of course, to the operation of Mr. Goschen's Exchequer contribution arrangement, by which the London County Council was made to take the place of the Government in giving grants in aid to the London local bodies, and made the recipient of Mr. Goschen's contribution to local rates. These two items were, by Mr. Ritchie's praiseworthy ingenuity, made to operate unequally as regards the different parishes, in such a way that the poorer districts benefit whilst the richer lose by the change. The result is that, as regards the majority of London parishes, the net demand of the central municipal authority has positively decreased during the six years of the Council's existence. I well remember the surprise of the blameless young barristers of Kensington, who were sent at the last election to fight East End seats in the "Moderate" interest, at finding that the Council had actually lowered the rates in the districts which they had to contest. St. George's-in-the-East pays, for instance, absolutely nothing to the central fund, and receives, on the contrary, a substantial balance from Spring Gardens towards its local expenses. This better sharing of the charges of London's government will be still further developed by the Equalisation of Rates Act of last session, which will increase the Council's demands from the richer quarters of the Metropolis for the express purpose of easing the burden on the rest. But even after all that has been done in this direction, some East End districts will be paying over 6s. in the pound, whilst the City and St. James's, Piccadilly, will get off for a little over 4s.

Apart from these financial complications, which affect rather the distribution of the burden than its total amount, the Council's net demand on the London ratepayer has, in the six years of its existence, risen by 1½d. in the pound, everything included. This increase will, I suppose, be regarded with different eyes by different classes. To me, I confess, it is a standing marvel how so much can have been done for so little. A halfpenny for the Parks Committee, a halfpenny for the Technical Education Board, a farthing for the increase in the Fire Brigade, and another farthing to cover the growing activities of the Public Health, Asylums, Main Drainage, and other committees—this is the price which London, as a whole, is asked to pay for the beneficent revolution which has taken place in every department of its municipal life between 1889 and 1895. In those six years over 1,000 acres have been added to its open spaces, over 20 per cent. to the strength of its fire-watch; a vast, though incalculable, advance has been made in its sanitation; the Thames has been so far purified that whitebait is once more caught where sewage lately floated up and down with every tide; great strides have been taken towards the better housing of the London poor; one large common lodging-house has been opened for the homeless men; thousands of improved dwellings are nearing completion; and every
slum landlord is complaining at the expenditure to which he is now put for improvements and repairs. The reign of the contractor, with its "rings" and "knock-outs," has been brought to an end, and trade-union wages, with a "moral minimum," have been established in every department of the Council's service. Nor has the Council stayed its hand in those improvements in the means of communication which are among the first needs of a growing city. The gigantic engineering experiment of a new Thames Tunnel, begun in 1890, is already more than half completed, whilst many minor street improvements have been carried out. Finally, during the last eighteen months, 800 of its most promising boys and girls have been started up the "Scholarship Ladder" of the Technical Education Board, and thousands of their elder brothers and sisters have been swept into evening classes. For all this London is asked in 1894-5 to pay 1½d. in the pound more than it paid in 1889-90, the last year for which the estimates were framed by the Metropolitan Board of Works. What, on this computation, does the London County Council cost each Londoner? According to Lord Salisbury, the Council is a hot-bed of Socialist experiments. Yet the net increase of charge upon each Londoner, after six years of this Progressive rule, is positively less than 1d. per month, everything included, and this is paid entirely by the richer parishes. Surely, never was revolution so cheap! It is now for London to say for the third time whether it is worth the price.