

PROTECTIONISM AND PACIFISTS

COMMENTING ON the Report of the Committee on Land Utilization in Rural Areas, in *Peace News* of 11th September, "Observer" defends the majority report and says that what is anathema in it "to those for whom wealth automatically takes precedence over human welfare" is the premiss adopted by the Committee that the maintenance of a moderately prosperous and balanced agriculture, and the employment of all agricultural land to the best agricultural advantage is a basic condition of healthy national development after the war. What is the meaning of "Observer's" phrase "best agricultural advantage"? Why not best "national" advantage? Are the interests of agriculture and the nation distinct?

"Observer" speaks of a violent campaign against the majority report and then says, in brackets: "(The minority is Professor Dennison: 1 against 11)." Pacifists may be an even smaller proportion of the community, but "Observer" might still consider them to be right.

Neither the majority nor the minority reports seem to question the monopoly basis of our land system; but whilst the majority stress the subject of "amenity" and the "well-being of the agricultural worker," the minority report points out that: "the community and the agricultural worker may have to pay a price, in the form of a lower material standard of life, in order to have the pleasure of contemplating a particular kind of rural scene, and of enjoying the other spiritual benefits accompanying agriculture." Professor Dennison truly states "Beautiful scenery has little appeal for the ill-fed and ill-clad." And he goes on to make a strong case to show that arbitrary attempts to force the development of certain kinds of farming, and to avoid what "Observer" calls the competition of the "products of prairie farming" abroad, may result, not in a higher standard of living for the farm worker, but in a lower one. "Agriculture," says Professor Dennison, "is not independent of the rest of our economic system, which is primarily dependent on international exchange for its ability to maintain standards of life... Return to pre-war standards of life is so dependent upon international economic exchange that any action which impeded the revival of that exchange might well redound to our disadvantage." And he goes on to show that a high standard of life depends on "the import of cheap, plentiful and varied food," so that we must be able to import food on the most favourable terms possible, if our standards, "including those of the agricultural worker, are not to fall."

We shall agree with Professor Dennison when he says: "The essential point is that the full measure of economic progress, the improvement of standards of living, can take place only if, as technique and economic conditions change, resources (land, labour and capital) are not deliberately impeded in their movement from uses which yield a small return of goods to those which yield a larger return." This is good doctrine related to the question of international exchange.

To return to *Peace News*, in which

"Observer" states that the opponents of the majority report "make no bones about their contention: agriculture which cannot successfully compete with the products of prairie farming must go to the wall, once again, and the land lapse once more to dereliction." He then drags out our old friend "Laissez-faire," "It seems strange," says "Observer," "that in 1942 there should be such unblushing exponents of pure laissez-faire. But there they are. And they will do all they can, when the time comes, to exploit the townsman's desire for low food prices against the countryman's right to a living wage." This criticism miscarries as applied to Professor Dennison, who distinctly states: "Equally with my colleagues, I desire the maintenance—even the increase—of the beauty of the countryside. Equally, too, I desire that those whom it is in the national interest to employ in agriculture shall have a decent standard of living. And I do not think that these ends can be achieved by just leaving things alone." One of the things that should not be left alone is the system of national and local taxation which leaves unused land untaxed, and thus leaves land monopoly free to impede production.

The assumption behind the remarks of "Observer" in *Peace News* is that the farming industry cannot be carried on without a tariff on imported wheat, an assumption based on ignoring, or on indifference to, the monopoly of land. No doubt as good a case could be made out for a duty on meat imported from the Argentine as well as on wheat from Canada. Such a case would be based on "agricultural" interests, as distinct from national interests. And a similar case could be made out for tariffs on the products of every trade that is struggling against our unjust system of land-ownership and local and national taxation. "Observer's" paragraph is a bit of Protectionism bolstered up with an attempt to create prejudice against Free Trade.

What is really strange is that the doctrines and arguments of economic nationalism should be advanced in the pages of *Peace News*, the organ of the Peace Pledge Union. Pacifists in general have been saying for years, quite rightly, that tariff barriers are one of the chief

causes of the present conflict. The P.P.U. itself in one of its pamphlets on "The Political Basis of the P.P.U." states that we must "work to abolish the present economic restrictions prescribed between nations—often referred to as economic nationalism. This will entail the abolition of the present system of preferential tariffs." In its Seven Practical Points for Immediate Objectives, Number Four is: "To abolish political and economic nationalism." The P.P.U. is carrying on a campaign against the Food Blockade. The suggestion to protect the farmers by import duties on wheat means a blockade against our own people to the extent to which imported corn is kept out.

Strangest of all is the way in which "Observer" appears to ignore the political implications of his way of helping British farmers at the expense of the British townsmen and the colonial agriculturist. If, for example, a tax is put on Canadian wheat, it is certain that Canada will want to retaliate with a tax on our manufactures. If the tax applies to Russian and South American wheat, as well as to the U.S.A., as it will in deference to colonial opinion, then the colonies will want a preference, and non-colonial producing nations will answer with duties against all British commodities and the old international wrangles will go on as before the war. A system of incipient warfare will break out once again and render futile all that pacifists can do to prevent another war, as effect surely follows its cause.

This writer in *Peace News* cannot dispose of the case against Protection by repeating the worn-out clichés about "laissez-faire" and pretending that there is no alternative to the ruin of the farmers except the taxation of the industrial workers' food.

It is sad to see the old Tory arguments for tariffs in the pages of the official pacifist journal. Both Cobden and Henry George showed that protective tariffs not only made the consumer pay more, but that the farmer did not get the benefit, which went to the owner of land in increased rents and land prices due to the effect of the tariffs; and both reformers taught that tariffs are the seed beds of international strife. "Observer" thinks it is a case of the countryman's right to a living wage against the townsman's desire for low food prices. But the agricultural labourer himself will not be any better off when he has to spend his higher wages on higher prices for the produce he has helped to grow, and this is another effect of Protection which is ignored, although it is clearly shown by the minority report, for which Professor Dennison, one against eleven as he was, is to be congratulated for its clearness and sanity. D. J. J. O.

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