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THE APPLICATION OF THE HOUSING OF THE WORKING CLASSES ACTS IN RURAL DISTRICTS.*

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You have all heard of the history of Ireland, one of whose chapters was headed "Snakes in Ireland," and the body of the chapter contained the words, "There are no snakes in Ireland." Similarly I feel almost inclined to say, "There is no application of the Housing of the Working Classes Acts in Rural Districts." Consider, for instance, the story told by Mr. Drinkwater, of the Levenshulme Urban District Council, in the *Journal of the Sanitary Institute* (Manchester Congress, 1902), where, in a village in Cambridgeshire, he "went into a house, which should rather have been called a den. No sunlight nor even fresh air could get into the room. The area was about 13ft. 6ins. square, and the window 21ins. square. He asked for a cup of tea, but the old lady replied that she was sorry, but the water was very bad. He made enquiries into the water supply, and he found a well on the village green, and the poor woman pulling the water up from a depth of 27 feet. He came to the conclusion that there was some contamination in the well, and made enquiries as to whether sewage matter got into it. An inspection of the well was made, and they found a young pig that a farmer had lost several weeks previously. That was only one illustration of the bad condition of the rural districts. He visited hundreds of cases not quite so bad as that, but nearly so." Now, dismissing the obvious peculiarities of this story, what does it amount to? A room 13ft. 6ins. square is no bad room; if the window was only 21ins. square, and would not open, the remedy is neither difficult nor costly; a public well, 27ft. deep, is a source

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of supply that I know many villages would be only too delighted to have ; and if a pig was drowned in the well, that points only to defective walling or protection, for which the surrounding tenants were probably more responsible than the owner. Look at it as you will, I cannot see that the case proves any necessity for the application of the Housing of the Working Classes Acts. I have, of course, only selected it as a specimen. It makes an effective platform illustration before an uncritical audience, but will ill bear examination by a society of experts.

Miss Constance Cochrane, of St. Neots, Hunts, is a well-known writer and speaker on the same subject. Among her statements are the following : (1) That in the country tenants dared not complain of sanitary defects because of arousing the wrath of landlords, and, perhaps, also of the Sanitary Authority itself ; (2) That many villages had no drains, no water supply, houses in bad condition and insufficient in number ; (3) That the Inspector of Nuisances and the Medical Officer of Health were underpaid, were therefore not the best men that could be got, and were often demoralized by their Sanitary Authorities. She describes the straits of a village without a water supply in language both vigorous and picturesque ; she describes houses without privies, privies adjoining the pumps which furnish the water supply ; cottages dilapidated and unfit to live in ; and sad overcrowding. I have the greatest possible sympathy with the sufferers under each heading of these complaints ; but my observations to-day are limited to the consideration of one particular Act, and I must again repeat my conviction that this Act is not the proper remedy for the defects, except, perhaps, in the one particular that it may be used by the Medical Officer of Health, if supported by his Authority, to obtain the absolute closing of one or more houses unfit for habitation, as a lever by which to compel the reluctant owners of other similar property to put it into decent repair, when other means have failed. And, even so, it is like using a steam-hammer to crack a nut. (Part II., Sect. 30.)

We will now call another witness, Mr. W. Bland, who was President of the Conference of Sanitary Inspectors at the Manchester Congress, 1902. He says : " In addition to dealing with town dwellings, rural districts require attention. Old, dilapidated cottages are too much in evidence ; built originally with no pretence at sanitary requirement, they have—through years of dilapidation—become a danger to their occupants ; they do not produce overcrowding upon space, but their defects, both of structure and of design, make against all the benefits that abundance of pure air, which fortunately surrounds them, would give. The rural labourer for the most part requires re-housing, and

increased provision is wanted, so as to retain the surplus population in our villages. If the present owners are unable or unwilling to deal with the case, the Rural Councils should take the matter in hand, and thus in some measure check the flowing tide of humanity into cities and towns." Matters are mentioned here, again, deeply interesting in themselves, and a fair specimen of the line of thought which leads to a demand for the application of the Housing of the Working Classes Acts to Rural Districts; and yet, critically examined, they prove to miss the mark; as, for instance, where the expression (above) "that abundance of pure air which fortunately surrounds them," proves at once that they do not come under Part I of the Act, which deals with "Unhealthy Areas"; and although Part II, "Unhealthy Dwelling Houses," *can* be applied, it has been hinted above that it is found too cumbersome in practice. And the suggestion that "Rural Councils should take the matter in hand," only shows, if I may respectfully say so, the writer's ignorance of the idiosyncrasies of those bodies. All operations under this Act, as will be presently shown, are necessarily costly; and the Rural District Council has yet to be born, which will voluntarily initiate and undertake costly schemes, of which they cannot understand the prospective value, or which they declare would be for the benefit of particular property-owners.

