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If I Were Dictator : TEN COMMANDMENTS OF SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION.

If a whole company are gamesters play must cease, for there is nothing to be won. When all nations are traders there is nothing to be gained by trade, and it will stop first where it is brought to the greatest perfection. - SAMUEL JOHNSON.

I have no wish to be a dictator. The value of a political system is that it expresses the wishes of the people who maintain it, for good or evil. The value of democracy is that it is based on the freedom of the individual will so far as that is compatible with majority rule, the alternative to the often regrettable will of the majority being the still more regrettable will of the minority. It often happens, indeed, that the majority abdicates to the minority, as in the case of the partition of Ireland and the hanging up of changes generally because a minority is strongly opposed to the wishes of the major portion of the electorate. But in amusing myself with setting down what I would do if dictator, I do not disclaim a wish to persuade someone here and there that what I would do compulsorily might be and should be done by a free and intelligent electorate voluntarily.

For as things are it is idle to deny or belittle the glaring position that the basic industries of the country are in a state of collapse, with every prospect that the position will become worse instead of better unless fundamental changes are made.

The annual reviews of agriculture and the coal, cotton, and metallurgical trades would be deplorable reading if we did not feel that things will only become better by becoming worse and so forcing on the changes that should long since have been made voluntarily. In this world, and with human nature as it is, great changes are not made merely because they are desirable, but only because at last they have become necessary, and even then the Reaction does its best to preserve some evil feature of the old way of doing things. In matters of taste and fashion a mere hint is enough to set men and especially women off on the new tack; but in public affairs men cling to the old ways with all the logic and all the practical convenience equally against them.

Success of Collective Control.

Nothing is clearer than the success of public control of public business. There is, for example, only one conspicuously successful railway in the world at the present moment, and that is the State-owned railway system of Canada, which was as much of a failure under private enterprise as coal and cotton are now. The private banks of the belligerent countries during the early days of the war had all but pulled the blinds down till the State came to the rescue with its credit. The private munitions factories could not turn out shells fast enough, even at grossly inflated prices, till the State experts filled the breach, and not only taught them better technical methods, but showed by their own practice in the national factories that munitions could be produced more quickly and cheaply and of a better quality, while the employees were paid better wages.

The tale could be carried much further; but the cases were cited as they came to light, and I must pay my readers the compliment of assuming that they have not forgotten.

We are a nation of shopkeepers, and the shopkeeper, wholesale or retail, is in a sheltered industry which may jog along almost irrespective of what is happening in the productive field, short of a general strike and the stoppage of all ability to pay for the shopkeeper's wares. The pipe that feeds a motor engine with petrol is a small part of the mechanism. But let it be clogged or otherwise stopped, and how soon the car will come to a stand! All the elaborate mechanism is there; but for want of the tiny trickle of life-giving spirit it is inert, dead.

The Trickle of Exports.

It is so with our few staple industries. The exports are a relatively small part of British trade - from a seventh to an eighth of the total home market, meaning by home market the national income from goods, services, and investments. In 1928 exports were only £723,000,000, as compared with close on £1,197,000,000 of imports. The value of British exports do not meet, by 100 millions, the expenses of government. That the home market and the domestic life of the nation should be subordinated to the retention of this dear-bought moiety is our present mistaken policy, based on the illusion that we cannot do without it.

Bleeding of the Basic Industry.

I turn to a really indispensable trade. The small market towns dotted at intervals of a few miles throughout the country depend upon agriculture. And agriculture and the population which lives by it are both dwindling steadily and even rapidly. The November hirings again absorbed a smaller number of men; the men not engaged hived off to the large centres; and they will inevitably be followed by a drop in the small-town populations. In the town where I write, in spite of relatively heavy expenditure on publicly-owned housing schemes, the population fell from 2152 in 1921 to 1939 in 1928, or fully 10 per cent. in seven years. Obviously such a process cannot be allowed to go on indefinitely, although those most responsible in the various localities do not seem to realise that the position is at all serious, and profess to regard all reference to it and suggested remedy for it as 'irrelevant' and superfluous. The same fatalistic contentment

was doubtless shown by the public men of vanished Babylon, Thebes, Tyre, and Carthage, as if the growth and decay of cities were a matter of mere fortuity beyond the help or hindrance of man.

First Things First.

Were I dictator one of the first things I should attack is the retrogression from agriculture to the pastoral stage represented in the substitution of sheep for crops and the laying down of arable land to grass. It is said that we cannot blame the farmer; that he finds cattle and corn unprofitable, and turns to sheep and poultry because there is more money in these, with less trouble and a lower wage-bill. As, however, the lower wage-bill means turning men off the land, clearly the State has an interest and a duty in the matter. With unemployment as the great problem in Britain as in America, a Government cannot allow its territory to be depleted of population and its resources to be wasted in the maintenance of able-bodied men in idleness.

