THE FOOD SUPPLY OF THE UNITED KINGDOM.

MEMORANDUM BY THE EARL OF SELBORNE.

(In accordance with Conclusion 5 of the Meeting of the War Committee held on March 10, 1916, War Committee Paper W.C. 31.)

Introduction.

No extraordinary powers were given to the Board of Agriculture, nor were any special inducements held out to the farmers of England and Wales, to increase the production of foodstuffs (for man and beast) in the cereal year 1915-16. Consequently the only appeal I could make was to the self-interest of the farmers and to their patriotism. I think that they have on the whole responded well under circumstances of ever-increasing difficulty, and I have no hesitation in recording my opinion that they have made a far greater effort from a sense of patriotic duty than they would have done if they considered self-interest alone.

All that can be done under the existing law is now being done to increase the output of foodstuffs from the land of England and Wales in the harvest of 1916. It is the yield of the harvest of 1916 which will be the main factor in fixing the amount of home supplies available until the harvest of 1917. Special powers taken, or special inducements offered now, would begin to produce results in the summer of 1917; but the main results would not be realised until the harvest of 1917 was gathered in and in the subsequent autumn months, and it would be the yield of the harvest of 1917 which would be the main factor in fixing the amount of home supplies available until the harvest of 1918.

It is for the War Committee to decide whether steps ought to be taken now to reduce the amount of food imports (for man and beast) in the cereal year 1917-18 to a minimum. On the assumption that they decided that such steps should be taken and that Parliament should be asked to grant compulsory powers to the Board of Agriculture, I will sketch in outline a plan for giving effect to that decision in order that the War Committee may see what it would involve. In using the word foodstuffs I mean, of course, meat, bacon, cheese, and milk, as well as corn, hay, potatoes, vegetables, fruit, &c.

Part I.—With Compulsory Powers.

(A.)—Method.

A flying survey would be made of the land in every parish of England and Wales and a return compiled of the number of acres which could advantageously be ploughed. Under no circumstances would it be wise to plough up the good pastures. The figures of arable and grass land are known for comparative periods over a considerable number of years. For instance, we know that since 1875 over 4,000,000 acres of plough land have been turned into grass and over 1,000,000 acres even since 1895. A short cut would be to decree, that all the land laid down to grass since a selected year must be ploughed up again.

By one method or another, and after a review of the means available, a decision must be taken as to the number of acres of grass land which must be ploughed up and then a scheme of crops drawn up, parish by parish.

Next an estimate must be made of the additional superintendence, labour, machinery, instruments, fertilisers, feeding-stuffs, and seed required.

A corps must be enrolled to plough and cultivate and clean the land, and to reap and gather the harvest. It must be divided into companies, one or more of which would...
operate in each county, and move from farm to farm with their machinery and appliances. They could be billeted in the villages as the troops have been.

Such a corps could only be formed either out of men released from military service or from men recruited for the purpose in Ireland, or from foreigners specially imported, such as Portuguese.

All the steam ploughs and cultivators in England and Wales would have to be requisitioned, and measures must be concerted between the Board of Agriculture and the Ministry of Munitions for the manufacture of more steam ploughs and agricultural machinery, and this would certainly mean the transfer of a good many men and of a certain number of engineering works from the service of munitions to the service of agriculture.

The only possible alternative would be to order this machinery in Canada or the United States of America, and to arrange freight for its transport to the United Kingdom.

Similarly, sufficient basic slag, sulphate of ammonia, and other fertilisers in the United Kingdom must be requisitioned, and if the supply were not sufficient, measures would have to be concerted between the Board of Agriculture and the Ministry of Munitions for a larger output of these articles.

Again the only alternative would be importation and the allotment of freight.

So also must provision be made for an adequate supply of feeding-stuffs, especially of oil-cakes, and of seed.

In some cases arrangements might be made with the distributing trades for co-operation between them and the Government. In others the Government might have to take over the whole process of sale and distribution itself.

Another question to be considered would be this: Shall the flocks and herds be maintained so that at the conclusion of the war the breeding stock shall exist in unimpaired numbers? Or shall the breeding stock be deliberately diminished so that during the war more meat shall be available and more land be devoted to the production of food for men and less to the production of food for beasts?

(B.)—Administration.

A new branch of the Board of Agriculture must be formed, partly out of the existing staff, but mainly out of a special war staff. There is plenty of material available for this purpose of men over military age.

The War Agricultural Committees, which were formed in every county last autumn, could render service of great value in every county, but the small grant which they now receive from the Treasury, and which is all they need for their present functions, must be largely increased.

