

Fabian Tract No. 195.



# THE SCANDAL

OF THE

# POOR LAW

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# THE FABIAN SOCIETY

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## THE SCANDAL OF THE POOR LAW.

FIFTEEN years ago a Royal Commission was appointed to inquire into the working of the Poor Laws and the methods adopted for meeting distress due to unemployment. Its investigations dragged into the light not only the perpetual degradation and misery of a large section of the people, but also the futility and wastefulness of the whole Poor Law system in dealing with the destitute. The system was, and still is—theoretically at any rate—based on the famous “principles of 1834”: (1) that relief should not be offered to able-bodied persons and their dependents except in a well-regulated Workhouse, and (2) that the lot of the able bodied should be made “less eligible” than that of the independent labourer outside. But the Royal Commission found that these principles had become, by the beginning of this century, mere shadows of their former selves. The relief of the able-bodied was very far from being confined to the Workhouse, nor were the pauper inmates always by any means “less eligibly” treated than those outside. The Workhouses for the most part were not well-regulated. They were too often shelters for an indiscriminate host of men, women, and children, able-bodied and infirm and feeble minded, of good character or bad, with little in common except their destitution and their disgrace. In a few cases the old hard theory of deterrence was still applied. In others the Workhouse had been transformed into a palatial institution, whose expensive grandeur served to conceal the wretchedness of its inmates and the stupidity of the whole policy of “parish relief.” If the Workhouse that the Commission examined was, generally speaking, less uncomfortable than it was, and was intended to be, in the middle of last century, it was certainly not less detested. As for outdoor relief, it had, by the pressure of a humaner public opinion, grown to enormous dimensions. It was often given without any proper investigation; it was capricious, and as a rule inadequate for a healthy subsistence, and being, as it frequently was, a mere temporary dole to the chronically destitute, it simply helped to perpetuate a pauper class. Moreover, there was an incredible waste of effort and of money, due to the fact that the Boards of Guardians were everywhere in competition

with other public bodies engaged in making provision for the sick, the feeble-minded, the children and the able-bodied. Overlapping and duplication of administrative machinery was universal, and the development of the good policy of the Local Health or Education Authorities was retarded by the conflict with the bad policy of their rivals, the Destitution Authorities.

Let us look for a moment at the picture which the Reports of the Royal Commission presented.

#### THE PAUPER CHILDREN.

It was found that there were in the United Kingdom some 300,000 child paupers. Nearly 20,000 of these were actually being brought up in the Workhouses, subject to all the demoralising influences which life in such an atmosphere must produce. The birth-rate in the Poor Law Institutions was nearly 15,000 annually, and the infant death-rate was appallingly high. Bad as the Workhouse was as a birthplace, it was often worse still as a nursery. Many of these wretched children were tended by imbeciles, and kept in dark and unwholesome rooms, from which they were seldom or never taken into the open air. Nor was the case of the "outdoor" infant paupers and their mothers much better. The starvation pittance of relief given to expectant and nursing mothers, and the restriction of midwifery orders, spelt misery or lingering death for thousands of women and children. Of the children of school age some, it is true, had a happier lot; for in many Unions they were "boarded-out" or brought up in separate institutions—Cottage Homes or Poor Law Schools. But a great number of the "boarded-out" children were without proper supervision, and paying the penalty of the inadequate sums allowed for their maintenance—sums often as low as 2/6 a week. And the condition even of those in the Homes and Schools was unsatisfactory; for apart from the stigma of pauperism resting on them, their education was impaired by the constant passage of the "in-and-out" children, the indiscriminate mixture of children of different grades of intelligence and the difficulty of getting good teachers.

But the crying scandal was the case of the children on outdoor relief, numbering nearly 200,000. Tens of thousands of these, the Royal Commission reported, were being brought up in insanitary or drunken and immoral homes, while the great majority were chronically underfed, insufficiently clothed, badly housed, and often suffering gravely from want of proper medical attention. It was with a shock of surprise and pain that the public read that many Boards of Guardians were allowing sums of 1/6 or 1/- a week to a mother to provide for a child, sometimes even with nothing at all for herself.



