

THE NEW POSITION OF THE FORESTRY COMMISSION

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IN *Nature* of March 17, 1945, the work of the Forestry Commission during its first twenty-five years was considered. The twenty-sixth annual report, for the year ending September 30, 1945, marks the beginning of a new phase. The report deals with the operations carried out on a more or less much diminished scale which had appertained during the war years. The total area planted by the Commission to the end of September 1945 was 469,000 acres, the total area controlled being 1,364,000 acres. The interest of the report lies in the details given on the future forest policy of Britain. Within the last thirty-five years the country has, on two occasions, for a period of years been dependent mainly on its own supplies of timber, of which in normal times of peace some 10,000,000 tons were imported annually. The two wars caused great inroads to be made on the privately owned woods of the island, for these had to supply the main bulk of the country's requirements; and the fellings—50 million cubic feet—were much heavier during the Second World War than in the First. The new State forests, the oldest but twenty years old at the outbreak of war, could supply only pit wood, from thinnings made in the oldest of the Commission areas. According to old-time accepted thinning theories in Conifers, mainly of German origin, there would have been little or nothing to come from these young British woods of twenty-five years of age and less. But investigation and observation, coupled with practice, have already demonstrated what had been expected, that in the exceptional moist and equable climate of Britain, the growth of some of the exotic Conifers surpasses that of the Conifers of Western Europe; hence earlier thinning is possible, though present experience is insufficient to lay down a rule in the matter.

The report notes that the year was a period of transition in national affairs, and the same in the Commission itself. The Forestry Act of 1945, which received Royal assent in June, changed the constitutional status of the Commission, which had been established under the Forestry Act of 1919. The progression of the new forestry work, the War and the heavy fellings in the privately owned woods, necessitated some changes in policy and administration. Up to then, the Commission had been an independent body subject only to the Treasury, which held the purse strings. In February 1945, it was announced in the House of Commons that in future the Minister for Agriculture, England and Wales, and the Secretary of State for Scotland would be responsible for forestry and forest policy in Great Britain, the Forestry Commission being retained as an advisory body with executive functions. Closer relations were to be made between the Agricultural Departments and the Commission. In practice this means that the officers serving in the Forestry Commission, of all categories, now form one of the Service Departments of the State for which a Cabinet Minister is responsible, and that forestry matters cropping up in the House of Commons will now have a Minister instead of a private member of the House, as before, to reply for and back up the forest policy already laid down. Ten Commissioners are to be maintained, and they are required to appoint com-

mittees for England, Scotland and Wales respectively, consisting partly of commissioners and their officers and partly of other persons. The commissioners will, in the words of the report, "devolve on these Committees such functions as they think fit". The new arrangement will undoubtedly make for forestry progress—the danger is that the latter will be clogged by the redundancy of committees and sub-committees which appear to be springing up all over Britain. It is difficult to foresee how these will make for either efficiency or rapidity of work, both of which are eminently desirable: the more so that the newly sanctioned forestry programme envisages the afforestation or replanting of 365,000 acres at a cost to the State of £20,000,000 spread over five years—a piece of work which will be watched with eagerness and will necessitate some rapid moving.

One outcome of the new trend given to the forest policy question in Britain is to be found in the much discussed 'Dedication of Woodlands' scheme, which in its first enunciation appeared to place all privately owned woodlands under the Forestry Commission. The first proposals were modified. The purpose of the scheme is to encourage correct management in private woods. This step is said to have become necessary in the interests of national security, because the reserves of standing timber were again greatly depleted during the War, and also because the area of land suitable and available for timber production in Great Britain is limited. The first of these contentions appears to ignore the fact that, however badly British privately owned woodlands may have been managed in the past, they did provide nearly 50 million cubic feet of timber for the War, for the growth of which the State, that is, the ordinary public, had paid nothing. But the very fact that so large a proportion of the woods of the country have been swept away makes their replacement a matter of the first importance, especially as the acres they occupied contain forest soils, a valuable planting asset which is absent on the large tracts of bare land which the Commission is engaged in afforesting. The principles underlying the scheme are: "(1) That the rehabilitation of Woodlands must proceed with both certainty and rapidity. (2) That all planting, and natural regeneration acceptable instead of replanting, must be properly looked after up to the stage of satisfactory establishment. (3) In every case the Owner must make an early decision as to whether he is prepared to proceed with the work of rehabilitation. (4) If an Owner is so prepared and can give satisfactory assurances, he is deserving of financial assistance from the State. (5) When no satisfactory assurances are forthcoming within a stated period, the State should acquire the land. (6) That the war-time system of felling licences must continue until the reserves of standing timber can be adjudged satisfactory. (7) That some degree of control of the Sylviculture of private woodlands is necessary."

The basis of the scheme, in which the State undertakes to provide certain financial assistance, is that all woodlands in Britain judged to be suitable and necessary for timber production should either be dedicated to that purpose by the owner or acquired by the State. Dedication would run with the land and would be unaffected by changes of ownership. A covenant of dedication will be entered into by which both the State and the owner undertake the respective obligations agreed upon. The covenant would provide for arbitration in the event of disagreement.