

PROVINCIAL COUNCILS.

The leading feature of the Bill, so far as its policy proposals are concerned, is undoubtedly that for the establishment of Provincial Councils.

For a long time past there has been a cry throughout the country that centralization had become too general in connection with the government of this country; and it is quite true that ever since the provinces were abolished there has been a tendency to centralize the power and influence of the Government in this city. We all desire to see a spirit of truly local self-government established amongst the people of this country. But the problem is, How can this be supplied with the existing local authorities? It is entirely opposed to public sentiment, and it is unthinkable that the cities should have, as such, any power or authority over the rural districts, and consequently there is no body that stands between the units of self-government formed by the municipalities and the counties on the one hand and the Central Government on the other. The question is whether it is desirable and possible to create bodies which shall stand between these two opposing poles and prove effective in assisting the government of the country.

Sir Joseph Ward, who, in my opinion, has approached this question as a statesman rather than as a mere politician, has in this Bill suggested that for certain general purposes there should be a grouping of counties and boroughs together; and he has called the resultant body a Provincial Council. Having considered it advisable to establish these bodies, the natural course was clearly to ascertain what functions could be passed over to them which represented united and cumulative powers and responsibilities; and he found these things to his hand in harbours, education, and hospitals and charitable aid. These three features of our political and social life all represent wide interests. Our large harbours are the channels for the exports and imports of large and very diverse districts; our education system, which is of the very highest interest to the body politic, covers also large areas; and the hospital and charitable-aid law is based upon the principle that the interests and responsibilities of town and country are so closely entwined as to be inseparable.

I have read a great deal of criticism in connection with the proposal to establish these Provincial Councils, which has appeared to me to be somewhat misconceived. They have been represented as new rating-machines, whereas at the present time several of the harbour districts exercise rating-powers; and those that do not exercise their rating-powers by a direct tax upon property do so by the rates they levy upon the imports and exports which pass over their wharves. So also with the Hospital and Charitable Aid Boards: they formulate their demands, send out their levies upon the local authorities that are within their districts, and the rates are collected for them and handed over to the respective Boards to expend and administer.

There is, however, a great deal to be said upon this question. I may say at once that in my opinion the provincial districts proposed in the First Schedule of the Bill are too small, and do not assure a sufficient community of interest to make the scheme really workable. There should be a rearrangement of the boundaries of the proposed provinces, and in my opinion the number should be reduced so as to secure larger provinces.

I believe that one effect of the establishment of these provinces would be that the division of interest between town and country, which has become so marked during the last twenty-five years, would probably disappear, and that the people of the provinces would begin to regard the cities and towns to which they belonged with pride, instead of with jealousy and envy.

The Provincial Councils would again become, as in days past, an excellent training-ground for public men, who would thus gain experience in a larger field than the Municipal or County Council, with a view to taking part in the public life of this country.

By establishing the Provincial Councils opportunity would be given for variation, according to the special interests of the districts, in the forms of settlement and civilization; thus provinces which wished to experiment in different directions in local self-government would be provided with the opportunity to do so.

The chief advantage would be that the Central Parliament would be able to hand over to strong governing bodies a number of the functions which now fall