An absolutely first-class organiser must be put at the head of this branch, a man of the type of Lord Milner or Sir Horace Plunkett. It would be no use expecting adequate results from a man of less power.

(C.)—Cost.

The expenditure must be considerable, but it should be small indeed compared with the value of the additional produce which should result. It is quite impossible at this stage to give an estimate of any value.

(D.)—Powers.

Parliament must give powers to the Board of Agriculture and its officers, and to the War Agricultural Committees acting under the direction of the Board of Agriculture, to enter on land, survey it, cultivate it; to give directions to the farmer what he shall grow; to set aside restrictive covenants; to buy and sell; to arrange compensation and conditions of co-operation with landowners, farmers, and traders; to requisition machinery, fertilisers, &c.; to enrol a corps of cultivators; to requisition billets for them, &c.

(E.)—Questions which must emerge and be settled as they arise.

It must be borne in mind that the experience of the years 1889 to 1900 has left an indelible impression on the minds of farmers and landowners. Many thousands of those classes were wholly ruined in those years, and the aggregate absolute loss of capital was immense.
As agricultural conditions were, just before the present war broke out, it would certainly have paid farmers and landowners well to have ploughed up again much of the land now under grass, but with the exception of a comparatively few extremely intelligent men like Mr. Edward Strutt they did not do so. Why? Because they felt that the conditions under which agriculture was carried on in the United Kingdom were still quite unstable, and, with the recollection of the years 1880 to 1900 still vividly before them, they were not prepared to risk their capital by ploughing up land which, would have again, in their opinion, become unprofitable if agricultural prices again fell to the rates current in those fatal years for agriculture. But for the purpose of war production we might have to plough up not only the land which they could have profitably ploughed up before the war, but also land which would not have paid better under the plough than in grass under pre-war conditions. Therefore the question of compensation will be brought up, and will be quite fairly brought up, and it must be met. How can farmers and landowners be indemnified against loss if the State interferes in the management of their farms and estates, and insists on the compulsory ploughing of land which they think will pay them better in grass than as arable, or for the cultivation of which as arable they do not possess the capital?

A farmer may be farming a farm of 200 acres, half of grass and half of arable, and he may possess an adequate capital to farm such a farm as it should be farmed. But if the farm were suddenly turned into one of 75 acres of grass and 125 of arable, he may not have the capital to farm it properly.

We may be quite sure that in nine cases out of ten a farmer will say, and in most he will really think, that he has been damaged by the change, and two years of war prices and war costs, much less one, would not be sufficient to indemnify him against loss, even if post-war prices did not fall below pre-war prices, in the case of land which a prudent, enterprising man would not have ploughed up before the war.

A landowner may have paid a large sum for laying down land to grass, and the farm may fetch less rent after the war when that land is ploughed up, and he might have to pay a second time for laying down the land to grass. Or the farmer might be willing to continue to cultivate the newly ploughed or reploughed land, but could not do so unless the landowner provided him with an addition to his farm-buildings.

The question of rural cottages was an acute one before the war, and will in any case be no less acute after the war. But what would be the position on a farm where a substantial additional amount of land had been ploughed up during the war, when after the war the corps of State cultivators had ceased to exist? It is quite impossible that any additional cottages should be built during the war.

And in considering the difficulties of compensation the first question which we must answer is this—What are going to be the conditions under which agriculture will be carried on after the war? Will they be generally the same conditions as existed before the war, or will considerations of national safety compel us to put agriculture on an entirely new basis? What I mean is this: If it were to become the settled policy of the State after the war to increase the area of ploughland and to make it worth the farmer's while to do so by the help of a duty or bounty on wheat, the question of compensation would be a small one. But, if the attitude of the State towards agriculture was going to be just the same after the war as it was before the war, the question of compensation would be a large one.

In any case, complicated issues would arise between landowner and farmer and between both those classes and the State, which must be dealt with by local tribunals established for the purpose.

A wholly different group of questions arises out of a consideration of what is to be the nature of the working arrangement between the State and the landowner and farmer during the war. Will the State confine itself to ordering the cultivation of a certain number of additional acres, assisting the farmer in the execution of the order and indemnifying him and the landowner against subsequent loss, but leaving the farmer to settle what crops he shall grow and to conduct his business as much as possible on his accustomed lines?

Or will the State tell the farmer what he is to grow? And in that case must not the State be prepared to take his produce, or certain portions of his produce, from him at a fixed price, after deducting the cost of services rendered, and dispose of that produce itself?

Agricultural wages happily have risen generally and considerably during the war, but I should be much surprised if the intervention of the State in agriculture did not have effects on wages corresponding to those which have resulted from its intervention in the manufacture of munitions.
This statement of the questions which will emerge for solution makes no pretence of being exhaustive; I have only attempted to indicate the nature of some of them.