## THE SICK PAUPERS.

"Sickness," said the Majority Report, "is admittedly one of the chief causes of pauperism . . . . We estimate that at least one-half of the total cost of pauperism is swallowed up in direct dealing with sickness. To this burden we must add the indirect contributions of sickness, viz., the widows, children, and old people, cast upon the rates through preventable deaths of bread-winners, and the host of degenerate, imbecile, maimed and blind, with whom disease helps to populate our workhouses. It is probably little, if any, exaggeration to say that, to the extent to which we can eliminate or diminish sickness among the poor, we shall eliminate or diminish one-half the existing amount of pauperism." But the Poor Law system is a system which, by its very principles, can only deal with those who have fallen into destitution. It thus actually deters the sick from getting the earliest and best treatment of their disease, which is hardly the most promising way to "eliminate or diminish sickness among the poor." It was estimated, after an inquiry into the ravages of tuberculosis, that nearly 60 per cent. of the consumptives in the Poor Law infirmaries were paupers because they were consumptives, and not consumptives because they were paupers. The majority of these sufferers come to the Poor Law when their disease is well advanced, and it is too late to effect a cure. Apart from this fundamental failure, due to the fact that the Guardians are compelled to restrict treatment to the destitute, there were particular evils which called forth the strongest condemnation of the Royal Commission. In many Unions there was the "grave public scandal" of the retention of the sick in the General Workhouse. Even where there were separate infirmaries, these, like the ordinary Workhouse wards, were commonly understaffed both as regards doctors and nurses. As for Outdoor Medical Relief, it was shown to be a tragic farce. "From first to last," said the Minority Report, "it has no conception of the Public Health point of view." The parish doctors were generally underpaid and overworked, with the very natural result that the poor could seldom expect proper treatment. One Poor Law Medical Officer, indeed, in his evidence before the Commission, actually stated that "we are forced to treat the people not as patients, but as paupers!"

## THE FEEBLE-MINDED PAUPERS.

Out of the great host of feeble-minded persons maintained at the public expense, it was found that there were "detained in the General Mixed Workhouses of England, Wales and Ireland, and, to a lesser degree, those of Scotland, no fewer than 60,000 mentally

defectives, including not a few children, without education or ameliorative treatment, and herded indiscriminately with the sane." The Minority Commissioners describe how they have themselves seen, "what one of the Local Government Board Inspectors observe is of common occurrence—idiots who are physically offensive or mischievous, or so noisy as to create a disturbance by day and by night with their howls, living in the ordinary wards, to the perpetual annoyance and disgust of the other inmates. We have seen imbeciles annoying the sane, and the sane tormenting the imbeciles. We have seen half-witted women nursing the sick, feeble-minded women in charge of the babies, and imbecile old men put to look after the boys out of school hours. We have seen expectant mothers, who have come in for their confinements, by day and by night working, eating and sleeping in close companionship with idiots and imbeciles of revolting habits and hideous appearance." And besides all these, certified or uncertified, of various degrees of mental deficiency, maintained by the Guardians in the workhouses, there were another 12,000 or so on outdoor relief, all more or less free to produce at the public expense further generations of imbecile paupers.

#### THE AGED AND INFIRM PAUPERS.

The Royal Commission found that the "Aged and Infirm" were a mass of diverse individuals of all ages and of different mental and physical characteristics, making up about one-third of the entire pauper host. The lack of classification, shown in the lumping together in a single category of all these different groups with different needs, was in itself strong evidence of one of the chief defects in the Poor Law administration. For their treatment the majority of the Boards of Guardians made no other provision than the general Workhouse, or indiscriminate, inadequate and unconditional out-relief—"forms of relief cruel to the deserving, and demoralisingly attractive to those who are depraved." In one particular class—the aged—the Old Age Pensions Act, which came into force after the Royal Commission had reported, did, of course, produce a considerable reduction during the following years. But even so, thousands of old men and women over 70 remained still in the Workhouse or on outdoor relief, because they were too feeble or too friendless to live independently on their pensions. And a still larger number under 70 must continue their pauper existence, a very few in the comparative comfort of separate "Homes" provided by a Board of Guardians here and there, the majority in the Workhouse or on doles of out-relief.

#### THE ABLE-BODIED PAUPERS.

In certain Unions the Royal Commission discovered an attempt to carry out the strict deterrent principle of 1834. The "Able-



bodied Test Workhouses," maintained at Manchester, Sheffield, and elsewhere, were little other than penal institutions, employing what were regarded as more brutal and stupid methods than any humane prison system would care to acknowledge; whilst the "Stoneyards," opened in times of exceptional distress, offered a spectacle of the crudest and most uneconomic "relief work." In the majority of Unions, however, the ordinary way of dealing with the "unemployed" was to put them in the "able-bodied wards" of the Workhouse. These were characterised by the Commissioners as "places of sloth and utter degradation of character, will and intelligence." "Of all the spectacles of human demoralisation now existing in these islands," said the Minority Report, "there can scarcely be anything worse than the scene presented by the men's day-ward of a large urban Workhouse during the long hours of leisure on week-days, or the whole of Sundays. Through the clouds of tobacco smoke that fill the long, low room, the visitor gradually becomes aware of the presence of one or two hundred wholly unoccupied males of any age between fifteen and ninety—strong and vicious men; men in all stages of recovery from debauch; weedy youths of weak intellect; old men too dirty or disreputable to be given special privileges, and sometimes, when there are no such privileges, even worthy old men; men subject to fits; the feeble-minded of every kind; the respectable labourer prematurely invalided; the hardened, sodden loafer, and the temporarily unemployed man who has found no better refuge . . . all free to associate with each other, and to communicate to each other, in long hours of idleness, all the contents of their minds. In such places . . . there are aggregated, this winter, certainly more than 10,000 healthy able-bodied men."