Mr. Bland also says: "The unhealthy conditions under which we find many persons living are often the creation of their own neglect"; and after elaborating the theme, he says: "Until some more stringent means be adopted to teach such people their duty, much of the work which Sanitary Authorities carry out to improve the health of their districts will fall short of the desired end;" which I take to mean that the application of the Housing of the Working Classes Acts will not cure the faults of ignorant and dirty tenants.

So far I have had in my own mind the "Rural" District proper, as distinguished from the neighbouring small "Urban" District; and I am of opinion that, in such districts, defects can properly be remedied by owners, and that the Housing of the Working Classes Act has little, if any, genuine application. Therefore, to prevent the discussion ending before it has begun, I am compelled to believe that the word "Rural" in the title really means all the country outside the Boroughs (Municipal or County), which is a common use of the word, although not strictly accurate according to the nomenclature of Local Government. In this sense, the subject immediately attains to greater importance; because it is precisely the small "Urban" Districts which perpetuate the evils so graphically described as belonging to "Rural" Districts, with just sufficient concentration

of insanitary conditions in regard to area occupied, to bring to everyone's mind the desirability of enforcing the provisions of this Act.

The problem may be briefly defined as the difficulty of providing sufficient suitable accommodation at reasonable cost for persons of the working class "displaced from insanitary houses or areas"; and I hope to be able to show you immediately that the real crux is contained in that one word "cost." For instance, and in passing, accommodation can be provided in London if the tenant can pay a weekly rent of 7s. to 10s., but the requirement, and the unattainable requirement, of the tenant is, that the rent shall not exceed 5s.; and in a little country town, with which I am acquainted, very careful calculations have been made, which show that the Council could meet all requirements at a weekly rental of 5s., except the one requirement of the tenant that the rent shall not exceed 2s. 6d.!!

Before concluding with a reference to the Housing of the Working Classes Act itself, I should like to tell you briefly what has happened within my own knowledge. A small township, containing a large village, obtained from the County Council independent sanitary authority; in other words, from being one among thirty, governed by a Rural Council composed of thirty members, one from each, it became an Urban District, self-contained, with a Council of twelve of its own leading inhabitants. There were notorious slums, or comparative slums, even in this pretty village; and the Council had an honest desire to improve them. Under Sect. 5 of the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890, the Medical Officer of Health accordingly "made an official representation" as to two small defined areas, and, according to Sect. 79, he made it in writing; whereupon, under Sect. 4, it became compulsory on the Council to "take the representation into their consideration"; and their action also was compulsory under two conditions, viz. (1) "If satisfied of the truth thereof" (which they were), (2) "And of the sufficiency of their resources;" and this latter condition could not be fulfilled. Land was dear, and after considering every possible scheme and suggestion from every point of view, for a period of twelve months or more, they were forced to the conclusion that they could not build under a weekly rental of 5s., to cover outlay and upkeep; whilst the class to be benefited could not afford to pay more than 2s. 6d., or possibly 3s. 6d. at the outside. Thus the scheme fell through; and matters have remained for many years at a standstill. In the meantime private enterprise has built a number of superior cottages, rented at 6s. to 9s.; and these have been filled by clerks and warehousemen from Manchester, without affecting or relieving the local housing conditions of the working classes.

With the above considerations borne in mind, it will be well now to glance at the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890, itself. This Act repealed 15 other older Acts dating from 1850 onwards; and consists of 103 sections, arranged in 7 parts, and has 7 schedules. There have been further Acts passed in 1894 and 1902.

