

Editorial & Publishing Offices :

MACMILLAN & Co., LTD.
ST. MARTIN'S STREET
LONDON, W.C.2



Telegraphic Address :
PHUSIS, LESQUARE, LONDON

Telephone Number :
WHITEHALL 8831

No. 3499

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 21, 1936

Vol. 138

Physique, Nutrition and National Health

THE incursions of the Lords and Commons into regions where the voice of science should be, and is occasionally, heard, are always of interest to the scientific worker. A notable debate of this kind was held on November 10 in the House of Lords on the Government's declared intention to raise the general standard of physical fitness, and especially that of the young. The subject was first introduced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in an address to the Conservative Party at Margate on October 2, and was afterwards mentioned in the King's Speech to Parliament on November 3. As on neither of these occasions was any reference made to the subject of national nutrition, and as no responsible minister can be unaware of the relation between national nutrition and national health, one can only assume that the Government does not propose to attack the major issue, with all its far-reaching implications.

However, as Mr. Gladstone said, it is always best to take the charitable view, especially in politics, and it may be that the Government took its cue from the recent disclosure that recruiting for the Army has been seriously affected by the large proportion of rejections on medical grounds. In the Lords' debate, this aspect was emphasized by Field-Marshal Lord Milne, who recalled that in 1932 no less than 57 per cent of would-be recruits was refused from this cause, and that about 25 per cent is usually rejected by the recruiting officers prior to medical examination. Lord Milne urged the necessity for improved and extended physical education of a non-military type, and regretted that, outside the Services, there is a great shortage of qualified instructors.

Although it is to some extent fallacious to argue from a section of the community to the whole community—for recruits are not drawn from the better-to-do classes who are well-nourished from infancy onwards and have ample opportunities for regular physical exercise—no one will deny the value of a good physique; but adequate nourishment is of prior importance. This view was well brought out by Lord Horder. Fitness can never be obtained by physical measures, be they educational or recreative; more basic and imperative are food, shelter, air and leisure. The Ministries of Health and Labour, and the Board of Education must continue their present good work; their methods, however, must be intensified and expedited, and more co-operation is needed. Government offices are necessarily departmental: why must they be so compartmental? The national interest must be aroused; and the cost need not frighten us; it would be very small compared with the cost of revolutions elsewhere. So far we have spent nothing on bloodshed, and we have retained the greatest of all our assets—individual freedom. Regimentation is not wanted; if our people are given the modest requirements of security at home and security of sustenance, their sturdy common sense will do the rest. Democracy, and especially a democracy asked to be physically fit, advances on its stomach.

Lord Dawson of Penn asked that the subject be viewed from the wider point of view of eugenics. Although we are to some extent neglecting the laws of sound breeding, and hence must be careful, it would be wrong to say that as a nation we are deteriorating. Inspection of our elementary

schools, notably in London, would corroborate this view; but deficiencies do exist, more particularly among adolescents in factories, and are to be seen among hikers and Territorials, who, although they may be good at games, yet possess bodily defects that bode ill for their future health. The boys and girls of to-day may be taller, stouter and heavier than their predecessors, but mere bulk of frame is not evidence of fitness. The demands on our race are greater than ever; and the defects which compel us to take stock of the present situation go deeper than political considerations. By correcting Nature's methods of a high birth-rate and a high death-rate, by allowing the unfit to survive and multiply their kind, we have incurred the heavy responsibility of exercising selection ourselves, so as to prevent the unfit from vitiating the race. While securing for the child of average abilities every opportunity in the limited sphere of usefulness for which it is cast, we should sieve out the fittest at the ages of, say, fifteen and sixteen or seventeen years, and spare no expense in pushing them forward; and at each stage, mind and character must be tested as well as body.

By saving our unfit children we are harming the community, but we are striving to repair the damage by having fewer and fitter children. It is a fact that the smaller families of to-day have a higher proportion of fitter children; and the mothers of those children appear to be better than those of any previous generation. Contraception is very closely related to the infant death-rate. Whereas formerly twelve pregnancies resulted in five children reared, to-day they result in ten; so that unless families are to become impossibly large, contraception must be practised. At the same time, we do not want too small a population; an appeal for adequate parenthood is needed, and would be answered if it were based on reasoned arguments. The inherently unfit, including the 250,000 mental defectives, should be discouraged from reproduction. The medical profession is always being exhorted to think in terms of prevention; why therefore should it not use measures to prevent the birth of children who are not wanted, who are a misery to themselves and their parents, and damaging to the race? To-day doctors dare not offer relief from the dangers of parenthood owing to the operation of a law which was passed centuries ago to prevent maiming as an escape from military service. That law was never meant to apply to any skilled profession,

and medical men should be exempted from its scope.

The Earl of Listowel maintained that malnutrition is the root cause of poor physique; he quoted Sir John Orr's findings to the effect that about half the population is suffering from inadequate nourishment, and stated that increased attention to sports or physical training can never mitigate the ill effects of a bad diet. The main problem, he said, is how to increase the purchasing power of the working-class family and to reduce the cost of foods that are essential to health.

The discussion is thus seen to have covered a wide field and to have been remarkable for the contributions of the two eminent medical men who took part in it. On the whole, perhaps too little attention was given to the underlying economic aspects of the problems involved. It was, for example, not pointed out that increased physical exercise must entail an increased consumption of energy-producing foods: the human engine must have more fuel if it takes in more oxygen; and the extra supply of food must be made accessible. The Government, fortunately, does not contemplate compulsion; but it realizes that "financial aid will have to be considered", though the main burden is to fall on local authorities and on existing voluntary institutions.

Another omission was any reference to the urgent need of a census of distribution and consumption. If, as many believe, adequate nutrition can only be achieved by raising wages or lowering prices, in lieu of Government subsidies and doles in cash or kind, it is of the utmost importance to know the causes and the extent of the wastes that are now alleged to occur in distribution and consumption; and accurate statistical data on these points are seriously lacking. While such a census is being compiled, progress could be made by undertaking some accurate social-economic experiments like that which was carried out last year by the Potato Marketing Board at Bishop Auckland.

Lastly, poverty is one of the main causes of ill-health and poor physique not only because it involves deprivation of certain essential foodstuffs and a bad environment, but also because it imposes a great mental strain upon those who suffer from it. This truth must have been in the mind of Rousseau when he wrote, nearly two hundred years ago, that "Un corps débile affaiblit l'âme".