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The International Institute of Agriculture.

NOTWITHSTANDING the position of science in the life of the nation, little or nothing has been done by the administration of Great Britain to give 'a square deal' to the scientific and technical officers employed in the service of the State. Frequent references to the disabilities under which the specialist officers labour have been made in these columns; and whenever suitable opportunity occurs we shall continue to associate their cause with that of efficient administration. Readers of this journal will recall the recent discussion of the report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service, when a number of proposals for reform were advocated (NATURE, Aug. 8 and 15, 1931).

Two things are needed to hasten these reforms. In the first place, an informed public opinion must be created which will insist that all important questions of the day involving scientific considerations are discussed with the full assistance of experts, who, moreover, must have free access to the supreme authority represented by the Minister. In this way the specialist officers will take their proper share in the formation of policy. In the second place, every blunder in administration which might have been avoided by the proper utilisation of scientific knowledge should receive the widest publicity.

A striking example of the maladministration of a scientific question has recently been brought to light by the publication of a detailed account of the founding, organisation, and administration of the International Institute of Agriculture at Rome.* This is the work of Dr. Asher Hobson, who for some years resided at Rome as the representative of the United States on the Permanent Committee of the Institute.

The inception of the International Institute is associated with something approaching romance. In 1884, a successful Californian merchant, the late Mr. David Lubin, bought a farm. To his intense surprise, the business ability which made him a successful merchant failed him entirely in the work of crop production. He became perplexed and at once set on foot an inquiry into the causes of his failure. This led to the study, among other things, of such subjects as railway freights, tariffs, and statistics of the area, yield, prices, and stocks of products like wheat. Eventually the idea took shape in his mind of an international organisation which would provide the farmer with all the

* The International Institute of Agriculture (An Historical and Critical Analysis of its Organisation, Activities and Policies of Administration). By Asher Hobson. Pp. vii + 356. (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1931.)

essential information as to the world production of agricultural staples. Instead of being a blind producer and seller of some raw product like wheat, he would be in possession of the main factors of the great producing and distributing industry of which he is a unit.

Lubin then proceeded as a private individual to Europe to place this idea before its governments and rulers. He was fortunate in obtaining the interest and support of the King of Italy. An international meeting was called at Rome to discuss the question, and in 1905 a Convention, establishing an International Institute of Agriculture, was agreed to by the nations. One of the main objects of the new undertaking, as stated in the Convention of 1905, was to "collect, study and publish as promptly as possible, statistical, technical or economic information concerning farming, both vegetable and animal products, the commerce in agricultural products, and the prices prevailing in the various markets, and to communicate to parties interested, also as promptly as possible, all the information just referred to".

The various chapters of Dr. Hobson's book make melancholy reading. After the inspiring account of the personality of Lubin, it is sad to trace the gradual decline of the Institute as the inevitable consequence of unsound principles of organisation and of administration. Although a scientific institution, the man of science has from the very beginning not only been denied opportunities in direction but also has been relegated to a subordinate position. The direction of the Institute has failed to take note of the fact that the universities of the world for many years past have provided numerous examples of the successful administration of scientific work, and have never failed to attract and to retain talent of the first order.

Instead of following the well-tried methods of the great republics of learning, those responsible for the conduct of the International Institute of Agriculture have attempted other methods of getting things done. The members of the *corps diplomatique* and the retired Civil servants who have been in charge of the movement have, with the valour of ignorance, applied the conventional methods of departmentalism both to the organisation and governance of a scientific institute. The result has been a tragic failure, in spite of the recent efforts of the representatives of the United States and Great Britain on the Permanent Committee in obtaining funds for the development of the work and in urging reform. One after another the scientific men, who at the beginning were

attracted to the movement, have resigned in despair. Instead of specialising in statistical work, and so making an honoured name for itself in international effort, the resources of the Institute from the very beginning have been thinly spread over a vast number of projects, none of which has been effectively handled.

The library of the Institute has been neglected, in spite of a generous provision for staff and equipment supplied by well-wishers in America. The publications can only be described as deplorable. Perhaps, however, the worst feature of all is the attempt in recent years to make programmes take the place of research. The most glaring example of this is the creation of the International Scientific Agricultural Council, consisting of 23 separate Commissions, with more than 600 members. The actual result so far accomplished has consisted in the holding of one meeting—in November 1927—and the issue of a vast programme covering the whole of agriculture, the conclusions alone of which occupy no less than 75 printed pages. It bears no relation whatsoever to the actual resources and work of the Institute.

In the last chapter of his book, Dr. Hobson deals with the future and with the reforms which must be adopted if the Institute is to fulfil its proper functions and become an important and effective body in the world's agriculture. This matter is dealt with in the following words:

"The Institute represents many peculiarities but perhaps none is so peculiar as the fact of its being a scientific organisation without a scientific staff. . . . It is safe to assert that the Institute will never be able to satisfy expectations until the Permanent Committee faces the task of recruiting a highly trained technical staff, thereby enabling the bureaus to turn out information of a reliable and usable variety. This task has always been relegated to the background on the basis of lack of funds, but it is suggested that the present salary budget distributed over fewer and carefully selected individuals, would go a long way in accomplishing the desired result. The fact that funds are limited makes it more urgent that unproductive employees be eliminated. To attempt to conduct a scientific institute without scientific and technical leadership is akin to the maintenance of a hospital without doctors, surgeons or nurses."

The present complex system of government consisting of a Permanent Committee and of an Assembly should be simplified. A scientific man, of the necessary standing, assisted by a properly trained staff, should be appointed for the future conduct of the Institute. If this were done, the prospects of future development would be much more promising than they are at present.