In the Act of 1890, Part I deals with the removal of insanitary areas, and the formulation of improvement schemes properly so called. Part II provides the machinery for the removal of obstructive dwellings, and for the closing of unhealthy isolated houses, or small groups of houses, belonging to one owner. Part III deals with the provision of lodging-houses for the working classes. These are the principal parts of the Act. Mr. Peter Addie said at the Birmingham Congress in 1898: "It is interesting to note, that while the existing Act and its predecessors were designed for the express object of housing the working classes, they have been used chiefly as towns improvements Acts." If this be the case in Boroughs (to which he was alluding) what likelihood is there of the Act being better administered in a Rural District?

Part I begins by placing upon the Medical Officer of Health the duty of officially reporting an unhealthy area; either because (a) houses, courts, or alleys are unfit for human habitation; or because (b) the narrowness, closeness, and bad arrangement, or the bad condition of the streets and houses, or groups of houses, within such area, or the want of light, air, ventilation, or proper conveniences, or any other sanitary defects, or one or more of such causes, are dangerous or injurious to the health of the inhabitants, and so on. Then the Local Authority must take this representation into consideration, and are to be satisfied of the truth thereof, and of the sufficiency of their resources. How many schemes will get beyond this point? Personally, I know of none; but Dr. W. J. Simpson stated on the 7th inst. that 14 Rural District Councils had taken action (this is in 14 years!), of which only 4 got to the building stage; and the total result is 32 houses! Fourteen of these are at Penshurst, in Kent, and four at Bralton, in Wilts, and these are financially successful. Eight at Thongoe, in West Suffolk, are a financial loss; and the remaining six are being built at Bradwell-on-Sea, Essex, at a cost of £1,400. I have, therefore, no hope of the true Rural District. Perhaps, however, an Urban District might feel inclined to go further. Then they must get out a complete improvement scheme, with plans and estimates; the scheme must be advertised; the Local Government Board must hold an enquiry; and, if convinced, will issue a provisional order, which must be confirmed by Parliament. Now let me tell you, on the authority of Dr. Scurfield, how this

worked out in Sunderland. Half-an-acre (out of a larger total) was reported in August, 1893. The improvement scheme was completed in September, and advertised in October, 1893. The Local Government Board enquiry was held January, 1894, and the Provisional Order made in May. Purchase of property was advanced by September, 1896, and a competition for designs was advertised. The prizes were awarded in January, 1897, and the plans approved in March, amended, again approved in June, and finally sent to the Local Government Board in July. Modifications were required, further enquiry was held, and in the summer of 1898, when the story was told, nothing had been done, though five years had elapsed since the first steps were taken. Sunderland is neither a Rural, nor a small Urban, District. With this experience before us, can we hope that this Act, Part I, will be of any use to a Rural District? Part II begins, as before, by making it the duty of the Medical Officer of Health to report insanitary houses. It is then the duty of the Authority to have them closed, and possibly demolished; but an appeal lies to the Court of Quarter Sessions, and tedious litigation may ensue. I have myself several times reported houses in this manner, but I have never yet seen any proceedings taken; and if an Authority chooses to ignore my representation, thereby itself deliberately breaking the law, there does not seem to be any superior Authority which cares a rap about it. Certainly neither County Council nor Local Government Board have ever assisted me. Perhaps they are ignorant of the facts. Then the sooner they give me Fixity of Tenure, the better it will be for the administration of the Housing of the Working Classes Act. Part II continues next to deal with groups of houses, and we get back practically to the provisions of Part I. Part III deals with the erection of Lodging Houses, but Rural Authorities are excluded from its powers, except they get a special permission from the County Council. It is hardly necessary to go into greater detail, I think, though much more might be said as to the nice things which the Act intended to place within the power of small authorities, because it is clearly very unlikely that they will ever be "within the domain of practical politics."

The literature on this subject is of great extent. No Congress has been held for many years past at which papers and discussions have not been in evidence. Journals of Transactions are full of these records. It would almost seem that everything had been said that could be said. And still we "get no forrader. Dr. Simpson's paper is the latest, having been read only ten days ago. He emphasizes the scarcity of cottages in Rural Districts, and the resultant overcrowding, with its accompanying physical and moral ills. He roundly

declares Part III to be a failure, showing that only four Rural Councils, out of a total of 587, had carried out building operations.

The question of bye-laws now comes into the consideration of building possibilities ; and I had intended briefly to discuss it ; but my introduction is already getting too long, and the subject is one which will carry an entire discussion of its own ; I, therefore, purposely omit it to-day, and will merely quote Dr. Simpson's dictum : " There is no incompatibility between cheap cottages and the enforcement of proper and suitable bye-laws which shall secure healthy homes ; but there is an incompatibility between cheap cottages and healthy homes, when every one is allowed to build as he pleases."

