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SECRET

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WAR CABINET, 71.

*Minutes of a Meeting of the War Cabinet held at 10, Downing Street, S.W., on
Saturday, February 17, 1917, at 11 A.M.*

Present :

The PRIME MINISTER (*in the Chair*)

The Right Hon. the EARL CURZON OF KEDLESTON, K.G., G.C.S.I., G.C.I.E. The Right Hon. A. BONAR LAW, M.P.	The Right Hon. A. HENDERSON, M.P.
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In attendance :

The Right Hon. A. J. BALFOUR, O.M., M.P., Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Admiral SIR J. R. JELlicoe, G.C.B., O.M., G.C.V.O., First Sea Lord of the Admiralty. The Right Hon. R. E. PROthero, M.V.O., M.P., President, Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. The Hon. E. G. STRUTT, J.P., Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. Mr. A. D. HALL, M.A., F.R.S., Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. Mr. J. HARLING TURNER, Director of Agricultural Section, National Service Department.	SIR R. H. REW, K.C.B., Permanent Secre- tary, Ministry of Food. Captain C. BATHURST, M.P., Parliamentary Secretary, Ministry of Food. The Right Hon. the EARL OF SELBORNE, K.G. SIR ARTHUR LEE, K.C.B., Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. The Right Hon. R. MUNRO, K.C., M.P., Secretary for Scotland. The Right Hon. H. E. DUKE, K.C., M.P., Chief Secretary for Ireland. Mr. R. J. CAMPBELL, B.Sc., Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction, Ireland. Professor ADAMS.
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Lieutenant-Colonel SIR M. P. A. HANKEY, K.C.B., *Secretary.*

Mr. THOMAS JONES, *Assistant Secretary.*

Mr. G. M. YOUNG, *Assistant Secretary.*

Agriculture :
Guaranteed Prices
for Wheat, Oats,
and Potatoes.

Minimum Wage.

1. THE War Cabinet continued the discussion on agricultural policy begun on the 15th February, with special reference to the question of guaranteed prices and minimum wages.

Mr. Strutt reported that the farmers whom he had consulted were willing to pay a minimum wage (including allowances) of 25s. per week, provided that they received minimum prices for their crops. They considered that the question had really been settled, in a sense, by the action of the Director of National Service.

The Prime Minister stated that he had received a visit from Lord Chaplin, who said that what the farmer needed was a guaranteed price. Lord Chaplin thought that probably not much could be done in any case in the way of increased production this year, as the land required cleaning. The farmer would not begin breaking up land until he received his guarantee. Lord Chaplin was strongly opposed to the Government fixing a price below which they would not commandeer produce.

Mr. Harling Turner, the Duke of Portland's agent, stated that a minimum wage was an essential part of the policy, and would prove ultimately to the advantage of the farmer, in which connection he instanced the good profits made from farming in Scotland, where wages are high. Mr. Turner also strongly supported the need of a minimum price for a period of not less than five years, and preferably for more. He considered the prices decided on by the War Cabinet on the 15th February (War Cabinet, 66, Minute 1 (a)) to be fair to everyone.

Captain Bathurst, who stated that he represented in the House of Commons a constituency containing some of the worst-paid agricultural labourers in the country, said that there was an increasing appreciation among farmers of the probability that if the labourer were better paid he would give better work. The more enlightened were in favour of a Wage Board, because it would place farmers on an equal footing.

Prices for
Commandeered
Produce.

2. The War Cabinet next considered the decision arrived at on 15th February (War Cabinet, 66, Minute 1 (c)). After hearing the views of the experts present the War Cabinet revised their decision that the Government should undertake not to commandeer produce during 1917, 1918, and 1919 below fixed prices, and, instead, they decided that—

The price should be announced from time to time by the War Office or Food Controller after the approval of the English Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, the Scottish Board of Agriculture, and the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland had been obtained.

Pheasants.