There is, however, yet another recipient of the Guardians' hospitality. This is the vagrant. The Casual Wards, where the tramps, in return for a night's lodging and a portion of bread and cheese and water, were put to a useless task of stone-breaking, corn-grinding, or oakum picking (with sometimes incarceration for thirty-six hours in a small cell), were condemned as "brutalising and demoralising." They were, indeed, patently cruel to the honest workman on the tramp for a job, whilst they could do little to deter, and nothing to reform, the wastrel or the "workshy."

#### THE DESTITUTION AUTHORITIES.

Such, then, briefly summarised, was the Poor Law system ten years ago. And such, in its essentials, as we shall see presently, it remains to-day. But there was another significant fact which the Commission laid bare. All this business of pauperism, covering in the course of a year something from one and three quarter million to two million individuals in the United Kingdom

was, and is, administered by 1,600 or 1,700 *ad hoc* Destitution Authorities—640 Boards of Guardians in England and Wales, 154 in Ireland, and between 800 and 900 Parish Councils (with 70 or 80 Poorhouses) in Scotland—at an annual expenditure, out of the rates and taxes, of about £17,000,000. But the Local Destitution Authority, thus trying to cope with the problems of infancy and education, of sickness and lunacy and unemployment, was found to have a whole set of other Local Authorities competing with it in every department. In 1834 the Poor Law was the only public agency for dealing with any form of destitution. By 1909 not one of the five different classes which came under the Poor Law was left to the Poor Law alone. The Local Health Authorities were providing hospitals, dispensaries, clinics, nurses, midwives and health visitors. The Local Education Authorities were giving meals and medical treatment and (in Scotland) clothes to necessitous children. The Local Lunacy Authorities maintained their own asylums, and boarded-out mentally defectives. The Local Pensions Authorities were paying old age pensions, and were soon actually to take scores of thousands of aged persons out of the hands of the Guardians. A Local Unemployment Authority had been created in 1905 by the Unemployed Workmen Act with its Distress Committees, which, by means of Farm Colonies, relief works, women's workrooms, the payment of travelling expenses, and even of the expense of emigration, deliberately set out to save decent workmen in distress from falling into the clutches of the Poor Law. Even the Police Authority overlapped with the Poor Law, with its gifts of clothing out of the "Police Aided Clothing Fund" and (in Scotland) the provision of a night's lodging for vagrants. All this, as we have said, was significant. There was obviously a squandering of public money in maintaining this elaborate duplicate machinery, even supposing that the Destitution Authorities and their rivals were both administering their services as economically as possible. But it was also pretty obvious that the administration of the Boards of Guardians was not economical in any real sense, though it was certainly miserly in all too many Unions. And the very fact of the development of the new services of the Local Authorities, and their steady encroachment on the Poor Law, was a sign that the Poor Law was a failure, and that public opinion was more and more recognising that failure.

#### THE REPORTS OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION.

When the Royal Commission reported in 1909 it was unanimous in its condemnation of the System as it stood, and urgent for large reforms, though as to the practical shape which these reforms should take, there was a division of opinion. Both the Majority and the Minority recommended the abolition of the



Boards of Guardians, and the transfer of their duties to the County and County Borough Councils. But the Majority were in favour of retaining an *ad hoc* Destitution Authority—a Statutory Committee of the County or County Borough Council, practically independent of the Council, though able to draw on it for funds, and appointing Public Assistance Committees to function under it in smaller areas (*e.g.*, Rural or Urban Districts, or groupings of these). The Public Assistance Committee would (in co-operation with Voluntary Aid Committees and other agencies) undertake the executive work hitherto carried out by the Guardians. The Minority Commissioners, on the other hand, were totally opposed to the idea of a Destitution Authority. It was not, they said, merely destitution that the victims of the Poor Law were suffering from. What was required was treatment of each individual according to his special needs. And the proper authorities, therefore, were those which were dealing with a particular class—*e.g.*, the Local Education Authorities, the Local Health Authorities, the Local Lunacy Authorities. Moreover, these authorities alone could, and do, pursue a policy of prevention and not of mere palliation. And the right method of coping with destitution is to prevent its occurrence, and not to relieve it after it has occurred.

