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ADDRESS to the ECONOMIC SCIENCE and STATISTICS SECTION of the
BRITISH ASSOCIATION, held at LIVERPOOL, 1896. By the RIGHT
HON. LEONARD COURTNEY, M.A., M.P., PRESIDENT of the SECTION.

WHEN the British Association revisits a town or city, it is the laudable custom of the President of a Section to refer to what was said by his predecessor in the same chair on the former occasion. I should in any case be disposed to follow this practice, but I could not choose to do otherwise when I find it was my honoured friend Professor Jevons who occupied this place in Liverpool in 1870. He was one of a group which passed away in quick succession, to the great loss of the study of economics in this country, since each had much promise of further usefulness, and left us with labours unfulfilled. Bagehot, Cairnes, Cliffe Leslie, Fawcett, Jevons, occupied a large space in the field of economic study, and no one among them excelled Professor Jevons in the vigour and clearness of his analysis or in the sincerity and range of his speculations. His first work which arrested public attention was perhaps not so much understood as misunderstood. This busy, bustling, hurrying world cannot afford time to pause and examine the consecutive stages of a drawn out argument, and too many caught up and repeated to one another the notion that Jevons predicted a speedy exhaustion of our coalfields, and they and their successors have since been congratulating themselves on their cleverness in disbelieving the prophecy. No such prophecy was in truth ever uttered. The grave warning that was given was of the impossibility of continuing the rate of development of coal production to which we had been accustomed, of slackening, and even arrested growth, and of the increasing difficulty of maintaining a prosperity based on the relative advantages we possessed in the low cost of production of coal; and this warning has been amply verified in the years that have since passed, as will be at once admitted by all who are competent to read and understand the significance of our subsequent experience. But I must not dwell on this branch of Jevons's work nor on the many other contributions he made to the study of our economic life. I am concerned with what he said here twenty-six years since.

At first sight the address of my predecessor may seem loose and discursive; but viewed in due perspective, it appears a serious inquiry into the apparent failure of economic teaching to change

the course and elevate the standard of our social life, and an earnest endeavour to impress these principles more strongly on the public mind, so that the future might better the history he reviewed. He referred to the repeal of the Corn Laws, and owned with regret that the condition of the people was little changed, that pauperism had scarcely abated, that little forethought was shown by the industrial classes in preparing for the chances of the future; and he dwelt on the mischievous influence of the unthinking benevolence of the wealthy in undermining providence by its constant and increasing activity in mitigating the evils of improvidence. Jevons was not content to condemn the doles of past testators; he wanted the reorganisation of the hospital service of our towns, so that, as far at least as the ordinary and inevitable casualties of sickness and accident are concerned, they might be met by the co-operation of workers inspired by motives of self-reliance instead of by ever open gratuitous service making forethought unnecessary and even foolish. In this connection it may be noticed that while giving a hearty welcome to Mr. Forster's Education Act, passed in the same year that he spoke, he noted with satisfaction that primary education had not been made gratuitous so as to take away another support of prudence. It is strange, too, in the light of our recent experience, to find him regretting that the task of remodelling local taxation had not been undertaken, so that local wants might be met by a just apportionment of their charge, and the principles of association of the members of local communities placed on a firmer basis.

It will be seen that what really occupied the mind of my predecessor was the apparent slow success of economic thinkers in influencing political action, and we, looking back over the intervening twenty-six years, have certainly no more cause of congratulation than he felt. We are forced to ask ourselves the same question, What is the reason of our apparent failure? We are driven to examine anew whether our principles are faulty and incomplete, or whether the difficulties in their acceptance, they being sound, lie in the prejudices of popular feeling which politicians are more ready to gratify than to correct.

