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THE REPORTS OF THE DEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEES ON THE HOME
PRODUCTION OF FOOD.

ON June 17th, 1915, the President of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries appointed a Departmental Committee "to consider and report what steps should be taken, by legislation or otherwise, for the sole purpose of maintaining and, if possible, increasing the present production of food in England and Wales, on the assumption that the War may be prolonged beyond the harvest of 1916."

On June 23rd His Majesty's Secretary for Scotland appointed a Committee to consider the same question in its application to Scotland, and on June 28th the Vice-President of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland committed an identical reference to a Committee for Ireland.

(i) *The Report of the English Committee.*

The *personnel* of the English Committee was strong. It was presided over by the Rt. Hon. Viscount Milner, and it included representatives of the three political parties, together with men whose familiarity with the present condition of the agricultural industry is beyond question. It did not consider itself called upon, by the terms of its reference, to inquire into the nature and extent of any possible shortage of imported food supplies, for it felt that the Government alone was competent to judge of this, but it confined itself to the consideration of the steps which could be taken assuming that an emergency might exist after the harvest of 1916. Recognising that if anything was to be done by that date it would be necessary to act quickly, the Committee met frequently during the month following its appointment, and it presented an interim report (Cd. 8048) on July 17th.

In this report it was laid down that the main problem was how to increase the area under wheat, 95 per cent. of the home supply of which is produced in England and Wales, and the Committee concluded that this could only be solved by extending largely the area of land under tillage. This would enable more of the existing arable area to be put down in wheat, leaving the newly broken up land for the other necessary crops thus displaced, such as oats and potatoes. The Committee recognised that in advocating this course they were inviting farmers, and to a lesser extent landlords also, to adopt a policy of management bolder

than many of them might think warranted by the conditions. Landlords would have to show themselves willing to relax covenants restricting the breaking up of grass-land, with the possibility of seeing it "tumbled-down" again to grass after a few years of cultivation had exhausted its accumulated fertility. Farmers would be called upon to throw over their present methods, with their comparative security of profits, and to undertake the responsibility of an increased arable area in the face of a certain shortage of labour and a possible fall in corn prices at the conclusion of the War.

Whilst not doubting that many farmers might be found who would be willing to face these risks, if appealed to in the national interest, the Committee considered that a general movement in the direction of increased wheat production could only be secured by *guaranteeing a minimum price for home-grown wheat for a period of several years*. It seems that all the witnesses examined were emphatic upon this point; and the Committee came unanimously to the conclusion that "a guarantee of a minimum price of 45s. a quarter for all marketable home-grown wheat for a period of four years would lead to a very substantial increase in the area of wheat harvested in 1916 and to a further increase in the succeeding years." Payment to the farmer under this guarantee was to be regulated by the difference between 45s. and the "Gazette" average price of wheat for the year in which the wheat is harvested, the farmer being left free to dispose of his produce in the open market. In order to protect the State in the event of no considerable response being made by farmers (in which case the Exchequer might have to pay out considerable sums although no great quantity of additional wheat were forthcoming) the Committee proposed that to qualify for the guarantee a farmer should be called upon to show that he had increased his area under arable cultivation by, at least, one-fifth over the similar area in October, 1913; or, alternatively, that at least one-fifth of his total acreage under grass and annual crops should actually be under wheat.

This is a very remarkable recommendation, which becomes the more noteworthy when the composition of the Committee making it is borne in mind, for here are representatives of the Liberal and Labour Parties advocating what amounts to a bounty on home-grown wheat. Ostensibly the guarantee is to be for what might be regarded as a war period only, but it may be taken for granted that its application would be for a much longer period—otherwise the scheme could not be expected to bear fruit seeing that no considerable number of farmers would incur the responsi-

bility of a largely increased arable area, if the guarantee was to be withdrawn almost before this area could be brought from its original grass state into good tillage condition.