Part II.—Without Compulsory Powers.

Without resort to compulsory powers there are only two things which the State can do which it has not already done to get more grassland ploughed up and cultivated during the war:

1. The offer of a financial inducement to the farmer of some sort of guarantee in respect of the price of wheat for a given period.
2. The offer of assistance to the farmer of a corps of cultivators, organised as in Part I, for the services of which he would, as in Part I, pay.

This subject was exhaustively considered by a Committee on Food Production last year, and its recommendations—which, for the purpose we are now considering, were quite unanimous—hold the field. A stronger Committee could hardly be imagined. It consisted of—

Lord Milner (Chairman).
Lord Inchcape.
Mr. Francis Acland, M.P.
Mr. Edward Strutt.
Sir Harry Verney, Bart., M.P.
Mr. Charles W. Fielding.
Mr. A. D. Hall.
Mr. Rowland Protheroe, M.P.
Mr. J. A. Seddon.

The following were their recommendations:

"Guaranteed Minimum Price.

4. To obtain any substantial increase in the production of wheat, oats, and potatoes in England and Wales, it will be necessary for farmers to sacrifice the comparative certainty of their present profits, to change some of their methods, to alter their rotations, and to increase their area of arable cultivation in the face of a shortage of labour. In addition they will have to run the risk, not only of uncertain seasons, but also of a fall in the price of wheat at the conclusion of the war. We believe that many farmers would be disposed to make efforts to increase the production of wheat, if appealed to in the national interest. But in order to ensure a general movement in that direction we consider it essential to guarantee a minimum price for home-grown wheat for a period of several years.

5. That such a guarantee would be the only effective method of attaining this object has been impressed upon us, with more or less emphasis, by all the witnesses who have appeared before us. As to the amount of the minimum price and the number of years for which it should be promised, varying opinions have been expressed. But they have not differed very greatly, and the best consideration we have been able to give to the matter leads us to the unanimous conclusion that a guarantee of a minimum price of 45s. a quarter for all marketable home-grown wheat for a period of four years would lead to a very substantial increase in the area of wheat harvested in 1916, and to a further increase in the succeeding years.

Many variants of the form of guarantee have been suggested. I mentioned one in my last paper, a guarantee of 40s. a quarter for four years after the war. But the principle underlying them all is the same.

The Committee suggested the following conditions as a reasonable qualification for the benefit of the guarantee:

"(a.) That a farmer should have increased his area under arable cultivation by, at least, one-fifth over the similar area in October 1913;
"Or, in the alternative,
"(b.) That, at least, one-fifth of his total acreage under grass and annual crops should actually be under wheat."
“In addition to its primary object this proposal has the advantage (1) that farmers who qualify under the above scheme will be encouraged to increase the production on their existing acreage as well as to secure a good crop on the additional acreage; and (2) that farmers will not be tempted by the State guarantee to grow wheat in place of other necessary crops. It would, however, be essential for the Government to make it quite clear that the fractions mentioned in (a) and (b) above represent only the minimum of effort required to secure recognition.”

An additional condition could take the form of a check by the State on the time of year at which the farmer sold a portion of his crop. For instance, a licence of the Board of Agriculture might be required for the sale of more than half his crop of wheat before the month of May.

Summary.

The non-compulsory policy is comparatively simple, and it would certainly produce important results. The Milner Committee estimated that, if it had been put into operation last September, it would have produced an additional yield of 4 to 5 million quarters of wheat in the harvest of 1916. Conditions have changed to the disadvantage of the farmer since this calculation was made and possibly the Committee, if asked the question now, would put the additional yield for the harvest of 1917 at a lesser figure. On the other hand, their calculation was not made on the assumption that the Government would assist the farmer with a corps of cultivators, as I suggest to be possible in this paper.

It would require legislation, certainly in respect of the guarantee to the farmer, and possibly in respect of the enrolment of a corps of cultivators by the Board of Agriculture.

The compulsory policy is a much more serious undertaking. I have only been able to give an outline of the considerations and difficulties involved within the compass of a reasonable memorandum. But I have endeavoured to give the War Committee enough information to enable it to answer the question I have asked. The measure of its success would entirely depend on the selection of the man to carry it out. Given a fortunate selection, I am of opinion that a large and substantial increase might be made in the amount of food produced in the harvest of 1917. An analogous policy would, I suppose, be adopted in Scotland and in Ireland.

But time would be of the utmost importance. If the War Committee decided to adopt this policy I ought to get my instructions now, and the necessary legislation should be passed at the earliest possible moment.

March 16, 1916.

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