I do not pause to meet the charges of inhumanity or immorality which have in other times been brought against economists. Jevons pleaded for the benevolence of Malthus, who might indeed be presumed, as an English clergyman, to be not altogether inhuman or immoral. In truth, everyone who has ever had any thought about social or fiscal legislation—and we have had such laws among ourselves for five centuries—everyone who has ever tried to influence the currents of foreign trade—and such attempts date from an equally remote past—has been moved by some train of

economic reasoning, and must strictly be classified as an economist; and the only difference between such men and those who are more usually recognised by the name is that the latter have attempted to carry their thoughts a little further, and have been more busy in examining the links of their own reasoning and the soundness of their conclusions. The men who attempted to fix wages, to limit the numbers in special trades, to prohibit or to compel certain specific exports, all had some notion that they were engaged in doing something to strengthen, if not to improve, the better organisation of communities. Even the aims which appear to us most selfish were disguised as embodying social necessities. But by the beginning of the present reign it may be said that the study of political economy in this country had worked itself free from earlier errors, and it had come to be believed that the secret of social regeneration lay in the utmost allowance of freedom of action to every individual of the community, so far at least as that action affected himself, coupled with the most complete development of the principle of self-reliance, so as to bring home to every member, freed from legal restraint on his liberty of action, the moral responsibility of self support, and of discharging the duties, present and to come, of his special position. With this education of the individual in self-reliance, and with this liberation of the same individual in the conduct of life, it was held that by certain, if slow, stages the condition of the community would be improved, and a wholesome reorganisation naturally effected.

Whatever view we may now hold of this belief, whether we must discard it as incomplete or even erroneous, or whether we remain strong in the conviction of its intrinsic soundness and in the possibility of realising the hopes it offered, it must still be evident that those who professed it were imbued with the deepest interest in the well-being of their fellow creatures, and that the aim of all their speculations was the purification of social life and its healthy and abundant development.

Such was the theory more or less openly expressed by economic thinkers when the British Association was founded, and the same theory, as I conceive, lay at the base of Jevons's address in 1870. Can we hold it now, or must it be recast?

Since 1870 primary education has practically been made gratuitous. The legislature had an opportunity for abolishing the mischief of doles, but showed no inclination to make use of it, and there were even traces of a feeling of favour for the maintenance of these bequests of the past. The indiscriminate multiplication of so-called charitable institutions has in no way been reformed, and there is as great activity as ever in the zeal of those who would mitigate or relieve the effects of improvidence without

touching improvidence itself. As far as the course of legislation is concerned, it may be feared that it has been directed to diminish rather than to increase the spirit of self-reliance. Codes of regulations have been framed for the supervision of the conduct of special industries, and their sphere has been extended so as to embrace at no distant period, if not now, the whole industrial community. The reformed poor law, which was regarded as a great step in the education of the workman, especially of the agricultural labourer, in independence, stands again upon its trial, and proposals are at least in the air for assuring to the aged poor a minimum measure of support without any regard to the circumstances of their past lives, or to the inevitableness of their condition. The suggestions made by responsible statesmen have indeed been more limited and cautious, but it will be acknowledged of those, as of the German system, from which they may be said to be in some measure borrowed, that they involve a great departure from that ideal of individual development to which I have referred. Add to this that there is a movement, which has become practical in many large cities and towns, for the community itself to engross some forms of industrial activity, and to undertake in respect of them to meet the wants of their inhabitants. All these developments and more may be summed up as illustrations of Collectivity—an ideal which has its advocates and professors, and which looks in the future for regulated civic and national monopolies instead of unrestricted freedom of individual activity, and for the supervision and control of those industries which may remain unabsorbed by State or town. In pursuit of this last conception there have been put forward not only requirements as to hours and conditions of labour, but a demand also for a living wage or a minimum below which no workman shall be paid; and this principle has been already adopted by some municipalities in respect of their monopolised industries. The State itself indeed has, through the popular branch of the legislature, declared more or less clearly in favour of the same principle in respect of the industries which are conducted in its service.

We have not only to acknowledge the continued slowness of politicians to adopt and enforce the teaching of economists such as Jevons contemplated, but also the rise of another school of economic thought which competes for, and in some measure successfully obtains, the attention of the makers of laws. The question which has already been suggested thus becomes inevitable. We must inquire whether the failure of former teaching has not been due to errors in itself rather than to the indocility of those who have neglected it.

