Public Library Rating.

THE action of the Public Library Authorities and of the Library Association as to the exemption of Public Libraries from rates and taxes is well known, and like all human action is open to criticism. Such criticism is not only healthy, but pleasant, even though it may be hostile, and no man would complain of such fair comment and opposition.

It is seldom indeed in English public life that the action of any body of men is dealt with in the manner recently adopted by some person or persons in connection with the Assessment Committee of the Vestry of Westminster, in a report submitted to that Board on the subject of Public Library Rating, accounts of which have appeared in the press. It is true that the report in question was indignantly repudiated by the Westminster Local Authority. It was referred back to the Committee. It was once more brought up unamended, and, as was said by a member, "flung in the face of the Vestry." It is pleasant to be able to say that the Vestry by an overwhelming majority rejected the report *in toto* with every mark of indignation and disapproval.

This was what might have been expected from a responsible and self-respecting body of gentlemen. It may be well, however, to recapitulate some of the "points that were made" in this strange document.

The report said in dealing with the proposed exemption of a London Public Library from Local Rates:—

"The origin of the movement has not been openly stated. The method of its promulgation, however, bears a close resemblance to that pursued by an irresponsible body who exerted themselves to prevent the Free Public Libraries being taken over by the Vestries; and as to its object, while it is perfectly true that the money saved in rates would be available for increasing the stock of books, it is none the less obvious that it would be available for increases of another kind, in which the

paid officials who support the Association naturally have a direct personal interest. Be that as it may, strong evidence of concerted action was furnished in the statement made in support of the objection to the assessment, that out of twenty cases in which enquiry had been made fourteen libraries had been exempted."

Let us see what this charge means and on what it is based.

Various Public Library Boards throughout London and the country hold (1) that these Libraries are exempt from rates and taxes under certain Acts of Parliament and under certain decisions of the Courts of Law.

(2) That where doubts exist as to these Acts and decisions, they take all needful required steps to obtain authoritative decisions on the matter, and they appeal to intervening authorities to support them in what they believe to be their duty, and for the benefit of the public. They are supported individually and collectively by that Association which concerns itself with all things conducive to efficient library work and administration, which consists not only of librarians, but of library authorities and eminent men of letters, and of the learned professions generally throughout the land. Not only are they justified in their action, but had they not taken such action they would have been false to their duty and to the public. Yet these men are actually told that their alleged object, the legal exemption of Public Libraries from Rates for the public benefit, is only a cloak to enable them to increase the salaries of their officials. We mean to speak very plainly to the drafter of that report. His innuendos are absurd, obviously illogical and absolutely untrue. When the London County Council went for and secured exemption from rates of a well-known public park, were the advocates of that action advocated by a desire to increase their own salaries? If not, why not? When the Manchester Public Libraries, aided by the Library Association, secured after a long legal campaign the exemption of libraries from taxes, were they and the Law Lords only seeking to increase the salaries of the librarians? If not, why not? Financial questions as to all sorts of Municipal and Parochial matters are being constantly raised and legally contested by Boards, Councils, Vestries and Associations. Are they all to be told that the welfare of these various public trusts is not really the object in view but—the increase of the salaries of officials! Again we ask, if not, why not?

The report alluded to the objection of certain bodies to the

transfer of powers under the Local Government Act. The clause as to transfer is a purely optional one, some Boards approving it, some disapproving. Does the author of the report charge the vestry officials who are in favour of transfer with not really being interested in the supposed public advantage of transfer, but with a desire to get advantages of "another kind in which the paid officials would share." If not, again we ask, why not?

When a certain musical institution succeeded the other day in getting this very exemption from rates, though opposed—fairly and legally opposed—by the Westminster Vestry, were they actuated by motives of increases of salaries of officials? Has the Westminster Vestry charged them with this object? If not, why not?

The advocates of Library Exemption have complete answers to every one of the arguments put forth in the rejected report. Indeed, to any fair-minded, intelligent man the answers are self-evident. This is not, however, the place to deal with them. But one cannot help alluding to the strange argument that libraries *must* be liable to rates, or else *certain other institutions must also be exempt*.

Anything more naively simple-minded and begging of the whole question cannot be imagined. By the irony of fate the answer has been promptly supplied by the Court of Queen's Bench, which on December 14th did actually so exempt another institution in the parish of Westminster. This decision is, we suppose, in the language of the report, another "evasion of the law."

The writer challenges what he calls "interested Bodies" to go to Parliament for the legislation required; but has it struck him that the man who goes to Parliament for legislation without first seeing if the *existing* law is sufficient is—well, hardly a wise citizen?

In conclusion, let the writer of that report rest assured that the "concerted action" of the Public Library authorities and Association, which so shocks him, will continue the even tenour of its way. The Library Association has watched, does watch, and will continue to watch, over all matters pertaining to the library world. There has been concerted action, and there will be concerted action, for the public good, and for the best interests of these institutions. It is not too much to say that the lesson taught by the Westminster Vestry to over-zealous persons will

not be thrown away. Zeal is only good when tempered with discretion, and the attributing of personal, interested, and law-evading motives to a great number of public boards and public officials is so strange, so unusual, and so dangerous an innovation, that it is to be hoped this, its first, will also be its last appearance in London municipal life.

HERBERT JONES,

Hon. Sec. Metropolitan Public Libraries Committee.

20, Hanover Square, W.