The question raised by this recommendation, therefore, is whether the possibility of war, with its attendant risk to the importation of food into this country, makes it desirable to depart from principles which the majority have regarded, hitherto, as sound, in order to give an artificial stimulus to the production of wheat at home. It might be thought that the high prices ruling for agricultural products should be in themselves an adequate stimulus to increased cultivation, but this is not the case, for, apart from the difficulty of getting labour to work arable land, the high prices themselves enable farmers to reap a handsome return on their capital without the necessity of extra exertion. It is for this reason, no doubt, that the Committee thought it necessary to limit the application of their guarantee to those cases where it could be shown that an increased area under wheat had been put down. As regards the labour difficulty some figures for two Midland farms bring out very clearly the enormous reduction in labour made possible by grass farming :—

Farm A.

720 acres, of which only one-twelfth is arable.

Capital per acre = £5.

Men per 100 acres = 0·7.

Profit (after paying 5 per cent. on capital) = 22·5 per cent.

Farm B.

650 acres, of which one-half is arable.

Capital per acre = £10.

Men per 100 acres = 3.

Profit (after paying 5 per cent. on capital) = 16·1 per cent.

These figures cover the first year of the war. They bring out very clearly the smaller capital required for grass-land, the smaller volume of employment given by it, and the high return on capital. At the same time the returns in food production per 100 acres are very much less from the grass-land than from the arable farm. It is not suggested that these farms are in every respect comparable one with the other, but the figures may be relied upon sufficiently for the purpose for which they are here used, which is to show that the farmer is unlikely to do much of his own initiative to increase the production of bread food at the present time.

The questions for consideration, then, are, first, will a State guarantee of a minimum price lead to the breaking up of grass-land for the production of more wheat, and second, assuming that this would follow, is it the most desirable result to aim at?

On the first point it seems highly probable that a guarantee of a minimum price of 45s. per quarter for wheat would result in an increased area under the plough. The experience of landlords in certain parts of the country has been that farmers are not reluctant to abandon the easy practice of ranching when it has been demonstrated to them beyond doubt that plough-land would be more profitable. In the Fenland many hundreds of acres of grass have been broken up owing to the advent of the potato industry. Farmers have realised that their land was worth more for the growth of potatoes than for feeding bullocks, and many of them restrained by covenants from putting a plough into their pastures have been willing to pay a penal rent, or liquidated damages, for the right to do this. The position of the landlord who is willing to take such rents or damages need not here be discussed. Arguing from this it seems a fair assumption that farmers would respond readily enough to a guaranteed price for wheat. At the same time it is doubtful whether a four-years' guarantee would be long enough to satisfy them, and if this policy is to be regarded as a war insurance there seems to be no reason why the guarantee should not be permanent. There will be the objection that with the assurance of profit the incentive for hard work and maximum production would be lost; that ultimately a bonus to the farmers would find its way to the landlords' pockets, and so on. But no doubt the Committee's answer to all these objections, theoretical and practical, would be the necessity for insuring a higher production of food stuffs at home in case of war.

This raises the second question, namely, whether an increased wheat production should be the principal object of agricultural organisation. There do not appear to be figures available to show the cost of producing wheat in Canada, in South America, in Australia, in Russia, or in any of the other countries which supply this country, but in normal times and under peace conditions it seems likely that wheat can be sent into this country at a price which would not be attractive to the English farmer. If this is so, and assuming a state of peace, or a state of war in which Britain's command of the seas and her supremacy in the carrying trade of the world were at all events no less than in the present war, it may be argued that a better course of Government action would be in the direction of encouraging the organisation of agri-

culture in this country for the production of those things which it is most fitted to produce in competition with the world, and of these wheat probably would not be one. The whole question is based on the comparative cost of production of articles of food in different parts of the globe, and about this practically nothing is known. The field for investigation is enormous, and the need for it most urgent, and in the long run the nature of the agricultural production of this country must be determined by it. In the meantime, however, Lord Milner's Committee has its justification in the present price of wheat, and the decision for or against their proposals will depend upon the individual point of view on the probability, or otherwise, of the maintenance of British naval supremacy or of general disarmament.

The Committee recognise that a guaranteed price for wheat should entail upon the farmer the obligation to pay a fair rate of wages to his labourers; in fact, some members were evidently in favour of accompanying the minimum price with a minimum wage. They contented themselves, however, with recommending that an inquiry into wages and earnings should be instituted at once.