The greatest difficulty which the teachers of the past have to

overcome when put upon their self-defence lies in the suspicion, or more than suspicion, of an occupied multitude that their promises have failed. It is thought of them, if it is not openly said, that they had the ear of legislators for a generation, that the course and conduct of successive administrations were governed by their principles, and yet society, as we know it, presents much the same features, and the lifting up of the poor out of the mire is as much as ever a promise of the future. Some quicker method of introducing a new order is called for, and any scheme offering an assurance of it is welcomed. A ready answer can be given to much of the suspicion of failure that is entertained. That freedom of industrial action, which is the first postulate of the economists, has never been secured. We are so much accustomed to the conditions of our own life that this declaration may seem strange to many, who will say that at least in England labour and trade are free; but it must be admitted, on reflection, that in one great sphere of action the liberty so postulated has, for good or bad reasons, never been conceded. The limitations and restrictions necessarily consequent upon the system of land laws established among us are not commonly understood, but although much has been done to liberate agriculture from their fetters, its perfect freedom has not been attained. There may be free trade in the United Kingdom and free land in the United States, but the country is yet to be found in which both are realised, and even if both these requisites were attained the sores of social life would not be removed unless the spirit of self-reliance were fully developed: and how little has been done to secure this essential condition of progress! nay, how much has been done by law, and still more by usage, to weaken and destroy its power! The economist of whom I have been speaking may boldly claim that so far as he has had a free hand, his promises have been realised; there has been a larger population with increased means of subsistence and diminished necessity of toil, a people better housed, better fed, better clothed, with fewer relative failures of self-support; and if the teaching which has been partially adopted has brought about so much, everything it promised would have been secured had it been fully followed. This raises the question whether there are inherent difficulties in the nature of man preventing such a consummation, and many will be ready with the answer that such difficulties exist, are permanent and cannot be surmounted. As long as human nature is what it is—so runs the current phrase—men will not see misery without relieving it, they will not wait to inquire into its cause and whether it could have been prevented, and it is claimed that this instinct is one of the best attributes of humanity, which we should not attempt to eradicate.

This kind of reply easily catches the popular ear. It seems generous, sympathetic, humane. But it is based on a view of human nature being incapable of education which has been and will long be the excuse for acquiescence in all imperfections and even iniquity; nor can that be said to be truly generous, sympathetic, or humane which refuses to inquire into the possibility of curing disease, and prefers the selfishness of self-relief to the patient endeavour to probe and remove the causes of the sufferings of others. The economist of the past generation would, I think, be justified in repudiating with warmth the feeble temper which recoils from the strenuousness of endeavouring to deal with social evils at their origin, and in reproaching the acceptance as inevitable of vices we take no pains to prevent. This, however, does not conclude the whole matter. Even if we did attain the ideal of bringing home to all the members of the community the fatal consequences of improvidence and vice, should we find improvidence and vice ever narrowing into smaller and smaller circles, or should we be confronted with their existence as before, with this difference, that past attempts to alleviate their miserable consequences would be discredited and abandoned? I fear I must here confess to a somewhat faltering faith. That a vigorous enforcement of the penalties of improvidence would diminish it, is a conclusion justified by experience as well as suggested by theory; but that it and its consequences would not still remain gross and palpable facts is a conclusion I have not the courage to gainsay. At all events, I cannot refuse to consider the question whether something more than the complete freedom of the individual is not necessary for the reformation of society, and to examine with an open mind any supplementary or alternative proposals that may be made to reach this end. Yet one thing must be said, and said with emphasis, of the theory of the economist. It was a working theory. No theory can be accepted even for examination which does not show a working organisation of society, and the theory we have had under review has this necessary characteristic, even if it does not open up a certain way to a perfect reconstruction of our social system.

It will be conceded by the most fearless and thorough-going advocates of the liberty of individual development, that it must be supported by large measures of co-operative action. No individual can by any amount of forethought protect himself by himself against the chances and accidents of the future. No one can tell beforehand what is in store for himself in respect of sickness, or accident, or those changes of circumstances which may arise from the default of others; and mutual aid is necessary to meet such contingencies. The freedom and activity of association thus

