



YOUR COAL AND YOU

by
H. NORMAN SMITH

TRACT SERIES No. 259



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H. NORMAN SMITH

*Prospective Labour and Co-operative Candidate
for South Nottingham*

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FOREWORD

The preliminary research for this tract was done by Mr Arthur Blenkinsop, who went into the Army before he could complete his work. We are very much indebted to Mr Norman Smith for stepping into the breach and producing this tract. Whatever policy is eventually adopted about coal production, it will still be necessary to formulate a plan for its distribution to the individual householder. I hope that Mr Smith's tract will stimulate the relevant activity.

JOHN PARKER, M P,
General Secretary.

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Your Coal and You

H. NORMAN SMITH

THIS pamphlet is about coal distribution ; yet I, who write the pamphlet, believe that coal ought not to be distributed at all ! I do not pretend to be a scientist ; but I am persuaded that the British people would get more heating and lighting value out of coal, if it were burned, not in domestic grates, but under power-station boilers, and its heat-energy were distributed in the form of electricity carried into people's homes, not on the backs of husky labourers, but along cables. I do not overlook the enormous potential importance of the gas industry. The conversion of coal into gas, coke and by-products is destined to play a significant part in industry for a long time to come ; but at the moment I am concerned more with the domestic aspect. The electrical method is, to my mind, far more sensible than having dirty, dusty and heavy coal, first cluttering up our railway lines and then being carted round streets for dumping into bins from which tired and overworked housewives must shovel it into scuttles for carrying indoors to fireplaces where sticks and paper have been carefully and laboriously laid. Domestic fires cause lots of labour before they are lit and after they have gone out. Besides, they discharge smoke into the air, polluting it and making yet more work for the women who have to wash soot-blackened curtains.

So far, however, British housewives have shown no very ardent desire to have done with dirty coal and to use clean electricity in its place. Even British industrial chiefs have been slower than many of their foreign competitors to electrify their factories. Very many of them, instead of tapping the electrical grid, prefer to burn coal under their own boilers, with the result that in 1937 industry and transport in this country were using 110 million tons of coal a year over and above the 19 million tons consumed by gas, and 15 million by electricity works ; in addition also to the 35 million tons burned in people's homes.¹ For better or for worse, Britain in days of peace was consuming 182 million tons of coal a year : until, therefore, the British people can be educated sufficiently to appreciate the tremendous advantages which electricity offers them, common-sense demands that British citizens give intelligent thought to ways and means of getting

¹ *Political and Economic Planning*. Report on the Gas Industry in Great Britain, 1939.

all these millions of tons of coal distributed as cheaply and as conveniently as possible. Hence this pamphlet.

WHO HAD THE RAKE-OFF ?

Before the present war people used to wonder why their coal was so dear. They knew they were paying—if they lived in the South, which an increasing proportion of them did—50s to 55s a ton for it, although the pithead price was round about 21s to 24s. Of course, coal costs money to transport; but the man in the street was not far out, as we shall see, when he suspected that ‘middlemen’s rake-off’ made him pay more for his coal than he ought to have done or need have done. Successive war winters eclipsed the ‘dear coal’ riddle with the far more grim enigma of ‘scarce coal’. This pamphlet seeks to explain the methods by which coal gets from pithead to consumer, and to suggest improvements in those methods.

Let us take a look at the structure of the coal distribution business, all the way from the pithead to your domestic coal bin—if you are lucky enough to have such a thing at home! The moment the coal reaches daylight, there is a snag. Coal storage facilities are usually lacking on colliery premises. Few collieries can store more than a couple of days’ output. Confusion therefore results if the railway fails to bring empty trucks back to the colliery as fast as it takes full ones away. Here is the first possible impediment to the smooth working of the business of coal distribution. Demand for household coal is obviously greater in winter than in summer. For ideally smooth working, it would be convenient to have storage dumps either at pitheads or on suitable nearby sites, replenishing themselves continuously throughout the summer, emptying themselves steadily in winter. This would permit an even rhythm of production in the mine, of traffic on the line: yet not until this war were such dumps established by Government, though doubtless they would have been provided long ago if the coal mines had been nationalised. Storage by local merchants did exist in peacetime, but it was not adequate to ensure smooth working or ample reserves against emergency. The ordinary merchant could plead with truth that ‘it would not have paid’ him to rent storage space or tie up money in stocks that would lie on his hands for weeks or months. Storage facilities at most depots and wharves are still primitive—there has been no improvement for years. New and well-planned dumps are needed, close to railway sidings. They should be equipped not only with modern plant to ensure swift and cheap handling of the coal, but also with welfare accommodation—washing, clothes-drying, feeding

facilities. Much winter work has to be done in bad weather, and these things would help make jobs in the coal trade more attractive. Such improvements are, however, unlikely to come about until the coal mines have been nationalised and the whole business of coal distribution reorganised on a nation-wide basis.

