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Economic Planning and Agricultural Production

SOCIETY, said Karl Marx, is a kind of organism on the growth of which conscious efforts can exercise little effect. That this is not the common view to-day is shown by the wealth of thought that is being devoted to 'planning', with the object of preventing the recurrence of economic crises and of securing, eventually, 'abundance for all'. Political and economic planning is now engaging the attention not only of economists and politicians, but also of those numerous professional men who usually ignore economists, as being too inhuman in their science, and politicians, as being all too human in their practice.

Most of the world's present economic and political troubles appear to have followed from man's failure to control his instincts of acquisition and pugnacity—'smash and grab' not being confined to the modern gangster; and so we find that the proposed ameliorative measures relate mainly to the reorganisation of our productive, distributive and monetary systems, and to projects for keeping the peace.

Science in the service of man, aided by capitalism mainly in the service of the few, has done wonders for production; but it has yet to solve the problems of exchange and distribution. From the point of view of the requirements of civilised man, maldistribution in Nature appears to be the rule rather than the exception, for not only are most useful minerals and plants very unequally distributed, but they are also often located in places difficult of access and exploitation. Valuable minerals are mostly found deep down in the earth; the enormous amount of gold in sea-water is present in such dilute concentration, as Haber found, that it cannot be economically extracted; and the upper air is not exactly the ideal location for the ozone required by modern industry and sanitation. Science and invention have, however, overcome many of these obstacles; new instruments, machines and processes have been devised for locating and extracting valuable minerals; the plant-breeder has provided economic plants that will grow in regions remote from their natural habitats; and engineers have so revolutionised transport that both natural and artificial products can now be conveyed expeditiously and economically to the uttermost parts of the earth.

In spite of all such achievements, however,

man has signally failed to effect anything like an equal—and some would say a fair—distribution of the world's wealth, either among nations or individuals; hence the spirit of evil in its hydra-headed shapes of want, fear, envy and discontent continues to stalk through the world, poisoning the well-springs of human happiness. If the world were ruled by reason, there is no doubt that every developed country would abjure war, would concentrate on producing those commodities for which it is best suited by its natural wealth, geographical position and the capabilities of its inhabitants, and would exchange them freely for commodities best produced abroad. How far and how fast the world has of late been departing from these ideals are well known; less well appreciated are the implications for Great Britain. Once the premier exporter of manufactured goods and the greatest international 'shopkeeper', and paying for imports of food and raw materials by exports and services, with a good margin to spare, Great Britain is now being forced into a policy of national self-sufficiency; and foremost among the problems now awaiting solution is that of food supplies: Can we afford to continue importing foodstuffs to the extent of about a million sterling a day? And if not, what changes are necessary in our agricultural economy? To this problem Sir Daniel Hall made a notable contribution in the address on the planning of agricultural production which he gave to the Agricultural Section of the British Association at Aberdeen.

The competition set up by intensive nationalism, according to Sir Daniel Hall, has destroyed the economic position of the British farmer, so that the nation has had to abandon free trade and to adopt protection. At the same time, internal competition alone, in which imports play but a small part, may be equally destructive of agricultural stability, checking enterprise and that development of production which the nation needs. This is the case for a planned agriculture. The various marketing boards can, by virtue of their monopoly, direct production along the lines that are most economic and best suited to the requirements of the consumer, but neither protection nor subsidies will suffice to bring about the required intensity of production; farmers, in consideration of measures giving them adequate returns, must submit to a certain amount of control; and an advisory body, acting behind the administration (and apparently having no relation to the Agricultural Research Council),

should be appointed to advise upon the guiding principles of the nation's agricultural policy and upon their application.

Sir Daniel Hall thinks that we could increase our production of home-grown food from about 38 per cent of our total requirements, the present figure, to about 60 per cent, within a generation, and that, in general, we should concentrate our efforts on products that employ labour, demand skill, and are costly to transport. Live stock products, fruit and vegetables come within this category, whilst cereals and sugar, being more cheaply produced abroad, should be mainly imported. In this way Sir Daniel ranged himself on the side of the 'Up-Horn' school in the perennial controversy whether 'corn' or 'horn' should predominate in our agricultural economy. This school of thought maintains that our agricultural land is best suited by Nature for growing grass and its derivatives, beef, mutton, milk and other dairy produce; that arable crops like wheat and sugar can be grown with greater security from adverse climatic factors, and more economically, in foreign parts than in Britain; that home-grown flour is not liked by our millers and the bread made from it is not to the popular taste; and that cheap corn is a fundamental requirement of a flourishing live stock industry. Our people require fresh food, whether milk, meat, eggs, fruit or vegetables, and this can best be grown at home.

