

it is the natural state in which men work to get a living, which exists by the will of the Creator, and continues until it is disturbed by aggression—generally some method of getting the products of labour without rendering equitable service in exchange. And war is only aggression extended to a particular stage according to the “power in control of the State” dominated by aggressors.

Let us abolish the whole system of aggression at

home, and internal peace will naturally follow. The effect on our own condition would do more to influence other peoples than a mere statement of principles which might or might not be acted on later.

Aggression is the enemy. Such co-operation as can prevent aggression is the first sort of State Federation required. With peace and goodwill such further co-operation will naturally follow as can be agreed upon.

J. H. McG.

NEGLECTED ASPECTS OF THE FOOD PROBLEM

By D. J. J. Owen

Two of the most notable recent contributions to the discussion of food production are those by Sir John Boyd Orr entitled “Food and the Ordinary Man,” in *Chambers Journal*, November, 1940; and by Sir R. George Stapledon on “A Lands Commission” in the *New Statesman and Nation*, 9th November. When we look for the definite proposals of these authorities they have a familiar shape. Rationing, price-fixing, subsidies, commissions; nothing apparently more original than these oft tried specifics.

Sir John Orr says: “Rationing helps, but there still remains the question of price,” that is, as a means to ensure an equitable distribution of the most health-giving dietary. “The most economical method of feeding the nation would be to subsidize the six basal foods which taken together can provide a diet adequate for health.” “In peace-time,” says this writer, “the farmer produced what gave the maximum profit. In war, he must produce what will give the maximum yield of food per acre, and prices for the different agricultural products must be adjusted so that it is more profitable to produce the foods we urgently need than those we can dispense with in the present emergency.”

Here there is the vulgar notion that there is something wicked in producing what gives maximum profit, and a failure to see that given fair and open marketing conditions, without monopolies or restrictions to exchange, this profit motive would hurt no one, and even in war-time would be a better incentive to the most economical production than arbitrary and bureaucratic price-fixing and subsidies. Further, it is not explained how the adjusted price is to be justified as between the producer and the consumer. The same people, either as consumers or as taxpayers will have to pay extra in the long run.

Sir John Orr objects to going back to a peace-time food policy based on trade interests. “We will never again impose quotas or other restrictions on production or imports to bring about an artificial scarcity to keep up prices.” We hope Sir John is a true prophet, but Government spokesmen have already hinted that post-war plans must take into account the special trade interests of the Dominions and that sounds like a continuance of tariffs and preferences. In either event, Sir John appears not to realize that subsidies whose aim is to keep up prices to the farmer are just as vicious as quotas and are just as likely to create artificial scarcity. For there is one consideration which nearly all our modern food reformers persistently ignore and that is the effect of their proposals upon the price of land. Subsidies will have the same effect as import duties and quotas; by giving preferential treatment to farmers they will make agricultural land more desirable, more valuable, therefore more dear; higher rents and purchase prices will make land in the market more scarce and thus output is likely to be restricted by more than the subsidies will stimulate it.

This is the heart of the problem which has always baffled the experts who leave out the clues provided by economics and particularly the law of economic rent or land value. Their aims are admirable. Sir John Orr, for example, says in price-fixing the objective will be, not to safeguard the profits of producers or distributors but to ensure an adequate diet within the purchasing power of the poorest family. But how to fix the subsidy: how to control farmers’ costs in the shape of fluctuating rents and land charges. This perennial problem is not apparently recognized as such in any of these discussions. There is no mention of the fact that three-quarters of the farms in this country are held on yearly tenancies and that tenant farmers have no protection against arbitrary rises in land values created by the subsidies that are to replace quotas and duties.

Before the war an International Wheat Commission, to which Sir John Orr draws attention, was trying by means of quotas on production in the exporting countries and by making wheat unfit for human consumption, to prevent a “glut” in the world markets. Our own pre-war food policy had the same objective: to create an artificial scarcity. These schemes were adopted on the tacit assumption that there was already sufficient to meet all needs. At the same time, as Sir John says, there was another Commission, appointed by the League of Nations, which approached the subject from a very different standpoint. Their findings were, that reckoned by the standard of human requirements the pre-war food supply of the world was hopelessly inadequate.

Along with this latter Commission’s findings should be considered the statements of Sir George Stapledon, who has conducted a survey of the grasslands of England and Wales for the Ministry of Agriculture. He says that two million acres of grassland have been broken up by the plough during this war, and that “in England and Wales there remain at least another seven million acres of poorish-to-very-poor permanent grass that as acres can never be made fully productive unless brought under the plough.” The experts confirm, rather late in the day, what we knew all along to be the case.

Sir George’s cure, unlike that of Sir John Orr, is not subsidy or price-fixing. He says: “All the price-fixing in the world can never, of itself, constitute an enduring agricultural policy . . . no matter how generous or how well thought out the prices, prices alone and as such can never ensure that proper care is taken of the land.” What is essential, he thinks, is a regulating department and compulsory purchase of land. The task of the “Lands Commission” which he proposes is somewhat nebulous as stated by him. “Policy must make a judicious balance between commodities which easily dissipate fertility—wheat, milk and potatoes, for example—and those which tend to enhance soil fertility—sheep, pigs, poultry and fattening beasts. Within exceedingly wide limits, the more of the latter we carry,

the more of the former shall we produce." If both these gentlemen are appointed to the same commission we should anticipate some piquant discussions as to what are those "exceedingly wide limits."

