

growth of the population and the consequent increase in the number of counties, boroughs and town districts have largely contributed. Other factors have influenced the position, but the result is the cumbersome system in operation today.

There appears to be no large body of support for the opinion, heard occasionally, that local government in New Zealand should be scrapped. But there has been a persistent demand for radical alteration of the system in the direction of reducing the number of local bodies by a process of amalgamation. There are many citable cases of local authorities existing side by side and doing work which could be done more efficiently by one authority combining the several functions in the district. Not only would amalgamations in such instances result in marked economies, but the stronger financial position of a large local body would enable it to pay higher salaries, and thus secure the services of more highly qualified executives.

There is hardly a district in New Zealand which does not offer opportunities for amalgamation. County councils, drainage boards, river boards and the new catchment boards, for instance, perform tasks over much the same area which in many cases could satisfactorily be made the responsibility of a single authority. Already in a few districts there has been some minor progress towards this goal in accordance with existing statutory provisions for the voluntary amalgamation of local authorities—a small number of contiguous boroughs have been merged and the one-time numerous road districts have now largely been absorbed in county areas. It would be difficult, indeed impossible, to meet the position entirely by the introduction of compulsory legislation, for the obvious reason that conditions vary in different districts. If the pruning knife is to be used, it must therefore be in the shape of optional

legislation. One suggestion has even been made for the appointment of a commission to handle any proposed amalgamations.

While there is a strong case for reducing the number of local bodies, care is needed to ensure that amalgamation is not carried to the point where economies would impair efficiency. It might not be possible, for instance, for the functions of a hospital board to be taken over by a county council, and the need for viewing each individual situation on its merits therefore becomes apparent. In other words no sweeping take-it-or-leave-it plan would do.

New Zealand today is divided geographically into 129 counties, within which borough and town districts exist as separate entities. These three divisions—counties, boroughs, and town districts—provide the foundation for a heavy superstructure of overlapping districts, such as those formed, for example, for the distribution of electric power. Under the old system of provinces abolished in 1875 nine Provincial Councils carried out all local government administration within their particular districts, receiving from the Central Government a capitation allowance for the maintenance of harbours, hospitals, asylums and charitable aid. Out of their own revenues they provided for the maintenance of roads, bridges and other public works.

To many people, and especially the ratepayer, actual or potential, the present-day maze of local administrations would indicate that the position has deteriorated rather than improved since the time of the Provincial Councils. Yet, while the existing system is obviously far too unwieldy, there can at the same time be no suggestion of a return to a structure modelled on Provincial Council lines. The answer seems to lie somewhere between the two.