More than half the Rural Districts are without bye-laws ; so that in them any kind of building can be erected.

As to a labourer's cottage, I would insist (from my own experience) that three bedrooms should be the minimum of size ; that two at least of them should contain a minimum of 1,000 cubic feet ; that there should be fireplaces in these two ; and that all the windows in the house should be made to open. The necessity for a pantry, or larder, in a convenient place and in a sanitary condition, has often been alluded to. A cottage of this class, whether alone or in a small block, it must be remembered, has no public water supply, no sewers, and no scavenging. Each of these matters has to be attended to by the tenant, by himself, and for himself. Hence the absolute necessity of an area of ground to belong to, and, if possible, to surround, each cottage. The amount required is not less than one-fifth of an acre. Certain urban requirements are out of place ; for instance, the " paving of back-yards," because here there is no " back-yard," but a garden instead. Of course the ordinary requirements of good foundations, weatherproof walls with a damp-course, and so on, should be insisted on ; but, personally, I think more liberty might be given in the materials used. In particular, why should not wood be more largely used ? The danger of fire prohibits it in populated areas ; but for single cottages this public danger does not exist, and the danger to the cottage itself is exaggerated. No doubt, brick or stone is theoretically better ; but if you had to choose between a dilapidated ancient stone cottage, and a new modern cottage of lighter material (wood or other), I fancy I know what most people would prefer. I mention this because the question of cost is here again a powerful factor. The problem of the moment is a cheap cottage. Possibly the " Cheap Cottage Exhibition," which is to be held next month, may help to solve it. At the same time it is not likely to solve the whole problem, but only that part of it relating to structure. I cannot do better than quote Dr. Simpson again : " The requisites

of a healthy house in a Rural District are, that it should be dry, well lighted, well ventilated, in good repair, warm in winter, cool in summer ; it should be provided with a good water supply, and should possess sufficient space around it for ventilation of its parts, also for the accommodation of its out-offices, and for the proper disposal of excreta, kitchen refuse, and slops, without being a danger to health or an offence to the inmates of the house or neighbours, and without any risk of contamination of the well on the premises. None of these essentials can be dissociated from one another."

The landlord, the speculative builder, and the householder, all enter into the question also ; in fact, it is far from being as simple as it would seem.

Sir William Grantham's case can hardly escape mention ; and, with regard to bye-laws, the following is a summary of the statements made to the President of the Local Government Board by a deputation.

" That the bye-laws governing the building of cottages in the country are enforced by those who either have (a) No knowledge of the *locus in quo* ; (b) No knowledge of the wants and requirements of the district ; (c) No ability to administer them ; (d) An interest against the landlord or person desirous of building ; (e) A desire to administer bye-laws suitable for towns, but most unsuitable for country districts ; or (f) a desire on the part of the Councils, or of the officials of the Councils, to strain the language of the bye-laws against the building-owner, and instead of assisting him, throwing every obstacle in the way of his carrying out the desired work ; and that hundreds more cottages would have been built all over the country, which would have prevented, to some extent, the people from crowding into the towns, if there had been—(a) More suitable bye-laws ; (b) An elasticity allowed to those who administered them ; or (c) If there were no bye-laws in those places or districts where there is no necessity to enforce them."

Another large and interesting subject is that which includes all building conditions ; but this, again, seems outside the present discussion, and is, therefore, passed over.

There is a Bill now before the House of Lords, introduced by Lord Hylton, which aims at abolishing all control over the sanitary requirements necessary for the building of a healthy house ; except only the drainage and closet arrangements. This can only be characterized as lamentably retrograde. It certainly conflicts with the opinion of the Local Government Board, as officially stated in a circular to Sanitary Authorities on the Housing of the Working Classes question, dated 23rd June, 1900, which concludes in the following words :

“Parliament has made it the duty of any Local Authority, entrusted with the laws relating to public health and local government, to put in force from time to time, as occasion may arise, the powers with which they are entrusted, so as to secure the proper sanitary condition of all premises within the area under their control, and the Board would point out that a heavy responsibility rests with the local Authorities if they fail to give effect to the intentions of Parliament.” The greater, therefore, is the pity, and the greater is the anomaly, that the Local Government Board itself, as the highest Sanitary Authority, does not translate its most excellent intentions into concrete action, and compel the subordinate Authorities to perform their respective duties.

