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FOOD SUPPLY AND PRODUCTION.

NOTE BY THE EARL OF SELBORNE.

I SHOULD like to have instructions from the War Committee on the following points:—

If the war is prolonged over this year and through the year 1917, should I take measures to increase the food production of the country next year? It is unfortunately a fact that the food supply from overseas is causing us more and more anxiety. I am not now alluding to the difficulties of foreign exchange which are partly caused by the great volume of food purchases, but to the actual physical difficulty of getting the food across the sea and into the United Kingdom.

There has never been more wheat for sale in the world than there is at the present moment, in Canada, the United States, Argentina, and Australia, and the price of wheat inside those countries is moderate. But the price in Europe is very high and bears no relation to these facts. The reason for this is that the ship tonnage for bringing the wheat to Europe is grievously deficient, and that the demands of France and Italy and of the neutral countries for immediate supplies of wheat are insistent. The result is that there is a clamorous competition for every ton of wheat directly it is brought to a port and put on board ship. Fortunately we have succeeded in eliminating competition between the Allies. All the purchases, whether for the British, French, or Italian armies, or for the civil population of the United Kingdom and of Italy, are now in the hands of agencies controlled by one Committee on which all the Powers are represented. This was not so last year, and if we had not succeeded in making this arrangement this year, I really do not know up to what price wheat might not have been driven.

Last autumn I was authorised to establish a wheat reserve in the United Kingdom against the months of June, July, and August, when experience had shown us our supplies will be at the shortest. I have had altogether unforeseen difficulties in establishing this reserve. I fear that I certainly shall not be able to keep it at the level at which it ought to be kept, and I am full of anxiety in respect of the next six months. We started the cereal year in September with an excellent supply, and we arranged to commence establishing our reserve early in the new year, but our calculations were upset by two unforeseen causes. There was a grievous shortage in the amount of wheat imported into the United Kingdom in November and December, due entirely to the lack of tonnage. The Board of Trade, and then Mr. Whitley's Committee since it has been established, have done and are doing all they can to put more ships into the wheat trade, but their efforts to supply more tonnage for this purpose for the advantage of the United Kingdom have been largely neutralised by the clamorous demands of the French and Italian Governments for tonnage to take wheat to France and Italy. We had no previous intimation that the shortage of Italian and French supplies would be so great or that it would manifest itself so early.

In the light of this experience I think that we ought to look far ahead. The demands of the Admiralty and War Office and of the Allied Governments on British tonnage show no signs of diminution. The quantity of that tonnage is constantly shrinking owing to the steady toll taken from it by German mines and submarines and by raiders, the number of which may increase. The Admiralty will know whether the chances of a serious interruption of our supplies, extending over several weeks, by the operation of German commerce-raiders are likely to increase or diminish. Further, we cannot foresee what the Canadian and American harvests of 1916 are likely to be. If there was a short crop there might really be a shortage in the wheat supplies in the world.

Therefore, if the War Committee think that we may have to carry the burden of war all through next year, and that I should do all in my power to increase the amount of food produced in England and Wales in 1917, I ought to receive my instructions at once. If I had my instructions soon enough I think I could do a good deal. I have now a complete organisation throughout the country in the War Agricultural Committees of the counties, and with their assistance and the assistance of the various agricultural bodies I think that much could be done to organise an increase of production in the cereal year beginning September 1916 and ending August 1917. But I could not ensure a substantial increase in the amount of wheat produced unless I was authorised to give the farmers some guarantee that, if they plough up grass land, they will receive for the wheat they sell a higher price than that which obtained before the war for a period sufficiently long to ensure them against loss. Such a guarantee could be given in various forms. Probably a guarantee of 40s. a quarter for four years after peace is the form which would be most effective and yet involve the least liability to the national exchequer, but on this point I should see advice from men like Mr. E. Strutt and Mr. A. D. Hall. There would, of course, have to be conditions which the farmer would have to fulfil in order to obtain the benefit of the guarantee, and I should probably have to ask for some men to be returned to the land from the army. I do not think I should have to ask for very many men, but I should certainly have to ask for all those who have been trained to work steam-ploughing tackle.

Of course there is more drastic action which could be taken. I could have power given to me to compel the cultivation of land, but in that case I should certainly have to organise a ploughing and reaping corps, and many conditions would have to be adjusted. But if the men were lent me from the army it could be done.

S.

March 2, 1916.