indicated are in no way inconsistent with the fullest theory of individual responsibility. Nor is there any departure from it in the voluntary combination among themselves of persons, individually weak, to supervise and safeguard the economic conditions into which they may enter with others relatively stronger. A single workman may be powerless to induce his employer to modify in any particular the terms of his employment, but when workmen band together they may meet employers as equal powers. Such liberty of combination is a development and not a limitation of individual liberty. Another step is taken when the parties to such an arrangement as has been suggested seek to make its provisions compulsory on others, be they workmen or employers, who may enter into similar relations; and the principles of former economists would generally prompt them to condemn such attempts at compulsion. The Factory Acts were opposed in this way, although they rested upon different grounds; for, though in their consequences they affected the labour of adults, they were propounded for the defence of young persons and children unable to protect themselves or to be the parties to free contracts. Legislation has, however, been extended to control directly the employment of fully responsible persons, and this has been defended by three lines of argument. It is urged that when the unchecked liberty of individuals destroys in fact the liberty of action of larger multitudes, it is in defence of liberty of action that those individuals are controlled. If a sea wall is necessary to prevent a large tract from being periodically inundated, it cannot be permitted to the owner of a small patch along the coast to leave the wall unbuilt along his border, and thus threaten the lands of his neighbours with inundation. Again, it is urged that when the overwhelming majority of persons engaged in a particular industry, employers and employed, are agreed upon the necessity of certain rules to govern the industry, it is not merely a convenience, but is a fulfilment of their liberty, to clothe with the sanction of law the regulations upon which they are agreed. Lastly, it is submitted that there are individuals in whom the sense of responsibility is so weak and whose development of forethought is so hopeless, that it is necessary the law should regulate their conduct as it may regulate the conduct of children. I do not propose to examine in detail these real or apparent limitations of individual liberty. The first plea appears to me to be sound in principle, though it may often have been applied to cases not properly coming within it. As to the second, the convenience of giving to an all but universal custom the force of law is incontestable, but it is at least doubtful whether this is sufficient to deprive individuals who deliberately wish to put

themselves outside it of the liberty of doing so. Unless their action could be brought within the first line of argument, sufficient reason for restraint does not appear. As for the hopeless class whose existence is made a plea for restrictive legislation, the economist may forcibly argue that they have never been left to learn the full force of the lessons of experience, and it is the impatient interference of thoughtless men and thoughtless laws which allows this class to be perpetually recruited.

The limitations of individual liberty, to which I have referred, are familiar to us, and have obtained a firm hold in our legislation; but we enter upon comparatively new ground when we turn to the proposals that an increasing number of industries should be undertaken and directed by State or municipality, and that a minimum and not inadequate subsistence should be assured to all those engaged in such industries, if indeed the principle be not presently extended outside the monopolies so established. The ideas which are clothed in the phrases "The socialisation of the instruments of industry," and "The guarantee of a minimum wage to all workmen," appear to involve a complete reorganisation of society, and an absolute abandonment of the theories of the past. This is not enough to justify their immediate rejection or their immediate acceptance. The past has not been so good that we can refuse to look at any proposals, however strange in appearance, offering a better promise for the future. It has not been so bad that we must abandon its methods in despair, as if no change could be for the worse, if not for the better. A patient inquirer, feeling his way along the movement of his time, may even be constrained to accept a patchwork covering of life instead of the ideal garment woven without seam throughout; or he may be led to see that the harmony of society, like the harmony of the physical universe, must be the result of divers forces, out of which is developed a perfect curve.

No one could now be found to deny the possibility, and few to question the utility, of the socialisation of some services. The post office is in all civilised countries organised as a national institution, and the complaints that are sometimes heard as to defects in its administration never extend to a demand for its abolition. Jevons, in a careful paper, showed that the same financial success which marks our present postal system, must not be expected from the nationalisation of the telegraph service, and he dismissed even suggestions for the nationalisation of railways. His predictions have been amply verified with respect to the telegraph account; but telegraphs are a national service amongst ourselves, and railways are largely nationalised in many continental countries, and in some of our own colonies and dependencies. Some of our

largest municipalities have undertaken the supply of water and of gas, or even of electric light, to the inhabitants, and a movement has begun, which seems likely to be extended, of undertaking the service of tramways. Demands have also been made for the municipalisation or nationalisation of the telephone service.

