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## State Intervention and Agriculture

STATE intervention in a particular industry is one of those subjects which most probably would have been rejected by the Council of the British Association had it not happily decided to include within its ambit the interactions of science and the life of the people. It is true that this development tends to bring the sciences into closer touch with economics and politics, but one day economics may be established as a fully inductive science, and knowledge obtained by impartial scientific inquiry will be the basis of political action.

State intervention is increasing everywhere, and for reasons which are not far to seek. Industrial and social relations generally have multiplied so greatly and become so exceedingly complex that only a supreme authority can co-ordinate them. An industrial system based upon the law of the jungle is no longer regarded either as ethical or efficient. Morality has not kept pace with material progress, and the basest uses are being made of some of the fruits of science and invention. The view that the functions of the State should be restricted to protecting its citizens against external aggression and maintaining justice between them is still valid if we accept a wider connotation of the word 'justice'. Probably most of us now consider it right that the State should control the conditions of industrial competition; that it should abolish privilege as a right to which no corresponding function is attached; that it should so far as possible give equal opportunity to all; and many think that it should secure to every worthy citizen a sufficiency of the basic necessities of life—wholesome food, clothing, shelter and facilities for re-creating mind and body.

Opposed to this growing recognition of the need for extended State action is the inborn longing

for individual freedom, and one of the major problems of civilization is how to reconcile the freedom required for individual development and self-expression with the restraints which the State must impose to save itself from anarchy and disruption, and to give every citizen a fair deal. No one with any faith in the future believes that these two ideals are fundamentally incompatible. Science, art and industry provide the knowledge and the means for attaining a full, free and happy life; and yet it eludes us—probably because the necessary emotional stimulus is lacking. The older religions no longer seem able to impart this stimulus. Can devotion to high ideals of conduct and attainment take their place? Man began by being a slave to his environment; he acquired the elements of freedom when he learned to adapt himself to it, and to co-operate with his fellows; his freedom grew as science taught him how, in a measure, to control his environment; it will grow still more as he learns to control himself and develop a social conscience. Laissez-faire is on its death-bed; State intervention, regulative, controlling or dominating is taking its place. To many it is a necessary evil, but it will persist so long as individuals and communities play a lone or selfish hand. The ecclesiastics who demand a 'change of heart' are right: "The solid ground of nature"—like patriotism—is not enough.

The incongruity of State regulation or control and personal freedom, in relation to agriculture, was well brought out by Mr. J. M. Caie in his presidential address to Section M (Agriculture) of the British Association. As assistant secretary to the Department of Agriculture for Scotland, his pronouncements were necessarily guarded, but it was clear that, although he recognizes the

*inevitability of State intervention* in existing circumstances, he deplors its extension, believing with the fourteenth century poet, Barbour, that "Freedom is ane noble thing". Liberation, if only partial, waits on the return of economic prosperity, and the road thereto lies in securing for farmers a fair share of the home market, and in inducing them to eat of the fruits of education and research. The personal factor, he is convinced, is still extremely important, and the progressive farmer is usually the last to seek aid from the State.

The trouble here is that it has always been found difficult to induce farmers, as a class, to adopt the innovations indicated by scientific research (Australian farmers took to the use of superphosphate twenty-five years after its value had been demonstrated). Great Britain possesses some research institutions of the highest class and a goodly number of well-equipped agricultural colleges and farm institutes, yet farmers fail to take full advantage of them. We have some of the best farmers in the world, but, according to high authorities, our general standard of farming is relatively low. In recent years farmers have had to contend with very low prices for their produce, and many of them have not been able to afford the purchase of new equipment; but prices are now better, and the time now appears opportune for making an organized effort to 'put over' to the rank and file of farmers the practical results of recent research. Farm-equipment, seed-dressing, grassland management, fertilizers and composts, ensilage, grass-drying, and farm accountancy are all subjects in which progress has been made and to which the farmers' attention should be directed. This question is of very wide import and might well be discussed at a future meeting of Section M.

No one will deny that the Ministry of Agriculture has been alive to the hardships and responsive to the importunities of farmers; with its aid the production of sugar-beet has increased from 102,000 tons in 1923 to 3½ million tons in 1936-7, and that of wheat by 44 per cent since 1932. It is now extending its protection to growers of barley and oats, and—what is more important—is coming to grips with the fundamental problems of maintaining the fertility of the soil, by paying half the delivered cost of lime and one quarter that of basic slag; and improving the health of livestock, by instituting a vastly extended veterinary service. Less directly, the Government has assisted agriculture by fathering the establishment of marketing boards for milk, potatoes, hops and bacon, and of

a commission for fat cattle. These boards have, in the main, succeeded in enabling producers to get better prices, in mitigating the effects of violent price fluctuations, and in controlling the quality of certain marketed produce. On the other hand, some of the schemes are exceedingly complicated and require an army of officials and employees to work them, whilst the criticism is often heard that consumers' interests have not been adequately safeguarded; for example, the price of milk for liquid consumption is held to be excessive. In Germany the cost of distributing milk is stated to be only about one half of what it is in Great Britain, so that by adopting a system of State control from cow to consumer similar to the German, we might save £10,000,000 a year on this item alone. Nothing appears to have been done to reduce the lamentable 'spread' between producers' and consumers' prices, and the conviction is growing that the Government must be driven to tackle the general problem of distribution and consumption, and to institute a census forthwith.

So far governmental efforts have appeared to concentrate on symptoms and palliatives rather than on radical cures, and legislation has been too piecemeal. Desperate diseases require desperate remedies, and that no doubt is one reason why Sir Daniel Hall, in the inter-sectional discussion at Nottingham on "Planning the Land of Britain", advocated the nationalization of the land, and why Prof. R. G. Stapledon has come reluctantly to the same conclusion in regard to the improvement of our upland pastures. Another urgent problem the solution of which is defying the efforts of the Government, is how to reconcile the demands of home farmers with those of producers in the self-governing Dominions; and no solution to the problem of increasing our supplies of home-grown food to make us secure in time of emergency is yet forthcoming.

These and other problems confronting agriculture and the community are of such magnitude and complexity that no one expects them to be resolved overnight. They transcend the ability of individuals and are therefore rightly passed on to the State. Many of them are of international moment, and most of them bear direct relation to the riddle of how to raise the purchasing power of the masses so as to give them a higher standard of life. The important thing is to rule out drift. Social change, like all change, is ineluctable, but it can be controlled and directed towards social betterment.