

## THE ADVANTAGES OF THE HAZY WORD

FROM THE reports of Mr. Herbert Morrison's recent admonitions and lectures in Birmingham and London, the Parliamentary debate on November 5 and the comments of Conservative and Liberal newspapers, one may gather a fair conception of the economic ideas which those who dominate legislation and opinion desire the general reader and voter to accept. As the differences of principle between Government and Opposition on this subject seem no wider than those between a man who gets drunk on 'bitter' and another who drinks many pints of 'mild' one may include opposition views without upsetting the balance of the picture. And such pictures are important because they are the only source from which the masses usually draw their information.

Production was of course given prominence. In our officially ordered world the marriage of peace and plenty looks more like a *decree nisi*. Sifting the mass of verbiage on production, however, yields nothing new except perhaps that the operatives are to blame as well as the enterprisers. 'Labour went where it wanted to go,' and not where 'consumer needs'—known exactly to the Planners—required. 'Steps were being taken' to give the right industries 'more drawing power.' There was 'misdirection of national resources' (unspecified) due to 'the profit motive.' 'The system' was to blame, but apparently the profit motive was to be 'socialised' rather than liquidated altogether. Only 'planning,' apparently, could do this. So the answer to shortage of goods is more coercion—of operatives, enterprisers and 'resources,' whatever that word may mean.

Regarding employment, it seems we now have the good fortune to live in an era of 'full employment' after the mass unemployment of previous eras, although there are some 'development areas' where things are not quite so good. Wholesale borrowing, inflation and war, with its millions of Servicemen industrially unemployed, are not mentioned in connection with the new era, so we are left to conclude we owe it to official direction. This conclusion receives further support from Mr. Morrison's assertion that 'the maintenance of full employment is an obligation' on foreign Governments, especially that of the United States, which, 'with its tremendous economic power,' was in a position, if it wished, to afflict us with 'dumping' and force us to 'import unemployment.'

Other Labour speakers suggested that we must be 'protected' from the 'unfair competition' of Japan which, curiously enough, is not at the moment remarkable for economic power. No opposition spokesman seems to have noticed that if a Government wished to take credit for a situation it did not completely understand or explain, and to prepare a scapegoat in case of need, this is exactly the kind of idea to serve its purpose.

It seems there is a further danger, of a different kind. A period of peace might reduce the people's appreciation of planning. It must therefore be consolidated by establishing the new Economic General Staff. This idea is so popular that more than one party claims to have thought of it first. This General Staff is not quite so new as one might expect. It was formed more than twelve months ago, but owing to insufficient statistics has not yet moved entirely beyond the experimental stage. There are still, for example, some 'gaps in the returns for production per man-hour.' *The Times*, however, notes with approval one important discovery it has made, that 'all collective and individual elements in the British standard of living ultimately depend upon productivity.' My aunt has always been under the impression that the production of a pair of socks depends upon someone knitting them. She will be impressed to learn that this is officially confirmed. I must, however, warn her against assuming that 'labour is a commodity,' an error fostered by some industrialists who imagine that wages must depend upon

the amount produced. Labour must be regarded now as a 'service involving social duties.'

As soon as the Economic General Staff knows exactly how much each person in every industry produces per hour, how much and what kind of goods each person requires, how much and of what kind of goods each foreigner will be able to supply us and what he will require in exchange, how much will be available for new capital, and what form the new capital shall take (a forecast, in fact, of the inventive capacity of the world)—as soon as these things and a few more are known, the rest will be easy, according to the publicists of all parties. After all, it's only a matter of statistics. Moreover, the activities of the Economic General Staff have nothing in common with Fascism or Nazism. 'We believe in a free society,' says Mr. Morrison. 'We in Britain stand for free planning, and for planning as a means to fuller freedom.' Every citizen must understand 'the economic position of the nation, the aims of economic plans and the part which every citizen should play both in criticising those plans and in carrying them through afterwards.' 'The people,' he was convinced, would 'back an agreed plan.' It seems 'the people' is a single entity with a single mind. Government is much easier in such circumstances, especially when a party with only 48 per cent. of votes secures exclusive power.

My aunt, of course, says that every person has a mind of his own, and that so far from it being possible for others to forecast how much and what kind of goods each shall produce, consume and invent, no person can do so himself. She asserts that in the days before the Kaiser's war a multiplicity of official regulations was associated with the Governments of corrupt Continental bureaucracies rather than those more peaceable countries in which human life and personality were in higher respect. And where the production and exchange of goods, and commercial risk, were left more open to individual bargaining and initiative, although conditions were far from perfect, mass unemployment and depressed areas were terms scarcely known. She, of course, has not moved with the times. Her old-fashioned prejudices and ideas of human kindness lead her to suppose that you do not practice the Golden Rule by regimenting your neighbour. Perhaps she does not understand the importance of catching votes or increasing one's circulation figures.

It is worth while, nevertheless, to consider the equipment at present possessed by the masses who are to 'understand and back' this economic plan which after twelve months of effort the Government cannot produce. Can any person with common sense or common honesty assert that any more than an infinitesimal fraction of the people possess clear knowledge of the basic elements of economic law? Moreover, how many voters have had any training whatever in the rules of clear thinking, of testing evidence brought in support of political contentions, of detecting the logical flaws of argument on social questions? In what schools, in what system of State education are these subjects made obligatory? When one considers the answers to these questions one is left with very doubtful feelings about the publicists who urge upon us such absurdities as we have quoted.