It may be said of all the industries thus described as taken over, or likely to be taken over, by the nation and local communities, that when they are not so taken over they require for their exercise special powers and privileges conceded by the State or community, and the conditions of such concessions are settled by agreement between the community and the body or bodies exercising such industries. These conditions may involve the payment of a fixed sum, or of a rent for the concession, or the terms upon which the services are to be rendered may be prescribed in a stipulated tariff of charges, or the amount of profit to be realised by the concessionaires may be limited with provisions for reduction of charge when such limit is reached, or it may be required that in working such industries certain limits of wages shall be observed as the minima to be paid to the workmen employed upon them. Speaking very broadly, it may be said that the community delegates or leases the right of practising the industry, and there is no impassable gulf between prescribing the terms on which a lease shall be worked and assuming the conduct of the industry leased. There may be difficulties in the management by a community of a cumbrous and unwieldy undertaking, but there is no difficulty affecting the organisation of society when the undertaking must be created and shaped by the community in the first place. The arguments against the assumption of such monopolies by State or local authorities are those of expediency, founded on a comparison of gain and loss. It may be urged that there are more forcible motives of economy on the part of a concessionaire than on the part of a community working the undertaking itself; that improvements of method and reductions of cost will be more carefully sought; and although such improvements and reductions might in theory be realised by the workmen and agents of a community, which would thus secure all the savings effected by them, yet private interest is quicker in discovery and more fertile in suggestion, and it is more profitable in the end for the community to allow a concessionaire to secure such profits, subject to a stipulation that some part of them should return to the community in the way either of increased money payment, or of reduced rates of charge for the services performed. It may be urged that when a community works an industry itself, it may do so at a loss, thus benefiting those who specially require its services at the cost of the whole body; but this objection is

not peculiar to undertakings so directly worked. It is a matter of common experience for State or municipality to grant important subventions to persons willing to undertake such works on stipulated terms of service, and such subventions involve a levy from the whole community for the benefit of those availing themselves of the services.

New considerations of great difficulty arise when we pass to the suggestion of the undertaking by local authorities of productive industries not in the nature of monopolies. In monopolies direct competition, often competition in any shape, is practically impossible; in other industries competition is a general rule; and it is by virtue of such competition that the members of the community do in the long run obtain their wants supplied in the most economical manner. When commodities are easily carried without serious deterioration, the constantly changing conditions of production and of transport induce a constant variation in the sources of cheapest supply—that is of supply under conditions of least toil and effort—and any arrest of this mobility involves a corresponding set-back in the advancement of the economic condition of mankind. It is a necessary consequence of this process that the local production of special commodities should be subject to diminution and extinction, and that the labours hitherto engaged in such local production should become gradually worthless. Quite as much labour as before might be expended in achieving the result, but it would be misapplied; it ought not to command the same return; it should cease. It is at least difficult to foresee how far the production of commodities exposed to free competition could be maintained by communities themselves in face of the movement we have described. There would be a danger of pressure to do away with invasive competition—action which, in my judgment, would be destructive of the most powerful cause of improvement in the condition of the people. There would be an allied danger of a refusal to recognise the possibility of a diminished worth of work which remains as toilsome as ever, and of an increasing congestion of labour when the great movement of the world demands its dispersion. It may be that those evils are not inevitable, but they would require to be faced if any serious attempt were made to increase the range of national or municipal industries, and I have not yet seen any attempt at their serious investigation.

The position thus taken may be illustrated by an experience to which I have elsewhere referred, but so pregnant with suggestion that I need not apologise for recalling it. My native county, Cornwall, was in my boyhood the scene of widespread activity in copper and tin mining. There had not been wanting warnings

