

Mr. W. S. MASLIN (South Canterbury Hospital and Charitable Aid Board) agreed very much with what Mr. Harley, of Nelson, had said respecting the future of local government. Coming to the Bill, his remarks would perhaps be of a hostile character, though he was not opposed to the general principle of local-government reform. There might be something to be said in favour of a Local Government Board set up in Wellington, but seeing that the Minister would really be the power behind, before, and above the local governing Board, why not leave the responsibility where the authority would be? It seemed to him the appointment of such a Board would give the Minister an opportunity of shirking his responsibility, or at least of shelving it. Of that he did not approve, nor did he approve of section 10, which provided that "Nothing in this Act shall be so construed as to render it obligatory on the Local Government Board to hear evidence or otherwise act judicially in the exercise of any power, jurisdiction, or authority vested in it." If that was to be so, then let the Minister continue to act and to remain responsible.

The PRESIDENT said he did not agree with that clause of the Bill, and purposed withdrawing it.

Mr. MASLIN remarked that the Bill appeared to have been drafted according to Mr. Fowlds's gospel of the "New Evangel." The fact had not been previously noticed, but from beginning to end it was a single-tax Bill. He was surprised that members had not voiced that phase of the question more fully than had been done. He did not think this feature had been recognized. They had overlooked the taxing—he might say the confiscatory—power embodied in the Bill, which would impede land-settlement, and reduce land-values by 50 per cent.; while it meant increasing the possibility of local taxation by at least 100 per cent. If a man had land of the value of £20 an acre he was liable under the provisions of the Bill, for general purposes, to a tax of 10s. per acre. They had been settling men on land where they were paying from £1 10s. to £2 an acre. He was not saying it was not worth it; but if they made them liable to this additional taxation it meant that the land would be thrown back on the State, for the people could not possibly carry on under the enormous taxing-powers contained in the provisions of this Bill. This alone should condemn the Bill in its present form, and lead them to decide that it should not, if they could possibly help it, go very much further. He quite agreed that there were too many local bodies, but they were not going to lessen the taxing bodies under this Bill; they were going to create a new taxing body, which would make the taxation just the same as if the Road Boards and County Councils were in operation. He lived in a district where there was a Road Board and County Council in operation. The county levied a farthing rate, and the Road Board a three-farthing rate, so that while they had two rating bodies the total rate was only 1d., while under the provisions of the Bill the Provincial Council would have power to levy up to 3d. That was the power to rate; and with the responsibilities the Department proposed to throw upon the Provincial Councils, those bodies would have to levy up to the maximum rate for general purposes, because of the charges to be put upon them. He did not favour a provincial system at all, for by it they would merely create a body of paid men. The Chairman was to receive £300 a year. Why should the chairman of committees, who would have as much to do, receive nothing? To introduce a system of paying local bodies was highly objectionable, and he hoped the Conference would decide that there should be no paid members in connection with local governing bodies. Plenty of people were willing to give their time to these duties if they were recouped their travelling-expenses. How could the proposals now made lessen the cost of local government? Were they going to reduce the cost by paying members for services that were now rendered gratuitously?

The PRESIDENT.—Under what clause of the Bill do you say members are to be paid for their services?

Mr. MASLIN.—They can have 10s. a day.

The PRESIDENT.—Do you mean travelling-expenses?

Mr. MASLIN said it was to be not more than 10s. a day for every day they were away. That was too little if there was to be payment, but he maintained members of local bodies would give their services without any payment at all. Referring to harbours, the position of South Canterbury was this: One a struggling one at Oamaru, and the other, the Timaru Harbour, a harbour that was going to be one of the foremost in the Dominion, and was now first in the matter of the export of grain. What would be the position of the Oamaru Harbour with the Provincial Council sitting at Timaru, and having the Timaru Harbour under its control? Could the Council be expected to discharge its duties to the Oamaru Harbour? It would certainly let Oamaru go, and stick to the Timaru Harbour as the better one, and that would be unjust to Oamaru. With regard to charitable aid, it was necessary that members should have local knowledge of those applying; but in a district embracing two towns such as Timaru and Oamaru, as well as smaller towns, that would not be practicable; and he did not think they could possibly get efficient working of the system. The outcome of the discussion, he thought, would be that the county system would be the one most approved; that Education, Charitable Aid, and Harbour Boards—except in a few cases demanded by themselves—should be maintained, and that town districts, where they were able, should become boroughs or merge into the counties. He would suggest there should be some principle upon which counties and boroughs should be formed. While under the provisions of the Bill they perpetuated the existence of little boroughs with a population of less than five hundred, they also continued the existence of counties with a population of less than five hundred. It would be seen that was correct. He would suggest that this should be a basis: that any community of people should be allowed to form themselves into a borough if they had a population of not less than five hundred. That would meet the case of town districts that were doing good work. Where, however, the population was less than five hundred the local body should be abolished and merged into the counties. As far as Road Boards were concerned, any Road Board having a population of not less than two hundred and a valuation of not less than £2,000,000 should be allowed to form themselves into a county. That would be a reasonable basis upon which to build up a system of local government; but so long as they had a large number of struggling boroughs