Of the controversy that ensued between these two policies it is not necessary to say anything here; it has only a historical interest. It is sufficient to recall that the propaganda set on foot by the National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution very rapidly convinced the country that the Poor Law must be broken up, and its functions handed over to the appropriate Local Authorities. There was, of course, opposition by the defenders of the existing order—the vested interests of Bumbledom, from the President of the Local Government Board down to the ordinary reactionary Guardian or self-satisfied Workhouse official. But the Labour Party was solidly behind the Minority Report, as also were the majority of the Liberals and many Conservatives, and it was confidently expected, shortly before the outbreak of the war, that the Government would legislate.

#### PAUPERISM DURING AND AFTER THE WAR.

With the declaration of war in August, 1914, there was a new situation. The prospect of the Government taking up the question of Poor Law reform was, of course, indefinitely postponed. During the early autumn there was a large increase of distress owing to the rapid and widespread dislocation of industry and commerce, and despite the many agencies, public and private, which sprang into being to combat this distress, a considerable number of people were driven to the Poor Law for relief. The total of pauperism within three weeks of the outbreak of war was

as much as 41,621 higher than that for the corresponding date in 1913, and a month later it had risen by another 115,000. There was before long, however, an equally rapid recovery, and as more and more men were absorbed into the Army or the manufacture of munitions, and with the influx of women into industry, the figures of pauperism decreased. Many of the Poor Law Institutions—workhouses, infirmaries and the like, were taken over as military hospitals or depots, their inmates being transferred to other buildings or boarded out in neighbouring Unions. Nevertheless, there remained a large residue of pauper sick and infirm, feeble-minded, aged and children.

The following figures show the numbers in receipt of Poor Law relief in England and Wales at the end of the September quarter in each year:—

	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919
Ordinary Paupers (in workhouses, institutions and on outdoor relief) ..	641,028	566,725	516,876	483,436	446,665	463,009
Casuals .. ..	5,587	3,799	3,321	1,849	1,195	1,857
Outdoor Medical Relief .. ..	17,521	14,238	14,169	13,661	12,794	12,274
Lunatics .. ..	100,941	102,975	100,182	97,356	90,718	83,172
Total .. ..	765,077	687,737	634,548	596,298	551,262	560,312

It will be seen that the figures for 1919 show an increase. This is due to the dislocation which followed the Armistice and the demobilisation, and resulted in widespread unemployment, with strikes and lock-outs. At the beginning of 1920 the volume of pauperism was clearly returning to its pre-war proportions, and although industrial conditions are more settled than they were a year or six months ago the numbers in receipt of Poor Law relief tends to rise week by week. In January, 1920, the total of indoor paupers in over 30 of the largest industrial areas in the Kingdom showed an increase of 2,642 (or 2·3 per cent.) over that of December, and the total of outdoor paupers (exclusive of vagrants and of persons receiving outdoor relief) an increase of 1,374 (or 1 per cent.). By March there was a further rise of 1·8 per cent. in the indoor figures, and 2·4 per cent. in the outdoor. As compared with a year earlier, the increases were, in the case of indoor paupers, 6·2 per cent., in the case of outdoor, 11·2 per cent. In London there were 9,500 more paupers on April 24th, 1920, than on the corresponding day in 1919.

#### REFORMS IN THE POOR LAW.

But, it will be asked, have there not been reforms in the Poor Law administration in the last five years, and even before the war,



subsequent to the Reports of the Royal Commission? Is the state of the Poor Law as described by the Royal Commission a true picture to-day?