THE IMPACT OF SALESMANSHIP

Return to the pithead and survey the chaotic scene! There is much evidence to support the view held by the Co-operative Union, that far too many qualities and sizes of coal are being marketed. There can be, of course, no uniformity about industrial or domestic needs, which (especially the former) are bound to be highly diversified; but the diversity has been quite unnecessarily widened for purely competitive reasons. Before this war, coal merchants' price-lists quite usually showed as many as 40 varieties where many fewer would have sufficed for all practical purposes. The fluent patter of suave salesmen would tickle individual fancies with the respective merits or demerits of this or that coal; and consumers were not infrequently willing to part with good additional half-crowns to get Warwickshire or Yorkshire or whatever happened to appeal to them most. If this needless diversity meant longer coal hauls where shorter ones would have served the consumer's purpose just as well, why! who cared? Confusion was made worse by stove manufacturers whose apparatus was suitable for one grade but not another—a complication reproduced to a formidable extent by the makers of boilers and mechanical stokers used for industrial purposes. Eliminate the purely competitive or 'sales talk' element from these matters, put trained researchers on to the job of ascertaining just how much standardisation can be applied to the grading of industrial and domestic coal without loss of efficiency or reasonable amenity; and the result will be to simplify and therefore to cheapen coal distribution through doing away with needless grading and unnecessary hauling! This result, again, will probably have to wait on the nationalisation of the mines.

In one respect, the war has simplified railway transport of coal. Pooling of waggons has proved effective in avoiding empty haulage and in saving shunting. If this is to the nation's advantage in war, it is no less so in peace; but presumably there will be a return to the old wasteful system unless mines or railways or both are nationalised. Will there also be a return to the old wasteful competition between road and rail transport of coal? Land-sale merchants, without depots to maintain, drew supplies from collieries and, transporting by motor lorry, avoided rail

haulage costs, demurrage charges and short-weight losses. Short weight in itself is a pressing question, described by the Cooperative Union as 'persistent and vicious'. The Weights and Measures Act, 1889, should be amended to require all collieries to weigh all empty waggons before they are loaded, Government or railway inspectors to check the tare and gross weighings, and weighbridges to be available at the receiving end for use at a charge not to exceed a penny or twopence.

Cut-throat competition among collieries has disappeared as a result of the 1930 Coal Mines Act, which brought about centralised selling. The 1936 Act, carrying this change further, provided that colliery owners should establish inland and export sales committees in the various districts. The form and functions of these committees vary from district to district. Lancashire, Cheshire, Shropshire, South Staffordshire and the Forest of Dean have all adopted complete centralised selling, and their experience warrants its extension to all the coalfields. (If the mines were nationalised, this would follow as a matter of course.) Time and labour would undoubtedly be saved if the sales functions of all individual collieries were taken over by the district sales committees. These bodies are empowered under the 1936 Act to fix prices, supervised by the Central Council of Colliery Owners in London, for all colliery sales, both inland and export; also to prepare registers of distributors and to fix terms of resale by wholesalers to industrial consumers. This latter power—which the merchants resent as an encroachment on their own position—has not yet been exercised by the district sales committees. What happens in wartime is that prices are regulated under Wholesale and Retail Price Orders. Increases in pithead prices are subject to Government approval and in practice have been allowed by the Mines Department only when periodical wages ascertainments have disclosed increased costs.

With whom, as things stand, do the district sales committees do business? They sell direct to certain big industrial consumers, such as railway companies; also to two types of middleman—factors and merchants. A factor is a wholesaler who buys in bulk and resells in waggon loads to an industrial consumer or retailer; a merchant is a retailer who buys from a factor or direct from a colliery, and sells to the consumer. Merchants, as we shall see, render service; factors under modern conditions are survivals of doubtful value from a bygone age before telephones had simplified communications. If the coal mines were nationalised, the district sales committees would cut out factors altogether; they would deal directly with industrial consumers so far as they

were able, selling, for the rest, to merchants. To the present Government, support of 'the existing channels of private trade' is a matter of political principle; which explains why Government factories even in wartime usually buy their coal through merchants instead of from the colliery direct. There is, however, no sense at all in maintaining the 'existing channels of trade' whether they serve a useful purpose or not. One hears the excuse that Government factories do not possess the necessary buying organisation to enable them to order direct; but if private firms can make direct purchases (as we shall see presently they do in Lancashire) why should not Government factories do likewise?