Britain is too small a country to be wasted on sheep-feeding, still less on deer, which are crowding out even sheep. The corn lands of Scotland are the best in the temperate zones, producing, in 1928, 21.2 cwts. of wheat to the acre, as compared with 17.2 for England and Wales, and 23 and 24 bushels of oats and of wheat for Canada, and 16 bushels of winter wheat for the United States. Taking the bushel at 56 lbs., this gives only a little more than half the weight for Canada and a little over a third of the weight for America. And as the Canadian and American grain has to cross thousands of miles of land and sea before it reaches the ports of the United Kingdom,* it may well be asked: How is it able to compete successfully with British-grown cereals? *(On 31st December, 1929, grain freights were quoted: River Plate to United Kingdom up-river ports, 15/9 per ton; Gulf to U.K., 2/6 per quarter (that is, 12/6 per ton); North Pacific Coast to U.K. and Continent, 24/6 per ton; San Francisco to U.K. and Continent, 25s. Since the Commonwealth Line was sacrificed to enable the Shipping Ring to pay inflated dividends, Australian rates are not quoted. The report adds, with the usual vagueness: 'Australia quotes a few orders for grain; but rates weak on liberal tonnage supplies.')

For one thing, there is less of a rent burden. Then there is a small or non-existent manure-bill, freight rates are very low, and the crops are marketed in bulk. On the other hand, labour costs are higher in Canada and the United States. Anyhow, the proof that Canada and the States can out-compete British cereals is that they do it.

The truth is, agriculture is a sweated industry all over the world, and whatever tended to improve conditions here would tend to improve them in all countries from which supplies were derived, unless and until a time came when we should be able to do without cereals from these countries entirely. Rural depopulation is going on in the States as well as in Britain, and a great contributory cause is low prices. There is probably systematic over-production of foodstuffs.

Control of Imports.

If I were dictator I should institute control of agriculture from top to bottom, in the interests alike of the rural population and the nation.

A first step would be the nationalization of the railways and the complete readjustment of freight rates. Side by side with this I would strictly limit the issue of motor licences for road transport, much of which is entirely uneconomical. As I have repeatedly pointed out, a locomotive engine will pull 60 loaded trucks on rails, with three men in charge. The same traffic on the road would require 60 motors, 60 trucks, and at least 120 men in charge, while the roads would suffer much more than the rails.

As it is, motor licences are given as a matter of course and in the interests of trade and revenue, no account being taken of the subsidy of £40,000,000 a-year given to road transport by the British public in the form of taxation for road maintenance.

Railway Nationalization.

The nationalization of the railways would effect many savings in duplicated staffs and directorates, but the help it would give to agriculture would be in the reduction of freight rates to the home user and their increase to the foreign importer. At present the preference to the latter is as four to one against the home user, he having to pay the higher rate because the foreigner has to have the lower. If the foreign importer had to pay the home rate his produce would be automatically and quite fairly and naturally excluded, A Government Department would very properly impose a flat mileage rate to all comers.

Marketing.

The exclusion of artificially cheapened produce - foreign produce which does not pay its passage - would go far to help the British farmer. But an equalization so far of the conditions of competition would not of itself be enough.

Complaint is made of the difference between the price paid to the farmer for say potatoes and the price charged in the retail shop. This is often a question of marketing. It is not uncommon for produce to pass through several sets of hands between the field and the shop. One consignment of potatoes was traced through six firms of distributors, the potatoes being repeatedly re-sacked. After they had been from Forfarshire to Aberdeen city, they travelled, as seed, via Glasgow back to the district from which they came. If each of the handlers added even a small moiety of profit it would be no wonder if the price were at least doubled. The public is itself to blame for the existence of so many middle-men by neglecting to deal with the producer direct.

If I were dictator, regardless of public opinion and independent of a sectional vote, I should give farmers six weeks in which to get together for co-operative marketing, failure to comply being penalised. All blacklegs profit by the co-operation of those who do co-operate, and all should be compelled to contribute to the result by which they benefit.

With Government control of imports, the amount and bulk of consignments could be regulated. Dumping could be regulated or checked altogether. The price could be regulated. And given a living price, the farmer would be encouraged once again, as in war-time, to keep the plough going, to break up the 2 million acres that have lapsed to grass since 1918, and to employ more and more labour.

But would such encouragement be enough? We may be sure that, as in war-time, it would not. Control meant higher farming, and it must mean that again. For even war prices did not provide sufficient stimulus to speed the plough, and there had to be pains and penalties for bad farming. The problem is to raise immensely our food production, since the home market is more and more the only market that is being left to us.

What We Produce and What We Buy.