The corn-dominant view is that England grows some of the best wheat in the world and with yields that are higher than those in most other countries. Thanks to mechanisation, production costs bid fair to fall to a level comparable with those in the great wheat-growing lands. Satisfactory 'hard' wheat can be grown in England, for example, Yeoman II, although perhaps not enough of it to meet all our needs. Wheat has always played an essential part in our cropping systems, and in time of blockade, as in 1917-18, its large-scale cultivation is imperative; in a future war there may not be time to plough up more than three million acres of grassland to grow cereals for human consumption, as we had to do in the last. Beef, mutton and lamb, are, and probably always will be, produced far more cheaply in Argentina and Australasia, and butter in Denmark and New Zealand, than in Britain; and the production of greatly increased quantities of fresh vegetables, fruit, milk and eggs is as feasible under an 'up-corn' policy as under an 'up-horn' policy. Moreover, increased beef production would necessitate

increased importation of feeding-stuffs, and so adversely affect the balance of trade. There is no foundation in fact for the contention that imported chilled or frozen meat is less nutritious than home-killed meat.

Loving compromise as we English do, it should not be impossible to frame a policy that would go far to satisfy the chief demands of these two opposing schools. It might, for example, be possible to combine an 'up-horn' with an 'up-corn' policy by extending our present area of cultivated land, for example, by improving upland pastures in the way Prof. Stapledon is now showing us, by reclaiming submarginal land (heaths, moorlands and estuarine lands) and improving much marginal land by draining and liming; and, generally, by improving all fertile land by the increased use of fertilisers. It has been estimated by one of the active planning groups in London that about sixty per cent of our total food requirements could be obtained by such measures, which would include the conversion of sufficient very poor land to provide $2\frac{1}{2}$ million acres of good land, the substitution of more wheat and barley, grown wherever possible under mechanised conditions, for some of the oats and roots now produced, and a greatly increased production of pig-meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables.

Prof. Scott Watson, in his presidential address to the Agricultural Section of the British Association, advocated a substantial reduction in the area now under oats, which, owing to the development of motor traffic and other causes, has been steadily declining for some time past. A scheme like the above would involve large capital expenditure from public funds; and so, indeed, would any drastic scheme, but capital expended on land reclamation and improvement would continue remunerative for many years to come. The State is already supporting agriculture, directly and indirectly, to the tune of more than £45 million yearly (the figure for 1933), and it is conceivable that some of this amount might be diverted into more directly productive channels. Moreover, we have been expending hundreds of millions of pounds on keeping the unemployed in idleness, and some of this large store of potential energy might be converted into work on the land.

In Sir Daniel Hall's opinion, the continuance of the State subsidy for sugar-beet is open to question. That subsidy has cost the country some £40 million since its inception in 1923, and is still

costing more than £3 million a year. Although much may be said in favour of past policy—it has saved many arable farmers from bankruptcy, has given work to thousands of men during the campaign period in the winter months, has provided food for stock in the form of 'crowns' and 'pulp', and has ensured thorough cultivation and cleaning of the land upon which it is grown—Sir Daniel's contention that scientific research has so increased the yield of sugar from the sugar-cane that beet can no longer compete with it, is undeniable. In certain Continental countries, the cultivation of sugar-beet has been subsidised for many years, largely because the alcohol made from the sugar brings in a very high revenue to the State. We make practically no industrial alcohol from home-grown materials in Great Britain, but if we did there would be something to say on the other side.

Worthy of consideration in any scheme of agricultural production would be the establishment of industries like the manufacture of potato-starch and dextrine, and of strawboard from cereal straws, most of our requirements of which we now import; and there is good reason for believing that these industries could be instituted in such a way as to make them self-supporting within a short period of years.

The problems involved in planning agricultural production are thus seen to be both numerous and complex. Whatever the actual outcome may be, it is reasonably certain that if we abstain from our usual practice of 'muddling through', and adopt some definite policy, its nature will be determined as much by considerations of world and Empire relationships and home economics, as by the dictates of agricultural science. But economic planning, as Prof. Scott Watson points out, must not be regarded as a substitute for scientific education and research. Science will and must make its voice heard, and if the advisory body asked for by Sir Daniel Hall is appointed, it is to be hoped that he and other men of scientific outlook and attainments will be invited to take part in its counsels. Fortunately, British agriculture is now directed by a Minister who is alive to the value of scientific knowledge and method; but it will need all his ability and that of his colleagues and advisers to come to conclusions concerning the future of economic nationalism, and of international affairs, before any attempt can be made to map out a long term policy of home food production in Great Britain.