

Editorial & Publishing Offices :

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



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Vol. 145

SATURDAY, MAY 4, 1940

No. 3679

## A MINISTRY OF RECONSTRUCTION

THE measures advocated by Sir Gwilym Gibbon in a recent issue of *Public Administration* for the co-ordination of departments into groups with a minister for each, the Cabinet consisting of the Prime Minister and these ministers-in-chief and a few other ministers with few or no departmental duties, recall the report of the Machinery of Government Committee, of which Lord Haldane was chairman. Little or nothing has been done to implement the findings of that report since it appeared so long ago as 1918; but Sir Gwilym, in urging that it is imperative that this Cabinet directorate "shall be relieved of all but the matters of most importance, and that above all, it and its members shall have enough freedom from pressing duties to think of coming problems (as well as of current) well ahead of their coming", is indeed only restating the arguments and views of that report.

Lord Haldane's responsibility for the drafting of the Committee's report is well known, and its major recommendation, that every Department of State should be provided with its general staff and that a Ministry of Information and Research should be created for this purpose, was reflected in his presidential address to the Institute of Public Administration in 1922. Under the title "An Organized Civil Service", he appealed not merely for efficient and scientific administration and for the high tradition of self-sacrifice for public duty, but also for the forward-looking mind.

Lord Haldane did not conceal his doubts whether this outlook was being sufficiently encouraged in the Civil Service of Great Britain or in the universities from which its administrative officers are largely recruited, just as on another occasion he questioned the capacity of the older universities to

train men of the requisite precise habit of mind. It is no reflection on the valuable work which in the last twenty years has been carried out by the Institute of Public Administration and elsewhere to suggest that we have no reason to be any more satisfied with the present state of affairs. In the organization of civil defence in the last few years, and also in the measures taken in the economic crisis of 1931, there has been all too little evidence of the forward-looking mind and appreciation of the importance of scientific management or a scientific outlook.

Better provision for inquiry, research and reflection before policy is defined and put into operation could undoubtedly have avoided some of the worst mistakes in evacuation and other operations. If, however, such mistakes can be overlooked, once they have been admitted and rectified, their repetition becomes intolerable, whether from the point of view of war effort or of the reconstruction to follow the War. It is this position which gives fresh pertinence to the report of the Machinery of Government Committee, the more particularly as some of the reconstruction proposals which were implemented after the War of 1914-18 were liquidated in the aftermath of the crisis of 1931.

In the first place, it will be noted that the Machinery of Government Committee was established under the Ministry of Reconstruction, and is itself an example of the organized thinking which was carried out in the last two years of the 1914-18 war period. A valuable feature of a recent broadsheet issued by PEP (Political and Economic Planning) on Reconstruction, 1916-1919, is the reminder it gives of the many reforms in law, in local government, in power supply and other fields,

which we owe to men who during those harassing years and in such unfavourable circumstances proved themselves competent, not merely to organize victory, but also to think ahead boldly and with a precision justified by results when their proposals have been put to the test of practice.

The most cursory survey of the work of the Ministry of Reconstruction established in July 1917 and of the outcome of its activities will testify to the value of such work even in time of war, when victory is far from being in sight, and, indeed, of its essential importance if we are to realize the new world order which we look for after the present struggle. Unless the main underlying trends are analysed now and directed to constructive purpose in the light of possibilities and limitations which must persist whatever the outcome of the War, we may be once again in danger of losing the peace when we have won the war.

The Ministry of Reconstruction itself was liquidated in 1919, but in the Forestry Commission, the Electricity Commission, the Central Electricity Board, to mention only three public bodies, we are still able to benefit from the outcome of its deliberations. The grouping of the main-line railways, the reorganization of local government in 1930, and the Law of Property Act, 1925, were further results, and the work of the Whitley Committee on labour relations is another outstanding achievement, which has now provided a firm framework for industrial relations in Great Britain.

Besides its own particular activities, the Ministry of Reconstruction aimed at co-ordination as well as planning, and whether in dealing with the problems immediately following the cessation of hostilities—demobilization of man power, decontrol of raw materials and productive capacity, and generally setting the wheels of trade and commerce going again—or in those of the succeeding period of settled peace, it made contributions for which we owe a great debt to Lord Addison and his colleagues. During those years the country was equipped for the first time with a department devoted to research into questions of political science and to the encouragement of action on the lines ascertained.

The subsequent twenty years, however, afford no grounds for easy optimism concerning the extent to which the primary importance in reconstruction of organized thought, as distinct from executive action, is more widely recognized. Certain of the organizations brought into being by the Ministry of

Reconstruction have already been discarded—for example, the Economic Advisory Council, which in 1930 was formed out of the Committee of Civil Research, itself a child of the Machinery of Government Committee. Moreover, in this very field, refusal to make full provision for co-ordinating economic policy is at least causing profound uneasiness in many minds. So, too, as a valuable article in the *Political Quarterly* by Dr. W. A. Robson shows, is the neglect to deal with such long-term problems as the location of industry, although the Barlow Commission has already reported.

These indications of *laissez-faire* mentality are profoundly disturbing. We cannot assume that refusal to face long-term problems involves the more vigorous and efficient handling of short-term problems. There is plenty of evidence of timid and unintelligent treatment of important short-term issues. Indeed, as Dr. Robson points out, the abandonment of the reports of the Royal Commission on the geographical distribution of the industrial population of Great Britain deals a fatal blow at the development of a scientific treatment of the problems of evacuation. Unless even greater mistakes are to be avoided, some attempt must be made at central control. Town and country planning have acquired a new and more important status. They should, as Dr. Robson urges, be placed in the hands of a strong central department, competent not only to deal with the special needs of the Service departments and the Government offices, but also to take over the task of directing the location of industry and formulating a national plan for the whole country.

The experience of the Ministry of Reconstruction affords evidence of what is possible and indeed essential even in the stress of war, and its achievements will well repay study at this time. All the experience of the last twenty years, however, reinforces the plea for planning ahead. The task cannot and should not be avoided in war-time. It is in no way an impediment to victory. On the contrary, so many of our war-time exigencies are entirely consistent with socially desirable peace-time purposes that the same planning ahead which best serves our immediate war-time purpose will contribute most to subsequent reconstruction. The many factors which in the last two decades have intensified the need for bringing to bear organized thinking and the acquisition of facts as a basis for action into the affairs of State, emphasize the need for adequate attention now to the problems of reconstruction.