I now reach the end of my observations, which, I fear, have been discursive and somewhat inconsequential. My summing up of the case is as follows: The Housing of the Working Classes Acts, though no doubt not perfect, are still “good enough” for all practical purposes; but the procedure under them is cumbersome, and exceedingly costly, so that large Boroughs do not find them easy of application; and it is really hopeless to expect the small Urban District Council, which has not the money, or the Rural District Council, which does not see the necessity, to put them into action.

The only remedy I can suggest would be the following: Give the Medical Officer of Health security of tenure; let his representation under the Acts be a Special Report, to be communicated to the County Council and Local Government Board; and let one of these bodies be charged with the duty of seeing that the matter is properly taken into consideration by the Local Authority, who should furnish a full report of their decision to the superior Authority, who should then have some power of intervention; but this should be coupled with the duty of sharing in the financial burden, should they insist upon the carrying out of schemes which the minor Authority refused to tackle unaided. In other words, I arrive at the same point to which many previous subjects and discussions have led me: We don’t want new Acts, we only want better administration of the Acts we already have; and to get this, the first step is to improve the status of the Medical Officer of Health, who should at least share the conditions of the Medical Officers of the Poor Law service, who, though appointed and paid locally, can only be dismissed for misconduct, and only with the consent of the Local Government Board.

In dragging in this subject, I recognize my likeness to Dickens’s “Mr. Dick,” so I will conclude by saying, that I hope to extend my own knowledge in listening to the discussion that is to follow.

DISCUSSION.

DR. SERGEANT, in proposing a vote of thanks, said that in almost all big schemes under these Acts considerable delay must be anticipated. He was no partisan of the barrack type of building, for this was usually expensive, not built in a healthy place but in the centre of the town, and not suitable for the people displaced, because of the cost of the rooms. The large landowners were the people to whom they should look chiefly, but he feared that they were largely in the hands of their stewards, and the latter were averse to doing the necessary work. Certainly the landowners should rise to their responsibilities, and provide houses, particularly for those people engaged upon their estates. Wages were at present on the low side, and houses built to let at 5s. per week would probably remain empty so far as the working classes were concerned.

DR. J. A. HARRIS said that in his experience landowners were not coming up to expectations. They were ready enough at most times to pull down dilapidated houses, but when the question of rebuilding came up they were very backward. In rural districts the chief difficulty was that the Council, who were to a very large extent farmers, had a horror of any expenditure.

DR. MEREDITH YOUNG was of opinion that Section 32 of the Act was practically the only one of any good in rural districts. It was difficult to apply the Housing of the Working Classes Act to rural districts, because it was specially drawn to facilitate alterations in urban districts and large towns. In his opinion more legislation was required of a special kind suitable for rural districts, of the type, for example, of the Public Health Water Act, 1878. The mere adoption *en bloc* of urban sections, such as Sections 47, etc., of the Public Health Act, 1875, was, practically speaking, of little use. He would very much like to see more use made of that Section in the 1890 Housing Act, which enacted that in all lettings of houses of an artisan type a condition was implied on letting, that the houses were in all respects reasonably fit for habitation. He also thought that people should be taught more how to use their houses when they got them, and, instead of setting aside one room out of the four they usually had for pure purposes of ornamentation, they should sink dignity and style a little bit, and use this room sensibly. One of the difficulties connected with the water supply of isolated parts of rural districts was, that even when they had a water main running close to the house they desired to serve, the company, to whom the main belonged, were often unwilling to allow their main to be tapped, because in this case it meant that that length of main was also taxed.

DR. GARSTANG, in reply, said that he had derived great benefit from the discussion. In his rural districts individual houses were scattered widely apart, and a group of houses was quite the rarity, hence a public water supply and public scavenging was practically impossible. The fact of estate agents coming on to Rural District Councils in such large numbers boded little good for sanitary progress.

PROPORTION OF THE SEXES IN THE UNITED STATES.—Statistics of the United States Census Bureau show that there are in the United States 1,638,321 more males than females, the relative excess of males being greater than the average for all countries whose population has been counted with distinction of sex. The cities, however, contain more females than males.