In 1928 we produced only six million quarters of wheat, and we consumed 35 millions; so that the production needs to be increased five-fold. We produced six million quarters of barley, and imported four million quarters. So that the production of barley has to be nearly doubled. Of oats we produced 21 million quarters, and imported three millions, and in 1929 the import figure was considerably exceeded. So that here again a 14 per cent. increase is needed. I do not know that maize has ever been or could be grown in Britain; but we imported 10 million quarters of it in 1928. Doubtless it has substitutes, and if we could grow other feeding stuffs in sufficient quantity we need not import so much maize. It is a heating grain, and is held responsible for the widespread prevalence in Italy of the disease of malnutrition called pollagra.

There are many other crops in which, with all our facilities of soil, climate, and proximity to great markets, we are lamentably deficient.

Inspection, advice, and discipline would be as necessary and salutary under control as they are in proving in Ireland, where the visits of the inspector are welcomed and his expert counsel readily followed. No class of men do their best; no broad class of men *know* how to do the best. The best of us can do with advice.

Individualism.

I have said that agriculture needs control - that is, compulsory organization - from top to bottom. The need of control is shown by the hostility of many farmers to any form of organization, advice, or interference. One would think their industry was successfully expanding the area of cultivation, increasing the number of persons employed, and providing these workers with a high standard of life. The facts being all the other way, it behoves the nation to say: 'The land of Britain is in the last resort our land, and we have an interest in seeing that as much is got out of it as possible. From this standpoint everything is as different as possible from what it ought to be.'

But any week one pleases, farmers will be found objecting to something proposed in the interest of the nation and the consumer, though it is the consumer who gives agriculture or any other business its sole value. A Liberal M.P. has recently started a Potato Marketing Board in order to deal with the price-collapse in this branch of food production. Mr. Blindell, the founder, proposed that the Board should have representatives of the consumers and the agricultural workers, as well as farmers, and should work, in concert with the Food Council, to stabilise prices.

The National Union of Farmers (English) denounces all these proposals. They say the Food Council is no friend of theirs, and that they do not want prices stabilised. They say

that the years when prices are high recoup the grower for the years when prices are low, without offering any hint of when the prices are to be high, Anything rather than regulation or the removal of grievances. Not to have a grievance would in itself apparently be a grievance.

Overproduction Due to Lack of Organization.

As regards potatoes, the position is that farmers never know exactly what acreage is to be sown. The year 1929 saw an increase of 591,000 tons, and 1928 had increased by 691,000 on the previous year. The consequences have been glut and unremunerative prices. In the absence of any organization or agreement, the probability is that 1930 will see a scarcity, since there is no means of finding out what acreage is likely to be planted, and farmers will shy off from an unprofitable crop.

It is the same with turnips - a glut one year, a famine the next, and this not merely because turnips are a ticklish crop, but because there is no arrangement as to the quantity to be sown. It is true that turnips are not grown for sale as other crops are, but chiefly to be used on the farm. Sales do go on, however, and one has seen truck loads of turnips being carried on the railways from centres where there was a glut, owing to extensive sowing, to parts where there was a scarcity from the opposite cause, while ploughing in of the excessive and useless fodder represented a sad waste of labour, land, and seed.

Overproduction of food is like no other production in respect that food is perishable; and consequently central organization, both of home production and foreign importation, can alone prevent excess, waste, and unremunerative prices. Apples rotting in Kent and apples from Canada and America selling briskly are the proofs of unfair freights and no organization. If farmers have not had enough of this, the public has.

Beggars Cannot be Choosers.

If the rural districts could retain their population, and deal with the consequences of bad housing, sanitation, and low standards of life they would have a better claim to be allowed to mismanage their business; but as it is they slough their problems on the large centres - unemployed people, the feeble-minded, the diseased, accidents due to happy-go-lucky methods, and an immense burden of litigation. The county courts are kept going with rustic civil cases and rustic crimes out of all proportion to the numbers of the rural population. The ailing folk of the city must wait for a bed and treatment in their own hospitals; but cases from the country are forwarded as a matter of course and are accepted because humanity forbids their being returned untreated.

Farming a Business.

It is said by apologists that farming is 'not a business, but a way of living.' That is precisely what is amiss with farming. The farmer is not typically a business man. Struggling with weather, obstinate folk, and obstinate beasts, his hallmark is stolidity; and he is excused from keeping account-books because of his assumed dislike to, and probable incapacity for, book-keeping and his assumed disregard of whether his business is paying or not.

If I were dictator, then, I should control imports, stabilise prices, insist upon high farming and the maximum employment of labour compatible with remunerative business, and I should vest the Food Council with powers to enforce its findings. The business of the Food Council is not to be specially the friend of the farmer, but of the nation.

Grow Bigger or/and Bust.