An appendix to the Report describes the procedure recommended for securing a breaking up of land and the cropping of it to the maximum advantage.

On October 15th following the Committee presented their Final Report (Cd. 8095). In the meantime the Government had decided not to adopt the recommendation of a guaranteed minimum price for wheat, on the grounds that the danger from submarines was insufficient to justify it, but the Committee took the opportunity of stating their firm conviction that the conversion of arable land into grass, which has taken place to the extent of nearly 4,000,000 acres during the last forty years and is still going on, was bound to result in a diminution in the amount of food produced, and that much of this land would carry more stock under the plough, whilst at the same time producing corn for human consumption. They recognised, however, that the process of reconversion, though beneficial to the nation, would not necessarily be attended by any increase of profit to the farmer, though the evidence put before them indicated that arable farming during the few years prior to the War had been remunerative, and that it could be intensified and cheapened by the employment of machinery in such a manner as to render it possible to pay a higher wage to the agricultural labourer. The stimulus of rising prices prevailing before the War, coupled with the spread of

education, might have been sufficient to bring about in course of time the desired changes, but the Committee felt that in the present emergency, both as regards the increased production of food, the reduction of purchases abroad, and the provision of employment after the War, some action might be taken by the State to hasten the process.

The remainder of the Final Report dealt with the provision of fertilisers and feeding stuffs; increased attention to pig-breeding (as to which the very questionable recommendation was made to the effect that bye-laws prohibiting pigstyes near dwelling-houses should be relaxed); labour, labour-saving machinery, and the employment of women. Attention was also called to the use of waste land in towns and villages for the production of vegetables, and the Committee expressed regret that the sugar-beet industry had not been established in this country before the War. It recommended the amendment of the Development and Road Improvement Funds Act to enable the Development Commissioners to assist suitable schemes in the future. The Committee was not able to recommend the establishment of a reserve of wheat.

Two members of the Committee refrained from signing the Final Report, and presented a Minority Report to the effect that they regarded the recommendations put forward by their colleagues as applying to conditions after the War, which were outside the terms of the reference.

(ii) *The Report of the Scotch Committee.*

Like that of the English Committee the *personnel* of the Scotch Committee was strong; possibly, practical agriculture was more fully represented upon it. The Committee addressed circulars to 176 agriculturists and traders (from 135 of whom answers were received); it inserted notices in the Scottish Press indicating that it was prepared to receive the views of agricultural societies; it heard the evidence of forty-five witnesses; its Report (which bears no date) was signed by all the members of the Committee with reservations by certain of them, and in it the suggestions for the maintenance or increase of the food supplies of the country are grouped under three heads:—

- A. Increased production.
- B. Avoidance of waste.
- C. Using sources of supply not at present available.

Dealing with the first of these, the Scotch Committee avoid the controversial questions raised by the English Committee's recom-

mentations. The advisability or otherwise of resorting to artificial means to stimulate the production of wheat was considered by them, and some of the witnesses gave evidence in favour of a guaranteed minimum price, but they did not see their way to overcome the practical difficulties likely to arise. The Committee also considered the question of the compulsory conversion of grass-land, but quite apart from the fact that they do not appear to have been agreed that the increase of arable land would lead to the production of more food (a question upon which the English Committee were fully satisfied), they doubted the practicability of setting up the necessary administration for scheduling the land to be broken up. It may be inferred that the Committee had before them the Interim Report of the English Committee, and that they did not think its recommendations were applicable to Scottish conditions.

All the recommendations as to the increase of production are of a practical nature, and hardly call for examination in detail here. They relate to such matters as the more general use of artificial manures, and the restriction of their export; the advantages derived from frequent changes of seed, and cheap rail carriage for agricultural seeds and live stock for breeding purposes; the extension of the use of machinery; the provision of allotments; the extension of co-operative organisation for purchase and sale. Like the English Committee, the Committee for Scotland recommended that there should be relaxation of the bye-laws relating to pigstyes, "so far as is consistent with a due regard for the public health." Both Committees are thus of the opinion that the bye-laws impose unnecessary restrictions, but inasmuch as they have been framed for the protection of public health it is doubtful whether any general movement to re-establish pigstyes close to dwelling-houses is desirable. A great deal might be done, however, to promote pig-keeping if landlords would undertake the provision of pigstyes on garden allotments wherever these are sufficiently near to the homes of the tenants to enable them to undertake the management of pigs.