There have indeed been reforms. But let us examine them, and see how much change they have made in the Poor Law system. In the years following the publication of the Reports, Mr. John Burns, then President of the Local Government Board, did his best to whitewash the Poor Law. He admitted that amendments were required here and there; but these could safely be left to him—"the fairy godfather of the poor," as he modestly called himself! He was soon proclaiming that he had introduced sweeping "ameliorations," and that, "if reform by revolution has been denied us, revolution by reform in administration has been most efficiently secured." This revolutionary administrative reform proved, on examination, to amount to very little. An Outdoor Relief Regulation Order was issued, introducing a case-paper system. But in 1912 the doles of out relief in a great number of the Unions were as inadequate and as unsatisfactory as they had been before and as they have been since. Many of the Workhouses were still crowded with indiscriminate herds of paupers, as they had been before and as they have been since. The lot of the feeble minded remained practically unaltered, and the improvement of the miserable Medical Service of the Poor Law only moved by inches. Some of the aged certainly, as has already been said, were being rescued, but the Old Age Pensions Act could hardly be claimed, save in a very ironical sense, as a reform in Poor Law administration. The "able-bodied" problem, except in so far as it was affected by the Insurance Act (which, again, was not a Local Government Board reform) was still the same problem. The hardened tramps, however, were "reformed" by the remarkable device of putting all the twenty-eight Casual Wards of the Metropolis under the management of the Metropolitan Asylums Board. Thus, said Mr. Burns, "we shall be able to keep a register of all the vagrants, and devise a means by which the decent men amongst them can be put upon their feet, re-instated in the industrial sphere, and by which those who are not quite so good can be dealt with either by medical, curative or preventive methods." There is not, it must be confessed, much evidence that these dazzling hopes have been fulfilled. And, in any case, the possibility that the Metropolitan Asylums Board may succeed in rehabilitating a few hundred of these unfortunate wretches and "workshys," is not a very solid proof that the Poor Law is a satisfactory method of dealing with unemployment. In one department certainly Mr. Burns did make some useful efforts, though the process of reform took a long time. He put pressure on a number of the more reactionary Boards of Guardians to move their children from the Workhouses. Even in this, however, he was only partially successful, for a considerable

number still remain to this day in their old surroundings. There was also a Boarding-Out Order in 1911, which did a little to improve the lot of the boarded-out children. But in many Unions it was very far from being honestly carried out. Altogether it is safe to say that Mr. Burns was the only man in the Kingdom who could discern any important difference between the "reformed" Poor Law of 1912 and the "unreformed" Poor Law of 1909!

But there have been further reforms since 1912. It is not worth while to discuss them in detail. We have, indeed, only referred at some little length to Mr. Burns's activities in order to show the hopelessness of expecting any change of the Poor Law system from within. Of the most recent changes two only can be called important. These are the supersession of the reactionary Local Government Board by the Ministry of Health, and the removal, by the Representation of the People Act, of the disqualification which prevented a man from voting if he had received parish relief in the previous year. Both these, it will be noticed, were measures carried by Parliament; both point clearly to the general contempt for the Poor Law and its administration. For the rest, there has been, in some Unions, a better classification of paupers, a slight improvement in the treatment of sickness, and a further effort to deal with the "tramp" problem by the establishment of County Vagrancy Committees (which are, in fact, only local combinations of Boards of Guardians). And there is no longer a Workhouse; it is now generally called "The Institution" (though the name "Workhouse" must still be used for certain legal purposes). This trivial joke, which Bumble and his champions take quite seriously, is again significant of the popular feeling about the Poor Law and its degrading associations.

#### THE POSITION TO-DAY.

What, then, is the sum total of all these reforms of the last ten years? It would be unfair to deny that some Boards of Guardians have honestly tried to remove abuses, and that in the best administered Unions the standard of provision is as high as the law will allow. But in all too many cases the old evils, which were so unsparingly criticised by the Royal Commission, still flourish. The new Institution and the old Workhouse are as like as two peas. Outdoor relief is still, over a large part of the Kingdom, a synonym for inadequate doles dispensed in the old way. The outdoor scales have, of course, risen, but so also has the cost of living, and the old person or widow who receives 10/- or 11/- to-day cannot make it go any further than 4/6 or 5/- would go formerly. And some Boards, despite the great enhancement of prices, have not raised their doles beyond 7/6. The Guardians are little better equipped than they were for the



treatment of disease, for maintaining the mentally defective or for educating children. Many of them, as we have already said, still keep their children in the "Institution" despite the laments of the Ministry of Health. There were, in fact, on January 1st, 1920, over 3,000 inmates of the mixed Workhouse between the ages of three and sixteen (not more than one-third of whom could be said to be there only temporarily, pending their removal to some other place). As for the Medical Service, such reform as has been introduced has been largely superficial, and limited generally to the larger Urban Unions. Even there, it has not been universal. In one important town in the Eastern Counties, for instance, we find the Medical Officer complaining to the Guardians that "the nursing staff is inadequate and insufficiently paid, there are 120 people in the Infirmary, 83 of them bedridden, with only one certificated nurse and about three ward-maids."

Nor is there any sign of the Guardians having performed a miracle for the able-bodied. The Yorkshire Vagrancy Committee had 11,681 admissions to its Casual Wards during the fourth quarter of 1919. The Warwickshire Vagrancy Committee reports for the March quarter, 1920, an increase of 636 admissions over the previous quarter, and of 3,081 over the corresponding figure in 1919. The tramp, in fact, is again on the road, and the grim old farce will be repeated despite the County Vagrancy Committees.