The only definite thing about Sir George's plan, is the appointment "of regional, divisional and local officers, all sound practical technicians," under a "Lands Commission," which would have power to purchase derelict land compulsorily, on a sinking fund basis, requiring anything up to seven, ten or fifteen years to pay off the outgoings with adequate interest. The Commission would have "to safeguard reasonableness of price," but we are not helped by any suggestion as to the basis of a reasonable price for derelict grassland. We are promised that this scheme would lead "to the immediate produc-

tion of food in large quantities on land now virtually producing nothing."

These well meaning proposals will raise the expectations of owners of land. A speculative value will be given to grassland, derelict, and all other land by the very enthusiasm with which food production is discussed. It is an old story in these columns and we can only ask once more if our worthy reformers have ever considered the real first step, of working from the basis of the economic law of rent, to prevent the monopoly of land and the inflation of land charges, by taking the value attaching to all land for taxation purposes in lieu of taxes on trade and industry? With such a beginning it would be found that the Taxation of Land Values is the best fertilizer of all.

SECURITY THROUGH FREEDOM

IN HIS speech at the London Rotary Club (20th November) Mr Ernest Bevin, Minister of Labour, said: "My war aims are summed up in the phrase: The motive of our life should be social security." In explanation of this he continued:—

"After the last war there was a failure to recognise that it was largely, as indeed this one is, a great civil war, which must determine whether we are to be ruled from the top or must have government responsible to the people.

"The last 20 years has demonstrated that security cannot be attained by arms. It can only be attained by the enthronement of power with the people.

"Immediately power is taken from the people and given to a ruler at the top or a military oligarchy then security vanishes.

"Unemployment has been the devil that has driven masses in large areas of the world to turn to dictators.

"You cannot have social security on the basis of the present economic order.

"We have been taught that the only motive for energy, production and enterprise is profit.

"If profit can be the only motive the natural corollary is economic disorder, and that will bring you back to the same position as you are in now, ever recurring.

"That does not mean that all profits or surpluses would be wiped out, but it does mean that the whole of your economy, finance, organisation, science and everything, would be directed together to social security, not for a small middle class or for those who may be mere possessors of property, but for the community as a whole."

The greatest social implication arising out of this war was the effort to get rid of that horrible queue outside the labour exchanges. Mr Bevin said:—

"You have to stop that or stop the whole educational system. Better leave the masses untaught than give them a double appetite, both of stomach and head, then not satisfy either.

"I am afraid that at the end of this war, unless the community is seized with the importance of this, you may well slip into the most revolutionary action—though I don't mind revolutions if they are well directed.

"What I am horrified at is a blind revolution of starving men that is undirected and that ends in disaster for the whole community."

There is so much truth in this statement, that it is almost ungrateful to criticise it. In pointing to unemployment as the factor which has driven men to turn to dictators, Mr Bevin has touched the spot. The dictators have promised that the totalitarian state will save men from unemployment and social insecurity. In fact those promises were not being fulfilled, and the dictators turned to foreign conquest either in the hope

that by acquiring fresh territory they could fulfil those promises or in the endeavour to distract their peoples' attention from the failure.

So much is clear, but what Mr Bevin means by social security is not so clear, nor does his reference to profit throw much light on the problem, especially when qualified by the statement that not all profits or surpluses would be wiped out. In fact the word "profit" has no determinate meaning. Sometimes it indicates an excess of return over cost, and in this sense the whole aim of economic life is to reduce costs and to increase returns. Mr Bevin probably means by it an income which is obtained without making any contribution to production, and in that sense profit is a cause of economic disorder of which many examples can be given. The urge to obtain protective tariffs, quotas, and subsidies is a profit motive of this kind—a means of obtaining an unearned income is sought through creating a legalized privilege.

It is the existence of monopolies, and particularly of land monopoly, that creates the unemployment and insecurity to which Mr Bevin so strongly draws attention. He makes no mention of these causes. His plea for security, therefore, sounds as if it were merely an advocacy of more unemployment benefit or other doles from public funds. Such palliatives are not sufficient. Radical remedies are needed that will remove the cause of the evil.

Security is indeed attractive to those, and they are the majority, whose earnings are small and who run the risk of falling into unemployment at any moment. But is that security to be the security of the slave who knows that his master will feed and clothe him because he is a valuable possession; or is it to be the security which comes from opportunity, from the knowledge that a choice of occupation is open? Is not this where the distinction rests between free men and slaves? Perhaps it seems a more difficult ideal. Certainly it is not to be attained except by destroying vested interests, while the method of palliative appears to be relatively easy. The vested interests, indeed, approve of palliatives provided that they do not cost too much, or better still, provided that the cost is thrown by devious means on to the backs of the workers.

Let us work for social security by all means, but let it be social security through equality of opportunity. Let us abolish the monopolies and restrictions that put power and wealth into the hands of the few at the expense of the many. Let us throw open to labour the illimitable field of production which nature offers to man, and so end undeserved unemployment and poverty. Economic freedom should be the consequence and the safeguard of political freedom, and economic freedom can only exist through equality of opportunity.