3. The War Cabinet, having heard the views of a number of experts, including Mr. Prothero, Lord Selborne, Captain Bathurst, Mr. Harling Turner, Sir Arthur Lee, and Mr. A. D. Hall, and having received details of a precedent adopted by the Secretary for Scotland in the case of deer, decided that—

The Board of Agriculture and Fisheries should be responsible for seeing that agricultural production is not reduced by the depredations of game, and should take such measures as are required to that end.

Having regard to the statement already made on the subject in the House of Commons by Captain Bathurst, it is desirable that, in any Order issued by the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries, powers should be taken to empower tenants, at the bidding of the Board, to kill pheasants in cases where landowners had failed to carry out the instructions of the Board.

Prices of Potatoes.

4. The Prime Minister read a telegram which he had received from the Lord Mayor of Manchester with reference to the deadlock which had arisen in regard to the delivery of potatoes.

Captain Bathurst reported to the War Cabinet that the facts were as follows: The price which the Food Controller had fixed to be paid to the farmer was 8*l.* per ton for the best sound potatoes. This allowed a considerable margin above the cost of production, which would not be more than 5*l.* or 5*l.* 10*s.*, and would yield a bigger profit than was obtained in peace time. The only other price fixed by the Food Controller was 1½*d.* per lb., or 14*l.* per ton, as the price to be charged to the consumer, this price to come into operation on Monday next, the 19th February. The difference of 6*l.* per ton left a handsome margin for all the middlemen concerned. The price 8*l.* was for potatoes on the ground, and it was true that some farmers were taking advantage of the scarcity of supply and the urgent demand to charge abnormal rates for cartage, in rare cases as much as 3*l.* per ton. Dealers who allege that they have paid more than 8*l.* per ton, and that they cannot afford to sell at 14*l.*, have only themselves to blame, for the position was made quite clear, and they have had ample time to unload their stocks. The War office commandeered potatoes for the Army at 8*l.* per ton.

Mr. Strutt stated that in the three months preceding the issue of the Order, potatoes had been selling at about 10*l.* to 11*l.* per ton, and the sudden drop to 8*l.* without warning had been felt by the growers as a grievance, especially by the small growers.

Mr. Harling Turner said that the potato crop was a most speculative one, and might vary in two consecutive seasons from eight to two tons an acre.

Mr. Hall said that if growers were compelled to sell, it would only mean an earlier exhaustion of stocks, and there were only stocks for two months in the country. The next crop would not be forthcoming till July, so the country might be without potatoes for two months. There must be a serious potato shortage in any case. There was also a danger of a serious shortage of seed potatoes.

The Chief Secretary for Ireland said that the Irish crop was only two-thirds of the normal crop, and, as speculation in England threatened to leave Ireland in want, an Order was issued to prohibit export. Dealings in Ireland are restricted; the needs of the army are supplied, and the Department of Agriculture is saving seed. When these needs have been met, he thought Ireland would be able to spare some potatoes for export.

The War Cabinet decided that—

The Board of Agriculture and the Ministry of Food, in consultation with their advisers, should consider the question in the first instance and make an immediate report to the War Cabinet, considering the question from the point of view of general policy in regard to the shortage of potatoes, as well as of the situation arising out of the present crisis.

Irish Agriculture:
Guaranteed Prices
and Wage Boards.

5. The War Cabinet, having heard from the Chief Secretary for Ireland particulars of the very special characteristics of Ireland, both as regards farming and, more particularly, the very low rate of wages there, decided that—

- (a.) The system of guaranteed prices should apply to Ireland as to Great Britain.
- (b.) At this stage it would not be advisable to apply the minimum wage of 25*s.* per week to Ireland, but that Wage Boards should be established, with the object of raising wages in Ireland.

6. The War Cabinet decided that—
Minute 1 (d) of War Cabinet, 66, should be in suspense for the
present.

(Initialled) D. L. G.

2, *Whitehall Gardens, S.W.*,
February 17, 1917.