Meanwhile, the encroachment on the Poor Law by the Local Authorities has grown apace. The Local Health Authority has of late enormously extended its provision for infancy and maternity and for sufferers from various diseases, notably tuberculosis and venereal disease. Moreover, it is in many places in open conflict with the Guardians on the question of hospital provision. The insufficiency of accommodation has become a serious problem. Boards of Guardians are asking the Minister of Health to let the ratepayers come as paying patients to the Poor Law Infirmary; for in many of these Institutions there are empty beds, whilst the non-Poor Law hospitals, already over-crowded, have long lists of patients waiting their chance to come in. At Bradford the Poor Law Infirmary has actually been handed over to the Corporation, with the approval of the Ministry of Health, to be run as a municipal hospital, and it seems probable that a similar policy will be carried out elsewhere. The Local Education Authority, with its School Medical service, now doctors thousands of children who formerly were treated (if they were treated at all) by the Poor Law. The Insurance Committees, too, have further diminished the importance of the Poor Law Medical service. And the war gave us yet another authority, the Local Pensions Committee, to add to the confusion.

The ugly picture, then, of the Poor Law system that was drawn by the Royal Commission in 1909, remains in all essentials, if not in its details, a true picture in 1920. There have been

reforms; some of the worst scandals have been removed, or partially removed, and large numbers of the poor have been rescued from the fear of the "parish." But the fundamental cause of the Poor Law's failure has not been removed, and a thousand "administrative reforms" could not remove it. An *ad hoc* Destitution Authority, which cannot take any steps to prevent destitution before it occurs, and which, furthermore, is forced to regard those who come to it primarily as destitute persons rather than as individuals in need of specialised treatment, is a hopeless anachronism. The demand for the break-up of the Poor Law is as urgent to-day as it was ten years ago.

#### FURTHER PROPOSALS FOR THE ABOLITION OF THE POOR LAW.

But that demand has now been strongly re-inforced. In July, 1917, the Ministry of Reconstruction appointed a Committee "to consider and report upon the steps to be taken to secure the better co-ordination of Public Assistance in England and Wales. Its members were: Sir Donald Maclean, M.P. (chairman), Mr. R. J. Curtis, Mr. Robert Donald, Sir G. Fordham, Lord George Hamilton, Mr. G. Montagu Harris, Mr. Spurley Hey, Sir Robert Morant, Mr. R. C. Norman, Mr. H. G. Pritchard, Sir Samuel Provis, Dr. John Robertson, Mr. A. V. Symonds, Mr. J. H. Thomas, M.P., and Mrs. Sidney Webb.

Its Report (Cd. 8917, 1918, commonly known as the "Maclean Report") issued in December, 1917, was unanimous (with certain reservations, which need not be discussed here, by one or two members), and the following are its principal recommendations:

(1) Boards of Guardians should be abolished and all their functions transferred to the Councils of Counties, County Boroughs, and Boroughs and Urban Districts with populations over 50,000.

(2) Provision for all the sick and infirm (including the aged requiring institutional care, and maternity and infancy) should be made by these Authorities under the Public Health Acts suitably extended.

(3) The Ministry of Health should have power, on the application of any Borough with over 10,000 population, or any Urban District with over 20,000, to "direct that such functions as the Ministry may determine" shall be exercised by the Town or Urban District Council instead of by the County Council.

(4) The children should be dealt with by the Local Education Authorities, the mentally deficient by the Lunacy Authorities.

(5) Every County or County Borough (or Borough or Urban District Council with population over 50,000) should set up (a) a Prevention of Unemployment and Training



Committee (on the lines of the Education Committee, and including representatives of employers and Trade Unions) ;

(b) A Home Assistance Committee (on the lines of the Education Committee), to inquire into the economic circumstances of all applicants for public assistance, to supervise them, to administer all relief given in the home, to recover expenses for maintenance, treatment, etc., and to keep a private register of all such applicants and their families and of the assistance given.

(6) County Councils should appoint Committees for Districts or combinations of Districts, to which various functions of the Home Assistance Committee and the Prevention of Unemployment Committee would be delegated.

These District Committees would consist of (a) members of the County Council, (b) Town or District Councillors, (c) persons experienced in the work to be done.

(7) London should have a special scheme, in which the duties would be divided between the L.C.C. and the Metropolitan Borough Councils.

(a) The Borough Councils would appoint Home Assistance Committees, and would also carry out vaccination and registration of births and deaths.

(b) The L.C.C. would exercise the rest of the functions transferred (through its Public Health, Education, Asylums, and Prevention of Unemployment Committees). It would also appoint a Central Assistance Committee, which would lay down policy and rules of local administration for the Home Assistance Committees in the Boroughs.

