

Mr. WILLIAMS asked, then, how would it apply? To his mind, the Local Government Board was made possible only by combining so many of these other bodies, and being the head of the combine. The Conference was representative of local bodies, but it was not representative of public opinion. It would, perhaps, be a waste of time to try to defend the setting-up of a Local Government Board and Provincial Councils. Nevertheless, the principle underlying the Bill was, to his mind, the right one. He could not see that the Provincial Council would be such a terrible monster. When they had a body of men elected on a wide and popular franchise, and subject to a healthy and vigorous public opinion, they would not go so very far astray. The best that could be expected from the Conference was that the boroughs would remain as they were, and the counties have some enlarged powers. Hospital management under the present system was undoubtedly good, but the framers of the Bill had had to include various bodies, and there was no reason why the functions of a Hospital Board should not be as well discharged by the Provincial Council that was proposed. The great weakness in the Bill was the proposed change in connection with the national system of education. The Government of the country must find the money for primary education. No localization should be allowed in connection with our schools, and this proposal might be the thin end of the wedge that would ruin the whole scheme. The Education Boards, however, were another matter. If there was one part of the local governing machine that wanted altering and amending it was these Boards. He would consider, for a moment, their election. A meeting of householders was held once a year to elect a School Committee. This Committee was a body of men with no power. There was absolutely no inducement for good men to act upon them; in fact, in many country districts it was impossible to get together enough people to elect a School Committee. Yet to these Committees was entrusted the work of electing the Education Boards. No public interest was taken in the Education Boards. Very few people indeed knew how they were elected; indeed, the method of their election had had to be explained by the President of the Conference to a delegate. It was the boast of these Boards that they were elected by the parents, but he felt safe in saying that not one in fifty of the parents knew anything about the constitution of the Boards. In a large number of districts when a man was elected to an Education Board he was there for life, because there was not enough intelligent interest taken in the matter to have him removed. There were, of course, some very good men on the Boards—men who gave their time to the work; and no matter what the method of representation, these men would find their place on the Education Boards, and deservedly so. With regard to the counties, the framers of the Bill desired to give larger subsidies to sparsely populated districts. This was one of the finest clauses in the measure. There were districts where the population was so sparse that children had to be taken to school by their parents through the bush, there being no track of any kind. This should be remedied, even if it were at the expense of some of the wealthier corporations. He believed that ridings should be abolished, for one simple reason: when a County Council was elected by the whole county they had county men; when it was elected by the ridings they had riding men. If ridings were abolished they would have a better class of men. There was this danger, however: that small areas, thickly populated, might have more representation than their share.

Mr. J. G. ARMSTRONG (Chairman of the Awatere County Council) looked upon it as a waste of time to criticize the Bill. The Minister had not much chance of passing the Bill with the local bodies' consent; he would have to wipe out a large number of small bodies, and they would not consent to it. It would have to be forced on them, and this could only be done by a strong Government with a good majority behind it. He approved of the main principles of the Bill, on the lines of Mr. Studholme's speech. A lot of the details could be very much improved. Whether the Bill was passed or not, the boundaries of the present counties wanted amending. It would be a good thing if a Commission were set up to go carefully into the matter of the boundaries of the different counties and remodel them, altering the boundaries in some cases, and in other cases wiping out the smaller counties and including them in the surrounding counties. This was the best way to get the counties enlarged and placed on a proper working basis. The present boundaries were made forty years ago, before it was known where there would be community of interest. If this Commission were set up, and the boundaries were put in the proper places, a great deal could be done under the present Counties Act. He had not much faith in the Provincial Council passing, but they ought to do what they could to improve the existing counties.

Mr. J. CORKILL (Mayor of Wairoa) thought the country in local matters was really not so badly governed after all, although in a few instances given by the Minister in his speech it appeared that a local body was extravagant and local government was costing too much. The Minister, however, did not go into details, and he (Mr. Corkill) believed that in some of those instances, if the matter were gone into, there would be other factors that would place it in a much better light. So far as he could see, the opinion of the Conference was that no Provincial Council was wanted. To take the town districts first: many of these were in a growing district, and would be cities later on. He thought it a great mistake to cut out these institutions. They were useful, and in many instances were governed well and cheaply. As to the boroughs, there was very little to be said; there was not going to be any provincial control of them. The Harbour Boards in most cases were very large bodies, and did very important work. The few small ones could be made cheaper in the same way as the small towns. They were small at present, but the districts concerned were being rapidly opened up, and later on would become large centres. Then these Harbour Boards would be useful bodies. In any case, the small Harbour Boards could not do much harm. True they had small rating-powers, but a majority of the people must vote for a proposal before it could be carried out. The County Councils, to his mind, were the only bodies the Conference need deal with. There were a number of small bodies in the different counties whose functions might very well be taken over by the County Councils.