On the question of labour as related to increased production, the Committee recommended that representations should be made to the military authorities that any attempt to increase or even to maintain food production would be made impossible by a further withdrawal of experienced workers from agriculture.

The recommendations as to the avoidance of waste deal mainly with the conflicting interests of the game preserver and the food producer. So much has been written on the loss to agriculture

from the withdrawal of land for deer forests, and the multiplication of game by artificial means, that it is of particular interest to note that this Committee of Scottish agriculturists recommend the necessity for allowing agricultural tenants the unrestricted privilege of killing rabbits, including the right of entering into woods, the employment of special men for the work, and permission to kill rabbits on moors without reference to any time limit. They recommend further that an appeal should be made to all owners of deer forests and grouse moors to allow these to be used for grazing cattle or sheep, and, lastly, that all artificial rearing of game should be discouraged. Inferentially, this furnishes a severe condemnation of undue game preservation, and it would seem that in Scotland the balance between agriculture and sport has not yet been struck. Golf courses, it is suggested, might also be utilised to greater advantage for grazing purposes.

As to the utilisation of sources of supply not at present available, no recommendations appear to be made, but it was suggested that Local Committees should be set up for stimulating production in every possible direction, and the constitution of these Committees was outlined.

(iii) *The Report of the Irish Committee.*

The Committee set up by the Vice-President of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland was larger than the English and Scotch Committees together; it may therefore be taken as fully representative. It presented its Report on August 19th, signed, with certain reservations, by all the members except two, and one of these, Sir Horace Plunkett, Bart., presented a Minority Report. The Committee were impressed with the necessity of increasing the area under corn, and consequently the area under the plough, just as the English Committee had been, and they recommended that the Government should guarantee a minimum price for oats and wheat for one year, recording their opinion that having regard to the risk of loss run by the farmer in breaking up grass there would be no departure from sound economic policy in agreeing to a minimum price to secure him against it. No actual figures were suggested for the guarantee, which was to be restricted to one year. The question for and against State guarantees has been stated in dealing with the English Committee's Report, and it is only necessary to add that it is difficult to understand how any body of agriculturists could suppose that one year's guarantee would

suffice to bring about the desired result, namely, the breaking up of grass-land.

In the second place the Committee recognised the difficulty which confronts all communities of small-holders, namely, how to obtain the advantages of labour-saving implements and machinery, and they endorsed the action already taken in certain parts of the country in the establishment of co-operative implement societies with the aid of loans from the Department, and recommended the extension of the scheme. After a recommendation of a system of loans for the provision of boats and gear for the capture of fish, the Report concludes with an appeal to patriotism.

There is nothing striking about this Report except its futility. Not a word is said about co-operation, except in connection with implements, which is the life-blood of the small-holder, and which has done more than any other agency to increase production in Ireland. Sir Horace Plunkett, as President of the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, seems to have been fully justified in presenting a Minority Report in preference to signing that of the Committee. It is not necessary to analyse his Report in detail, for it is, in effect, a brief statement of the whole case for co-operation. The practical recommendation contained in it is that the state of war which seems, most regrettably, to exist between the Department and the Irish Agricultural Organisation Society, and must react most prejudicially upon the agricultural industry of Ireland, should give way to a truce, and that a joint Committee should be constituted to decide "by what co-ordination of function the two bodies can work together towards an increase of food production in Ireland."

The three Reports, that of the English Committee, the Scottish Committee, and the Minority Report of Sir Horace Plunkett, are complementary to each other, and among them they probably state all that can be done to stimulate production in these islands. The English Report deals with legislative measures, the Scottish Report deals with technical measures, and Sir Horace Plunkett's Report deals with measures for the better organisation of agriculture. It seems unlikely that any of them will bear immediate fruit, and in the long run it is to the better education of the landlord and of the farmer that we must look for that increase of production which many are agreed could profitably be achieved.

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