(8) Poor Law officials should be transferred to the Local Authorities (provided both they and the Local Authorities agreed), and compensated for any pecuniary loss incurred by the change.

(9) The cost of all functions transferred should fall on the new Authority (the Administrative County, County Borough, Borough or Urban District), and in London mainly on the County, except for Home Assistance, which would be a charge on the Borough (but the L.C.C. would repay two-thirds of this, if satisfied of the efficiency of the Borough's staff and administration).

These recommendations, it will be seen, represent the acceptance of the principle on which the Minority Commissioners in 1909 were so emphatic—the abolition of the *ad hoc* Destitution bodies and treatment of each individual according to his needs by the appropriate Local Authority. There are two particular points, however, on which they diverge from the Minority Report, and on these they are open to some criticism.

## UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES.

The first is the proposed local Unemployment and Training Committee. To this the objection has been made that it presents considerable administrative difficulties for the County Councils, and further that, in any case, a County is not a satisfactory area for dealing with unemployment. It must be confessed that there is a good deal in this contention. The problem of unemployment is primarily a national question. It might, no doubt, be dealt with in some measure on a "regional" basis—*i.e.*, by taking a group of counties as a unit. But single Counties are not convenient units. It is worth noticing, however, the exact words of the Maclean Report. It is proposed that the Prevention of Unemployment and Training Committee should supersede both the Board of Guardians and the Distress Committee set up under the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905. It would "exercise the powers of the Council as to (i) preventing unemployment (so far as practicable, and subject to service requirements and due economy) by procuring such a re-arrangement of the Council's rules and services as to regularise the local demand for labour; (ii) facilitating through the Employment Exchanges the finding of situations; (iii) making use of any form of educational training in co-operation as much as possible with the Education Committee; (iv) assisting migration; and (v) creating and administering, whether by itself or in federation with other Local Authorities, any specialised provision of the time required by the unemployed.

The scheme, it will be observed, is not altogether clear, and it is difficult to pass a final judgment until its details are put in a more concrete shape. But this much, at least, may be said. In so far as it means a definite obligation imposed on a Local Authority to play its proper part in the organisation of industry, it points in the right direction. The prevention of unemployment will not be achieved without the carefully devised co-operation of the Local Authorities with the State for meeting the great industrial depressions which unhappily recur every few years. But is it necessary for this purpose to set up a new Committee of the Council, with a separate staff and machinery, and whose function will be not to manage any service of its own, but rather to interfere with those of other Committees? In another aspect, again, it appears to duplicate the machinery of the Employment Exchanges. The Employment Exchange, for instance, is already able to assist migration. Is it necessary to charge a County Council also with this duty? And why this elaborate Committee to "facilitate the finding of situations" through the Employment Exchange? Push the idea but a little further and we shall have other Committees charged with facilitating the getting of Old Age Pensions from the Post Office, or Maternity Benefit from the Insurance Committee! A third point is the provision of training. This, of



course, may be of the highest importance. But it does not appear that the new Unemployment Committee is to maintain institutions of its own, but rather to see that men are properly placed in existing farm colonies, or trade schools or workshops. As for any "detention colonies" that may be created for "won't works," the Maclean Report does not propose to entrust these to the Local Authority at all, but "either to some one existing Government Department or to a special body on which the various Government Departments concerned would be represented." That is evidently right; but it is also evidently one reason the less for the establishment of the Prevention of Unemployment and Training Committee. Altogether, it is very questionable whether a case is made out for this new piece of local machinery.

#### "HOME ASSISTANCE."

Secondly, there is the Home Assistance Committee. Here, again, administrative objections have been raised on the part of the County Councils. The County, it is urged, is not properly equipped for this work; it would be better done by the Boroughs and Districts on their own responsibility. But may it not also be asked whether some of it, at least, had better not be done at all? The Maclean Committee was impressed, rightly enough, by the need of co-ordination among the various authorities giving assistance in money or kind out of public funds—often to different members of the same family, and without any common register of cases. There is thus, they argue, "a complex evil, involving (a) unnecessary expenditure on assistance and administration; (b) unnecessary multiplication at enquiry offices and pay clubs; (c) annoyance to the recipients of repeated inquiries from different authorities; (d) failure in many cases, owing to lack of organisation and staff, to make the payments promptly or regularly; and (e) the temptations to fraud afforded to the applicants by the failure of the overlapping authorities to discover what each is doing. And they add that it seems desirable that to the one Committee, which is to manage all the work of co-ordination, shall also "be assigned certain duties of general supervision, for the reason that it is the only unspecialised Committee and deals with all classes of applicants for assistance in the above sense . . . This supervision should apply to families where any member is in receipt of any form of assistance in money, kind, or service, wholly or partly provided out of rates or taxes, eligibility for which is dependent on the pecuniary need of the person or family concerned, or for which payment is legally recoverable. Have we not here peeping out the cloven hoof of the Charity Organisation Society? Obviously co-ordination, including a proper register of cases, is necessary. But why should this "unspecialised" Committee, on the plea of "co-ordination," interfere with the work of the specialised



