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PRESENT-DAY PROBLEMS OF YOUTH

SOME weeks ago, the National Youth Committee set up by the Board of Education announced that the Government had no intention of allowing a recurrence of the social problems of the War of 1914-18. Despite this assurance, familiar youth problems have again presented themselves and new ones have been created. A number of these were probably inevitable; others could probably have been avoided. It is not easy to resist the conclusion that, in certain important matters, the Government departments concerned with the social services have shown themselves to be regrettably lacking in foresight.

Nor is it easy to resist the further conclusion that some of them are exhibiting very little alacrity, method or determination in dealing with problems which appear to many to be urgent. Doubt on this point may be permissible, for it is probable that their hands are being tied by the Treasury, through reduction in financial assistance. But it might not have arisen at all, if these departments had shown more frankness in their pronouncements. Nothing is more likely to stiffen the task of the Director of Home Publicity at the Ministry of Information—that of making public opinion receptive to political decisions—than an accumulation of unanswered or half-answered queries on such matters.

If bewilderment is produced in this way, further psychological difficulties are created. In some cases, formidable resentment is built up; in others, apathy becomes all-pervasive. During recent weeks, both these reactions have been exhibited plainly; and nowhere more clearly than among those concerned directly and indirectly with problems of juvenile employment. In their treatment of a number of these problems, some

departments seem lately to have displayed neither frankness nor wisdom.

Why, for example, has the Home Office had to undertake to consider applications for exemption from those sections of the Factories Act of 1937 which regulate the hours of work of juveniles? Surely the evidence collected during the War of 1914-18 by the Health of Munition Workers' Committee suggested strongly that even the regulations of the Act of 1937 were not entirely adequate? It is not to be doubted that the factory inspectors of the Home Office will use their new powers with great discretion, but it is more than likely that some of them will feel compelled at times to declare decisions which they will reach with considerable reluctance. From various parts of the country it is already reported that two of the most evil consequences of unsuitable working hours—listlessness and loss of 'further education'—have once more manifested themselves. In his recent King George Jubilee Trust report, "The Needs of Youth", Dr. A. E. Morgan remarked, "British industry will not be ruined by being deprived of the privilege to exploit half-educated boys and girls". This pungent comment is as true in wartime as it is in times of peace. Even in factories which retain their pre-war time-tables, the tempo of production is apparently increased sometimes to such a pitch that the physical and psychological state of the slower workers is seriously affected.

Has the Home Office decided, in the face of all the evidence available on this subject, to surrender to the Ministry of Supply? If the outlook indicated by this ruling is maintained, what will be the quality of Britain's democracy at the end of the present conflict? For some workers, possibly even for the younger ones, patriotism may provide an

additional incentive ; but, as Dr. H. M. Vernon reminded his hearers at a meeting reported in *NATURE* of February 3, p. 174, "Nature cannot be defied indefinitely."

Again, why has the Ministry of Labour permitted the suspension of certain of the vocational guidance and after-care activities of its Juvenile Advisory Committees ? Why has the Ministry's scheme for the transference of young workers apparently ceased to function, while the need for it continues ? And why have some at least of its hostels for these boys and girls closed their doors ? Even when allowance is made for difficulties created by evacuation, such actions are bound to perplex those who had been led to believe that the Ministry took a broad view of its responsibilities towards young people. It is perhaps significant that its war-time opinions on vocational guidance and after-care have not been accepted without question by other experts. Its advice has been ignored by many local education authorities who have juvenile employment officers of their own and in whose districts the Ministry is only in indirect command. The very fact that acute disagreement exists here suggests that the Ministry's case for curtailing its activities is by no means unarguable. The 'rebels' are unquestionably right in maintaining that, both from the point of view of the individual, who needs a congenial occupation if he is to exert himself fully, and from the point of view of the nation, which urgently requires efficient workers, sound vocational guidance is at least as necessary now as it was before the War. If the Ministry feels unable to continue this branch of its work, it might well ask local authorities whether they will take it over. The machinery for such a transfer already exists.

Furthermore, why have the Civil Service Commissioners had to suspend their normal examinations for entry to this Service ? A very considerable number of able boys and girls—and their parents and teachers—have lately been profoundly disturbed by the Commissioners' unexplained move. In all parts of the country, secondary school principals, who are in a good position to judge the public reaction to it, are voicing strong criticisms of the Government's attitude to this problem. It is understood that alternative proposals, put forward by the staff side of the National Whitley Council, are being considered. Consideration of them should be completed speedily and positively. Purely negative decrees on employment matters by the Government can scarcely be

held to provide good examples for private employers ; nor can they easily produce the occupational incentives which are so much needed by young people at the present time.

Indeed, the negative character of the official attitude to many employment matters is extremely disconcerting. No reasonable person would expect the Government to show unerring foresight in making plans for dealing with situations which might never arise. But there is, unfortunately, much evidence which suggests a marked lack of constructive and co-ordinated thought. A striking example is to be found in the astonishing absence—an almost total absence—of official comment on what has been called the "16 to 20" problem.

