

PICTURE OF POVERTY

AN ARTICLE by *The Times* Labour Correspondent, 11th December, 1939, deals with the question of family allowances as a means for supplementing low wages. Its importance is not in the policy it discusses (which we need not stop to consider because it takes poverty for granted) but in the facts that are revealed. The writer says that social surveys in a dozen large towns in England confirm the conclusion that poverty affects children under 15 years of age much more than any other section of the community.

In a prosperous city like Bristol one working-class child in every five is in a home where income is inadequate to provide a bare minimum standard of living; and the standard adopted by the University of Bristol survey allowed no provision for sickness, savings, old age, holidays, recreation, household equipment, drink, tobacco, nor even newspapers. There were 16,000 such children in Bristol. Half the families with four or more children were below this minimum standard and another four-fifths were so little above it that existence was a perpetual struggle against poverty.

More than half the children of Bristol are in families with four or five children. One-fourth of the families containing three children were also below the poverty line.

Sixteen per cent of the working-class families covered by the Merseyside survey ("Men Without Work," published by the Pilgrim Trust) were found to be living in poverty, but the proportion of children in homes of poverty was 25 per cent. Approaching the question from the viewpoint of the long unemployed, the report said that the economic situation of men with a fair-sized family "deteriorates progressively with increasing size of family and that where there are more than one or two children there is almost always evidence of hardship."

When Mr Seebohm Rowntree in *The Human Needs of Labour* estimated that 53s. a week for 52 weeks in the year was the smallest sum on which an urban family of five could be maintained in health, he pointed out that, if wages were based on the needs of such a family there would still be about one-third of the children of Britain insufficiently provided for during five or more of their most critical years.

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At the Edinburgh Presbytery (*Glasgow Herald*, 1st December, 1939), the Rev Roy H. Hogg urged the appointment of a committee to "investigate the principles that govern the formulation of such national peace aims as embody the Christian attitude." He went on to say that although Great Britain in her national life was marked by outstanding virtues "yet by our selfishness and love of ease and indifference to higher things we have contributed to the outbreak of war."

If selfishness and love of ease and indifference to higher things is responsible for poverty, then Mr Hogg is right. His remarks have been put in juxtaposition to *The Times*' article as a kind of query mark. When one uses these words "our" and "we" it is well to be careful, for what is intended to say may not apply to all, as it certainly does not in this case. Who then are the "we" who are responsible and whose is the conscience that must be awakened as Mr Hogg says? The Church cannot speak just that way to the victims of the laws and institutions that have produced poverty and unemployment. It has no message for the people unless it is prepared to offer the abundance and the leisure that would come, elevating the moral and the spiritual man, when the labourer is worthy of his hire and no man lives idly on the labour of his fellows.

PRICES AND LAND VALUES

THERE IS MUCH talk of the vicious spiral of rising prices and rising wages. This is not unusual, but what is astonishing is that no notice has been taken of a far worse development and that is the spiral of rising prices and rising land values.

The inflated land values which were the legacy of the last war, were the real cause of the distress which followed the post-war slump in prices. The disparity between wages and prices was comparatively soon adjusted but the inflated land values with their accompanying huge mortgages and long leases remained frozen, and many are not yet adjusted. Urban and rural areas suffered equally.

In rural areas tenants were forced under threat of eviction to take long leases of their farms at inflated rents, or were compelled to "buy or quit" at inflated prices. There were plenty of war profiteers wanting farms for their sons at any price and the real farming tenants were helpless victims. The result was a mass of new occupying owners, mortgaged to the neck, and of tenants tied to farms at impossible rents. This and not the low prices was the real cause of the post-war distress.

Sir R. Dorman Smith said last week that he would avoid the mistakes of the last war. So far he has done nothing to prevent a recurrence of the same evil. Everything agricultural is now controlled except the rent and price of farms, so if there is any suggestion of inflated prices the landowners will be free to profiteer as before. This profiteering campaign has already started in some areas.

These evils of land value inflation are easily preventable in the case of agriculture and in the interests of food production they should be prevented by prohibiting the raising of farm rents during the war and for five years after, and by giving the farmer security of tenure for the duration of the war and five years after, subject to farming properly. Instead of doing so the Government so far in recent legislation have expressly enacted that the benefits of some subsidies shall go to the landlord. Subsidies, etc., meant for increased food production should not be absorbed and nullified by increased rents.

As regards urban land values and agricultural values also, the further action necessary is the taxation of these values, thereby taking for the community the values they themselves have created, and at the same time raising much-needed money without burdening the real producers of wealth.

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(From letter appearing in the *Scotsman*, 22nd January.)

The following paragraph dated 30th December, 1839, was recently quoted by *The Times* from its issue of 100 years ago:—

A surcharge was lately made by Mr Talbot, the surveyor of taxes in this district, of 30 windows, being in that part of the Essex Convict Prison at Springfield occupied by Mr Neale, the governor, which Mr Talbot contended was liable as a beneficial occupation. The commissioners here . . . relieved Mr Neale. Mr Talbot requested a case (and) it was laid before Justices Littledale, Patterson, and Maule, who have decided that the commissioners were wrong. The surcharge for 30 windows, the tax amounting to 9l. 16s. 3d., is therefore confirmed.

Although we no longer tax windows, we still tax the houses. It does not give ground for thinking that we are any wiser than our ancestors.