Political differences have always been a conflict of partisans rather than philosophers. It is the duty, as we see it, of the good citizen not to stand aloof and condemn all parties and politicians but to support the better elements in politics and professional journalism, allowing especially for the temptations of those who have the power of forming or exploiting popular opinion. In making such allowances we shall be enabled to assess the value of that opinion, and this is very much to our immediate purpose.

The present writer makes no claim to knowledge of the inner councils of any party, but, assuming that human nature does not

greatly change from one generation to another, it is not difficult to gather some idea of conditions to-day from those recorded in the not-too-distant past. John Morley was a successful journalist and a prominent politician. He had no special reason to feel embittered about the society in which he lived. But he derived from a school dedicated to intellectual honesty, 'the most scrupulous fair dealing with one's own understanding,' as the first condition of political or social enquiry. He confesses that 'politics are a field where action is one long second-best,' and that some political controversy 'is enough to make one think that George III knew what he was talking about, when he delivered himself of the saying that "Politics are a trade for a rascal, not for a gentleman." ' He found the newspapers' devices specially designed to maintain controversy at a low level, and was amazed that so many writers and speakers constantly employed words and phrases 'which they themselves were not competent to use, and which their hearers were not competent either to understand generally, or to test in the specific instance.' Surely this is sufficient to persuade any intelligent person to discard general opinion altogether when estimating the value of those lectures and admonitions which are constantly pressed upon us.

If we start with independent common sense we will avoid catchwords and dubious phrases altogether. We will establish the essential elements in production and exchange, and before devoting ourselves exclusively to schemes of restriction and direction will search for any previously existing handicaps or impediments to freedom of production and exchange, remembering that industry is, after all, nothing more than the means by which people seek to gratify their desires. We find that our 'resources' of production are simply land and labour, and that the motive which incites indeed compels men to labour on the production of material things is the desire for gain, sometimes called profit. If some men seek to gain without producing things of value to themselves or things which others will freely obtain from them by mutually agreed exchange—and let us be frank enough to admit that thieves, monopolists and the officials of unnecessary Government departments are all in this category—this does not alter the fact that a society in which the profit motive did not operate could no more exist than a herd of oxen which refused to graze. Neither does it alter the fact that however much any man may gain, it cannot injure another, provided that (a) his production has not been secured or assisted by coercing or restricting others, either legally or illegally, and that (b) the law does not allow him with his gains to purchase the power of coercing or restricting others.

These are the conditions. If, indulging a perhaps extravagant fancy, we were to imagine a society in which men exerted on social questions as much common sense as they every day bring to personal matters the solutions of these supposed abstruse problems would not be difficult. Instead of fining the enterpriser and operative by taxation and rating for producing they would be relieved of all such discouragements; instead of ignoring the monopoly laws which enable landowners to levy a toll upon the production of all who use land, the land value which the community creates would be collected by the community to defray the cost of all public services; instead of burdening themselves with the cost of an immense army of official non-producers engaged in preventing each man from exerting all his industry and ingenuity in that infinite range of exchanges necessary to modern industry, the army would be disbanded and advised to obtain productive work; instead of waiting for international committees of experts to direct the trade of other countries an enlightened society would open its trade to all peoples of the world, thereby benefiting itself and them materially and showing in practice that the prosperity of one country did not depend upon the coercion of others.

If, on the other hand, the people of a country are content

to bring common sense only to immediate personal problems and to leave social thought to professionals, it would be surprising if the professionals were not mainly concerned (unconsciously, if not consciously) with devising schemes which always avoided seriously damaging the interests of the Government or other powerful body which paid their salaries. Discussion would then concern itself with partisan differences rather than with principles, with motives rather than evidence; it would tend to establish convenient assumptions by reiteration rather than proof; above all, it would habitually employ words and phrases of doubtful meaning. The hazy word accords with the profit motive of many interests, but truth is not among them.

FRANK DUPUIS

## WHERE LAND IS FREE

RORATONGA gives you a kind of foretaste of the whole charm and beauty of the South Seas . . . All tellers of fairy tales, and all poets from Homer downwards, have always imagined the existence of certain islands which were so full of magic and charm that they turned man from his duty and from all tasks, labour, or occupation in which he was engaged, and held him a willing captive, who would not sell his captivity for all the prizes of the busy world . . . The woman who kept the hotel where I stopped at Rorotonga, and who had come from South Africa, talked of the natives. She said: "It is impossible to get them to work. If you find fault with them they go away. It is we poor white people who have to do all the work. I would like," she said, "to sjambok them as they do in South Africa, so lazy and impossible they are sometimes, but we are not allowed to touch them. But then," she said, "of course one can't blame them, because they are quite well off without working. They have got enough to live on without doing any work." I thought that it would, indeed, be unreasonable to blame these natives for not slaving for white people if they were not obliged to do so. The fact is that in these islands work for the natives is not a necessity; it is a hobby. It is to them what gardening must have been to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, in the days before the Fall. If Adam and Eve gardened then, they gardened for fun. After the Fall of Man, they had to garden for a living, not for choice. Well, the native inhabitants of the South Sea Islands seem to have escaped or to be exempted from the primal curse; in fact, I believe that the islands of Tahiti and Rorotonga are two bits of the Garden of Eden which are allowed to remain in the world so as to show mankind what they had lost by Eve's curiosity, Adam's disobedience, and the Devil's malice.

From *ROUND THE WORLD IN ANY NUMBER OF DAYS*, by Maurice Baring (Chatto and Windus, 1919).

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