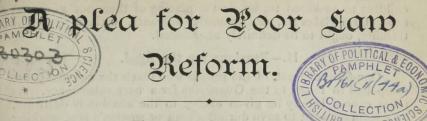
FABIAN TRACT, No. 25.

PROOF



The Need for Reform.

Every day in the year, one million persons or more in the United Kingdom receive relief under the Poor Law.

In the course of every year about three-and a-half millions of separate individuals are thus relieved by the community.

Most of these persons are drawn from the wage-earning class, so that at least one in eight of that class receive Poor Law Relief every year.

The Poor Law, which was designed to alleviate that poverty which is the inevitable product of our present industrial system, itself by its spirit and operation, intensifies and perpetuates the condition known as pauperism.

Whatever be the causes which have driven these millions to the hated doors of the Workhouse, each one of them alike is subject to contempt, degradation, and disenfranchisement.

In order to reduce the cost of our collective provision for the indigent, we study to make that provision so distasteful and dishonourable to the receiver, that workers with any sense of dignity will endure most bitter straits, and even practical starvation, in preference to availing themselves of it. And yet it is impossible for many workers to provide for their own maintenance in age out of the wages they can earn during their prime, and nearly half the number of deaths in country parishes, of persons over sixty, are deaths of paupers.

The time has come for us to make provision, not only for the bare existence, but for the comfort and dignity of the aged, infirm, and orphaned poor. The present system fails to extinguish destitution, often fails even to prevent starvation, and it produces wide-spread demoralisation. It offers positive discouragement to provident saving. It fails to rescue the children from a life of pauperism, and the aged from public disgrace.

Yet we must, for some time to come, count upon having to make provision from the rates, for at least one million people, ninetenths of whom are children, aged, or insane.

We therefore press for

I.-Efficient Education for Children.

They should be kept free from the associations of the Poor House, sent to mix with other children in good public elementary schools, and be carefully taught some highly skilled trade, by which they can fulfil the duties of citizens. The apprenticing of children to unskilled trades, or the placing of them out as errand boys, farm laborers, or domestic servants, without previous training, ought to be definitely abandoned.

II.—Pensions for the Aged.

One-fifth, at least, of the people who reach the age of 65, are compelled to resort to the Guardians for a bare subsistence. As relief cannot legally be given except to the absolutely destitute, all encouragement to save during a man or women's best working years, is withheld under the present Poor Law system. The man who has a shilling a week from his Friendly Society, is legally no better off than he who has nothing. Let the public pension be independent of other incomes, and it will become worth while to subscribe for an annuity of even sixpence a week. Further, those who have reaped the sole benefit of the labor of the working classes, should be compelled to provide for their old age: the classes who absord two-thirds of what the toil of the poor produces, should provide amply for their support and comfort when old and weak.

The aged poor are, in any case, maintained at the cost of the able-bodied workers, and the substitution of pensions for Poor Law relief, would be merely a re-adjustment.

III.-The Treatment of the Sick.

The isolation of infectious disease is necessary for the public welfare; but when 80 per cent. of our households are those of of manual wage earners, when in our great cities, 30 or 40 per cent. herd in single rooms, and as many more in two or three room tenements, neither isolation nor proper nursing are possible in the home.

Every case of serious illness should be treated in hospital.

In London nearly two-thirds of our hospital accommodation is now provided from public funds, and the existing distinction between the voluntary, and the State supported Hospital, ought not to be maintained.

We want in London an elected Hospital Board, managing all public provision for the sick, and the insane, and controlling all voluntary hospitals; thus removing provision for the sick from all contact with Poor Law administration.

In other counties it would probably be found sufficient to give similar powers of hospital management and control to the existing Asylum Committee of the County Council.

IV.—Public Funerals for All.

One-third of our funerals are already paid for out of Poor Law funds. The expense of funerals must necessarily be shared among the living. Free funerals would enable the total abolition of infant insurance, with its accompanying evil of infant murder; and cremation by the State would not be open to the objections which render general cremation in private inadmissible.

³ V.—Abolition of the Casual Ward.

No good service appears to be rendered by our present system of casual wards. The only reform that can be suggested is their total abolition, and a compulsory and corrective treatment of the habitual casual, vagrant, or mendicant, in some kind of "labor" colony. The merely destitute laborer, should in every possible way be assisted to obtain employment.

VI.-Reform of the Administrative Machinery

of the Poor Law, is most necessary, especially in the metropolis. Guardians are elected upon a system of plural voting, each elector having from one to six votes, according to the rateable value of his house. Owners are entitled to vote as well as occupiers, and may even vote by proxy. An occupying owner can give double votes.

Representative Government is needed in administering the Poor Law; that is one man one vote on the County Council register, uniform triennial elections, exclusion of J.P., and other nominated members, abolition of rating qualification, payment of members for each day's attendance, and for their reasonable travelling expenses.

Each Board of Guardians now administers relief, and collects its rates, independently of the others, but in London the cost of the maintenance of the poor inside the Workhouse, Infirmaries, and Schools, the salaries of Poor Law officials, and the expenses of Vaccination, are defrayed from a Common Poor Fund, and divided amongst the parishes in proportion to their rateable value.

This principle needs to be further extended,—but any complete equalisation of the London poor rate, requires an efficient central authority. London wants a single Poor Law Council, which, like its School Board, must spring from the direct election of the people.

The Poor Law Council should retain all power of deciding the principles of administration, delegating nothing to Local Boards of district almoners, but the duty of administrating and granting relief upon these principles.

Political parties have too long neglected the sufferings of the paupers and the degradation of the class, from which they are mainly drawn. They will continue to do so so long as paupers are deprived unjustly of the rights of citizenship, and all voting power in the State. For these reasons—

We must depauperise the children by educating them to become skilled, and not unskilled recruits in the labor market.

We must depauperise our treatment of the aged, by providing pensions for all.

We must depauperise the sick, by completely separating medical and hospital relief, from the Poor Law system.

We must depauperise our parish funerals, by ensuring free funerals for all.

A fuller statement of these facts with precise statistics and references to official documents will be found in Fabian Tract No. 17, The Reform of the Poor Law.

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