Lord Derby has suggested that voluntary labour camps should be provided for boys of secondary education who fall within this age-range. His proposal has been discussed at length in the correspondence columns of *The Times*. It is doubtful whether the space devoted to it has been commensurate with the usefulness of the suggestions put forward, or, indeed, with their relevance ; for most of them—not unnaturally, perhaps—have been concerned primarily with the comparatively limited problem of the boy whose parents have been able to send him to a public school. The Ministry of Labour's contribution to the discussion—communicated through *The Times* Labour Correspondent—has been a statement of the conditions under which boys in this age-group may be admitted to its ordinary technical training centres. Is it surprising that the head master of a large south of England secondary school reports that his boys are "simply bewildered" about their futures ?

Could not the Ministry of Labour at least stress frankly the need for considering the post-War effects of such schemes as those proposed by Lord Derby and his supporters ? They certainly need consideration ; for many of the suggestions seem to have been based on false assumptions. One is that many boys in the 16-20 group have sufficient money and influence to enable them to make an entirely fresh occupational start after the War and therefore need not worry if, in the period prior to their military service, they are called on to do something which bears little relation either to their abilities or to their interests. Another is that, when the War is over, the national recovery will not be hindered by the presence in the community of large numbers of middle-class young men devoid of occupational training and experience suitable

to their talents and temperaments. The vast majority of those leaving secondary schools cannot afford, even in war-time, to be ushered silently into unsuitable 'stop-gap' occupations; nor can the nation afford it. It is clearly important that these youths should be regarded, not as unfortunate liabilities to be put temporarily into places where they will create a minimum of trouble, but as citizens-in-training. The head master of Winchester College, who is chairman of the Head Masters' Conference, has very properly insisted that, in any work scheme produced for the 16-20's, the opportunities offered should be *real*.

Is it too late to suggest that this problem should be tackled experimentally by the Ministry and the Board of Education? Individual head masters here and there are doing this in their own way, and according to their own ideas: for example, by providing special commercial courses for senior boys who would normally have entered clerical occupations this year but have been unable to do so, and by increasing the amount of time devoted to O.T.C. activities. The Board of Education has already dealt with one of its own difficulties by allowing non-graduate students to enter its teachers' training colleges at the age of seventeen.

The Y.M.C.A. has proposed the formation of a Boys' Land Army. A number of professional training organizations have begun to provide shortened courses of instruction. One well-known rubber company has announced its intention of awarding a certain number of 'scholarships', providing free training and maintenance grants, to boys between the ages of 17½ and 19. Could not these experiments be co-ordinated and extended? If this were done, a great deal of the resentment and apathy noticeable at present might rapidly be dissipated and much valuable data might be gathered. But it will have little worth if it be not done seriously and with a determination to act on the results obtained. The adoption of an experimental approach, which might well make use of psychological techniques of vocational guidance and selection, must not be made an excuse for shelving decisions by bestowing semi-official blessing and inadequate funds on ardent advocates of reform, in the hope that the problem will quickly lose its urgency by the absorption of young men into the Fighting Services. An appropriate first step would be the appointment, by the departments concerned, of a director of research.

SCIENCE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE

Science and Everyday Life

By Prof. J. B. S. Haldane. Pp. 284. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, Ltd., 1939.) 5s. net.

THOSE who subscribe to the *Daily Worker* are privileged to read every week some of the most successful expositions of popular science in contemporary journalism. It is not possible to discuss the implications of this fact in a brief review; but if Prof. Haldane's modesty would permit him to admit that he is both a first-class man of science and a first-class educator, his faith would make him insist that he would be neither were he not a first-class Marxist. This collection of articles is certainly as political as it is scientific, and its author would believe it less scientific if it were less political.

The book should be read not only by the general public but also by all those who aspire to make science intelligible to the general public. To these the author's technique will be a liberal—as well as a Marxist—education. Why is it so successful? Apart from the blustering, ozone-laden style

through which Haldane introduces himself to his readers, rather as the *homme moyen sensuel* than as the ascetic scientist, there is the picture which he seems to carry in his eye of what his reader is like. He does not write for readers in their capacity of consumers willing to fill a leisure hour with science gossip, but rather as producers into whose labours science has already entered at every point. He creates a synthesis between the theories of scientists and the actions of workers, miners, chemical manufacturers, barmen, who are applied scientists by virtue of economic necessity. He does not describe disease as an abstraction but shows it always to be occupational, a function of the social environment.

Above all, the politician in him prevents Prof. Haldane from committing the commonest error of men of science trying to write for the man in the street, namely that emotion, or personal equation, is as deadly then as in the writing of a monograph for the *Philosophical Transactions*. He believes that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of science and so he writes.