I deal with this matter at special length, not merely because it is neglected in the policy of statesmen and the advocacy of publicists, but because it is in itself all-important to Britain. She is on the absolutely wrong road at present because her public men have the utterly unfounded idea (1) that she cannot feed her people with home-grown food, and (2) that she can go on depending indefinitely upon export trade. It is an essential feature of capitalism that its expansion means its ultimate extinction, since it obviously cannot expand except by equipping the nations of the earth to become their own producers. We send them money, machines, managers.

An Agricultural-Fiscal Decalogue.

So far, then, we have:

1. Set up a system of import control by a Government Department, whose officials would buy supplies from abroad in lessening quantities, liberating them on the market as wanted and at prices enabling the home producers to live and live well. This would be protection without tariffs, without speculative profits to Cartels, and without the trouble of collecting duties. If supplies were cheap from countries with low standards, the cheapness would be used, not to lower home prices, but would be State profits which would accrue to the nation.
2. We have nationalised the railways, equalised freights, improved the entire railway system in the interests of safety, efficiency, and the comfort and convenience of the travelling public. This, not as an expedient forced upon us, but as the best way of managing the service.
3. We have, unfortunately only on paper, restricted the issue of motor licences. The saving of the roads from heavy commercial traffic would mean that more labour and material could be expended upon the neglected third-class roads upon which agricultural traffic is mostly carried.
4. If I were dictator I should reduce the hours in all sheltered industries at once. After all the mechanical inventions and improvements that have taken place, a working day of eight hours is too long. As many shifts as you please, but none to work more than seven hours for a start. Russia is forging ahead with a seven-hour day at present. In competitive industries arrangements could be made with continental nations to reduce the labour day. Such international arrangements are the aim of the Washington Convention and the business of the International Labour Office.

5. An embargo upon the investment of money abroad was sound in war-time, and it would be sound now. At present one-third to one-half of the investments passing through the Stock Exchange represent British capital abstracted from the British pool and suicidally invested abroad to enable the cheap labour of Poles, Hindoos, and Chinese to be used to lower British standards and destroy British trade.
6. Nationalization of the land upon its present assessed value, the present holder to be given interest-paying scrip. Landlords no longer give improvements or repairs, and roads, drainage, tree-planting, and the provision of houses have long since become public concerns. As the landlords, thus pauperised, say land is a costly luxury, they ought to be glad to have 3 per cent. on the assessable value. Improvements in the countryside would then be improvements of the nation's own property.
7. A thoroughgoing policy of afforestation associated with small holdings and country crafts.
8. Electrification to be carried out in all directions, not through companies, but by direct labour under expert public servants, the amenity of the landscape to be conserved as against cheapness.
9. Recruiting for the army, navy, and air force to be stopped, as many men would be wanted for constructive work. There are millions of trained soldiers in the country who could be mobilised at once if need were. And there need be no need.
10. Slum clearances to be carried out as rapidly as new houses can be built for the transplanted population, labour being drafted from the mining and other distressed areas to do work and save doles.

The Great Contradiction.

These ten commandments of reconstruction are but a beginning. They are all not merely feasible, but changes that follow established precedents and cry aloud to be made. The organisation of labour is the State's most primary and important concern. To neglect it is both crime and folly. To attempt to find employment by the capitalist methods that have created and are still creating unemployment is to stereotype obvious mismanagement, is an abandonment of principle, and a shutting of eyes to all the signs of the times - not merely of the immediate hour, but the whole stream of tendency of the last fifty years, which is for the great industries to go abroad, the work being carried on where the products are required. The more that capitalism succeeds in its object of making profits the sooner it will fail as a social method, which it has never pretended to be anyhow. America with its 4,000,000 of unemployed, and much working of short time as an admitted result of capitalist 'prosperity' proves that capitalism is the Great Contradiction of history.

The moderate proposals here made should not require draconian powers or methods for their enforcement. The United States Farm Board is attempting, with some success, despite the opposition of the wheat speculators, to help the basic industry in the direction of organising marketing and eliminating middlemen, among other aims; and most of the

main products of the soil are the subject of compulsory regulation, from eggs in Ireland, sugar in Cuba, to hemp and sical in Manilla, with proposed compulsory co-operation among wheat-growers in Alberta. And the State railways of Canada carry Canadian wheat at about a fourth of the rates imposed in Britain. Other countries turn more and more to the control which Britain possessed and abandoned, although, on the undisputed claim of its authors, it saved the country £400,000,000 during the short period of its operation.

Draconian powers are here assumed chiefly because Labour in office has for the moment dropped its proposals for control through an Imports Board, apparently in deference to the opposition of vested interests. If this is not the case the best way to allay suspicion and meet the needs of agriculture is to revive in a Bill the proposals advocated during the General Election.

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