Committees? Doubtless, too, some supervision is necessary. But supervision is a blessed word which too often covers a multitude of inquisitions. Why should a whole family be supervised by a new and "unspecialised" Committee, (a goodly proportion of whose members are co-opted "persons experienced in the work to be done"—an ominous category!) because grandmother gets an Old Age Pension, or little Jane a pair of spectacles? Did not the Minority Report, in a word, go as far as was necessary in suggesting a Registrar of Public Assistance to co-ordinate the work of the Education and Health and other Committees? This personage came in some years ago for a large measure of abuse as a sinister bureaucrat. But he would be at least an official with defined powers, with routine functions, and under democratic control. At the very worst, he might have chastised the poor with whips; the Home Assistance Committee, with its co-opted members "experienced in the work to be done," would chastise them with scorpions! The proposal, in short, as it stands, looks suspiciously like a concession to our old friend the professional philanthropist, who, convinced at the bottom of his heart that destitution is a "moral disease," will "learn the poor to be better."

#### THE GOVERNMENT'S PLEDGE.

But these two recommendations are, after all, details, which can easily be modified in the legislation that will abolish the Poor Law. The significance of the Maclean Report is that it heals the old breach between the partisans of the Majority and Minority of the Royal Commission, and unites them in the demand for the complete disappearance of the Board of Guardians. What, then, has the Government to say to this demand? The Government has accepted it. It has promised to legislate at the earliest opportunity. The Minister of Health has continually proclaimed the urgency of carrying out this great measure. When will the opportunity arise? Why not immediately? It is a large question to deal with, but it does not present the difficulties which it presented before the war. The Ministry of Health is in favour of reform, and not, as was its predecessor, the old Local Government Board, against it. There is even less popular support for the Poor Law than there was ten years ago—and there was very little then. A devoted band of reactionary Guardians and Bumbles, great and small, will die in the last ditch to save the system. But their plea for what they naively call the "splendid machinery of the Poor Law," so cheap at the price of £15,000,000 to £20,000,000 per annum, will hardly persuade an infant in arms. Nor will their own proposals for "genuine reform," in the shape of "re-adjusted" local Destitution Authorities "for the purpose of co-ordinating further assistance," commend itself to any intelligent person. The efficiency of such a scheme of



glorified Boards of Guardians is no more credible than the efficiency of the present "splendid machinery." For the rest, the Government has no opposition to fear, and no excuse for its inaction. It is idle to pretend that time cannot be found for this important task; the time of Parliament and of the Government is constantly occupied in less pressing business. No such pretence would be made if the public chose to bestir itself. Let the public, therefore, take careful stock of the facts of the last ten years and the position to-day.

The Poor Law to-day is a crying scandal. It is a scandal because it applies mischievous principles of deterrence where it ought rather to encourage treatment. It is a scandal because it inflicts needless humiliation and suffering upon a vast mass of the poor. It is a scandal because it interferes with the development of good local government. It is a scandal because it expends each year, for an utterly inadequate return, millions of public money. It is useless to tinker with it; it cannot be "reformed." For the system does not fail merely because Boards of Guardians are not doing their duty: some of them are, in fact, doing all that is possible as the law stands. It does not fail because the "wrong people" are elected to administer it. It would fail if all the Guardians in the country were Archangels or Labour men—and that for the very simple reason that it is a system of Destitution Authorities, attempting to relieve those who have fallen into destitution instead of preventing them from falling into it. It is a system which is repellent alike to educationists, to public health reformers, to the victims who suffer under it, and to the democratic sentiment of the age. There is only one way to deal with it, which is to abolish the Boards of Guardians, the Poor Law Unions, and the Workhouses; to make the Local Health Authorities responsible for all the sick, the infants and the infirm aged; to make the Local Education Authorities responsible for all the children of school age; to make the Local Lunacy Authorities responsible for all the feeble minded; to establish such an "organisation of the labour market" and such reforms in industry as will provide, through the State, the Local Authorities and the Trade Unions against the distress caused by unemployment.

All this was recommended by the Royal Commission eleven years ago and again by the Maclean Committee, whose proposals the Government pledged itself to carry out. It is high time to insist that the Government shall honour its pledge.



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