



Expansion of Public Works for Preservation of Prosperity

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Expansion of Public Works for Preservation of Prosperity

By HAROLD S. BUTTENHEIM

BEFORE this depression descended upon us, or we descended into it, whichever it may be, I was one of the small group of orthodox thinkers along the lines of long-range planning of public works, who believed not only that public works ought to be expanded in times of depression, but also that they ought to be reduced in times of prosperity.

I am coming recently to associate myself more with the ideas of Dr. William T. Foster, Dr. Virgil Jordan, and Mr. David Cushman Coyle. That is, I am coming to believe that instead of spending our surplus wealth to build up means of competitive manufacture which will increase the problem that we are facing, which will produce goods which there is no adequate method of consuming, we ought to use the power of taxation to a very considerable extent to promote and compel public or semipublic works. This can be done partly by levying a heavy surtax on high incomes, which may be canceled in a given case if the individual spends his money for certain approved works, such as the building of hospitals or libraries or college buildings, or the installation and equipment of parks, playgrounds, or other projects of that kind.

Also there ought to be a very considerable increase in public works expenditures for purposes such as these and the many other activities which this country needs—the abolishing of our grade crossings, the taking of the sewage out of our rivers, the improvement and beautification of the river banks, the paving of our many thou-

sands of miles of unpaved highways, the beautification of the roadsides, the elimination of the slums of our cities, and a very large number of other activities which could be conducted with this surplus wealth to the benefit, I believe, of the surplus wealth itself as well as of the community as a whole.

CITY WORKS ARE ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT

The cities can coöperate very greatly in that matter, and they ought to be given some compulsion to do so. I believe it would be advisable in every one of our states to adopt legislation which would require every municipality in the state to appoint a city planning commission if it does not already have one; which would require that commission to arrange a budgeted method of planning for five or six years ahead for public improvements in the approximate order of their urgency; and which would provide for carrying out those improvements. The municipalities would be expected to carry out those improvements from year to year, though of course they could not be compelled to do so.

My belief is that if we would use these methods, we probably should never have another depression such as we are experiencing. But if the statistics, which ought to be kept much more carefully by the Federal Government, were to show an abnormal increase in unemployment at any time, then let the Federal Government come to the aid of the situation, not only by speeding up its own public works activities, but also by making large

sums of money available to the states and the municipalities at a very low rate of interest, say 2 per cent, as an inducement to them to carry out in a period of one year the plans say for the next two years, as far as that would be feasible. The inducement of the loan of this money at a low rate of interest would probably be the means of having a very large number of the cities carry out that activity.

Of course, the Federal Government has no control over the spending of municipal funds, and it ought not to have; but it can act in a great many ways as a stimulus to such spending. I

believe that the combination of these ideas would make the long-range planning of public works much more practical. In other words, I am still absolutely a believer in long-range planning of public works. They ought to be speeded up greatly if there is any depression threatened. But I think they ought also to be speeded up to a considerable extent from year to year as we learn how to produce better, as we learn how to distribute better, as we have a greater surplus; and we ought to look toward a steadily mounting expenditure for public works in good times as well as in bad.

Mr. Harold S. Battenheim is editor of "The American City"; organizer and president of the American City Bureau for promoting efficiency of commercial, civic, and welfare organizations; and a member of the board of directors of the National Municipal League, National Council on City Planning, and National Child Welfare Association.