that the competition of richer deposits in far countries would put an end to these industries in the county, but the warnings had not been realised and remained unheeded. In the years that have since passed they have been gradually and almost completely fulfilled. There are no copper mines now in Cornwall, and the tin mines, which were scattered far and wide throughout the county, are reduced to two or three within one limited area. It is not the case that the ores have been exhausted; they could still be raised, but at a cost of production making the process unprofitable. The mines were abandoned one by one, and the population of the county has steadily diminished in every recent census. What would the experience have been had the mines been a county or national property worked by county or nation? I do not stop to comment on the difficulty of expropriating present owners, which, however, must not be forgotten. If the collective owner had leased the mines to companies of adventurers (to use the local phrase), the lessees would have gradually relinquished their concessions, as they have done when taking them from private owners. Nor would the case have been materially different even if the collective owner had introduced the novel stipulation into his leases that the working miners should be paid according to prescribed rates of wages. The process of relinquishment might have been precipitated and accelerated by insisting on such a condition, but otherwise the experience would have been the same. The shrinkage of industry would go on without a check, and it is to be hoped that the workmen who found their work failing would, with the fine courage and enterprise they have in fact shown, have betaken themselves to the fields of mining industry displacing their own in all parts of the world. Can one think that the same process would have been maintained had the collective owner worked the mines directly, and the working men looked to country or nation for the continuance of work and wages? The attachment which all men have for the homes of themselves and their fathers would have stimulated a demand for a recurrence to the other resources of the collective owner for the maintenance of an industry that was dying. Some demand might even be made for a repression or prohibition of that competition which was the undoing of the local industry. These possibilities may be regarded as fanciful, and it is true that forces might be kept under control that operated within an area and affected a population relatively so limited. But what if the warnings of Jevons respecting coal in England proved like the warnings of the men who foresaw the cessation of tin mining in Cornwall, and the community had to deal with the problem of the dwindling coal industry in face of nationalised coal mines and armies of workmen employed by the

nation? The initial difficulties of the nationalisation of that which for centuries has been the subject of private property are formidable, but they could doubtless be overcome by the short and simple process of confiscation. This transformation is theoretically conceivable. It is in the subsequent development of the scheme of nationalised and municipalised industries that we are confronted with tasks not so easy of solution. How is its working to be reconciled with that opening up of more and more productive fields which is one of the prime factors of social progress? How is the allotment of men to be directed so that they may be shifted about as new centres open and old centres close? What checks or commands can be invoked to restrain the growth of population in a district when it should be dwindling? These are questions that can scarcely be put aside, and it may even be acknowledged that they gain fresh force when viewed in the light of another experience. Agricultural industry has recently been subjected to severe trials through a great breadth of this country. This has been due to cheaper importations from other lands, and though the competition has in my judgment been aggravated by causes into which I will not now digress (which aggravation however might and should be dealt with), the importation of food at less cost is a result no economist will regard as otherwise than beneficial to the community as a whole. It is well that bread and flesh and the sustenance of life should be procured with as little toil as possible, however severe the trial for those who have been engaged hitherto in the production of those necessities. We know that it has been so severe that demands for relief and assistance have been loudly made, and their power has been such as to have been in some measure successful; but had land been nationalised and farms held from the State or from county, town, or parish, they would have assumed a different shape, have been urged with greater purpose, and have received larger treatment. The difficulties of such a nationalised industry, passing into what may be described as a water-logged condition, would test beyond the straining point such statesmanship as our experience warrants us to believe possible.

However much we may contemplate the construction of an industrial system, it must, if it is to be a living social organism, be constantly responsive to the ever-changing conditions of growth; some parts must wax whilst others wane, extending here and contracting there, and manifesting at every moment those phenomena of vigour and decline which characterise life. In the development of industry new and easier ways are constantly being invented of doing old things; places are being discovered better suited for old industries than those to which resort had been

made; there is a continuous supersession of the worth of known processes and of the utility of old forms of work involving a supersession, or at least a transfer, of the labour hitherto devoted to them. All these things compel a perpetual shifting of seats of industry and of the settlements of man, and no organisation can be entertained as practicable which does not lend itself to those necessities. They are the pre-requisites of a diminution of the toil of humanity. As I have said before, the theory of individual liberty, however guarded, afforded a working plan: society could and did march under it. The scheme of collective action gives no such promise of practicability; it seems to lack the provision of the forces which should bring about that movement upon which growth depends. The economist of the past generation still holds his ground, and our best hope lies in the fuller acceptance of his ideas. Such, at least, appears to me to be the result of a dispassionate inquiry; but what may be wanting is something more than a dispassionate temper—a certain fervour of faith. The economist must feel, if he is to animate multitudes and inspire legislatures, that he, too, has a religion. Beneath the calmness of his analysis must be felt the throb of humanity. Slow in any case must be the secular progress of any branch of the human family; but if we take our stand upon facts, if our eyes are open to distinguish illusions from truth, if we are animated by the single purpose of subordinating our investigations and our actions to the lifting up of the standard of living, we may possess our souls in patience, waiting upon the promise of the future.