The service rendered by merchants is real, though as we shall find, they charge dearly for it. They arrange for delivery from the colliery, for handling and weighing at depots which they maintain, for setting up order offices, running lorries and carts; most of these functions (though not, of course, that of retail distribution) could be performed by the district sales committees of the collieries with at least equal efficiency, and would be so done if the mines were nationalised. Over and above this, the committees could effect great savings in transport which the merchants under ordinary conditions have no incentive to effect—savings arising through planning the shortest rail hauls between colliery and local depot, avoiding cross-hauling.

This picture of how coal distribution works is not quite complete, because collieries usually develop direct sales in the locality of the pithead. Some organise their own deliveries in their own lorries; others hire a transport contractor for the job. Some collieries open their own order offices, sell direct to nearby houses, hawk the coal in the neighbouring streets. Away from the immediate vicinity of the pits, however, direct sales, whether to industrial or domestic consumers, are not the rule, though Lancashire provides an exception. In 1938 the Lancashire Associated Collieries disposed of 528,000 tons of coal direct to industrial consumers and only 124,000 tons through middlemen distributors. Before the present war, no more than one-third of British industrial coal output was supplied direct; the remaining two-thirds went through middlemen, 500 of whose firms are organised in the National Council of Coal Traders (for railborne coal) and a further 117 in the Seaborne Coal Traders' Association (for coastwise traffic).

Merchants claim that their rake-off is small and is justified by the services they render. They say they act as a stabilising force for the industry, helping the collieries in summer by storing coal, helping the consumer with credit while asking none for themselves, and helping colliery and consumer alike with technical

advice. They allege that their charges are moderate. The average operating cost of 100 firms distributing in 1938 a total of 20 million tons of coal was said in evidence before the Monckton Committee to be 8d a ton (varying in individual cases from 6d to 1s 2½d). This operating cost excluded railway rates, depot costs, wagon hire, road haulage, interest on capital, and tax. Significantly, this margin of 8d contrasted with the margin of 4d suggested by the Chamber of Coal Traders. The net average profit of 52 firms was said to be 2½d a ton. The Seaborne Coal Traders published a statement showing their operating costs (exclusive of freight, dues, handling, tolls, interest on capital and tax) at 6¼d a ton average, with individuals varying from 5d to 1s. The average profit of 26 firms was given at 3¾d a ton. These figures should be accepted with reserve, because obviously the middlemen, giving evidence before the Monckton Committee, would endeavour to show themselves in the most favourable light possible. If they exaggerated a little the importance of the services they rendered, and at the same time minimised the extent of the toll they took, well, they would only be doing what you would expect them to do!

CHAOS ON THE GRAND SCALE

The public is well aware that to survey the business of retailing household coal is to be confronted with waste and chaos on the grand scale. Birmingham, with a million population, has a thousand coal merchants; Sheffield's 520,000 people are served by 400. One estimate puts at 40,000 the total number of coal merchants in Britain, with an average annual turnover of 1,000 tons apiece. (Like a good many so-called 'averages', this may not mean very much; because in a large city it is quite usual for two or three very big merchants to do nearly all the business, leaving very many small traders to scramble for what is left.) Some 300 local coal merchants' associations are affiliated to the Coal Merchants' Federation, itself a member of the Chamber of Coal Traders. Competition is intense. A single street in almost any British town may be served by as many as 15 or even 20 different coal traders. Waste is colossal—of labour, of petrol, of tyres! Cooperative societies and the more reputable private merchants afford comparatively decent labour conditions to their employees, but such is certainly not the case with many of the other traders. Moreover, the position is complicated by the incursion into the business during the winter months of hawkers who, getting supplies either from collieries or merchants, earn a bare living by undercutting the established retailers. These casual

vendors have no responsibility towards their customers, whom they serve only at the time of the year when demand is brisk, leaving them in summer to get the coal they want from other traders with more sense of responsibility to the public. This problem became acute during the trade depression that followed the last war, when numerous ex-Service men sought a living in this chancy field.

What do coal retailers make out of the game? Naturally they are secretive on this point, and do not publish their trading figures so that all the world may know the full extent of their gains. Light occasionally shines, however, in the darkest of places; and here are figures given to the Monckton Committee by the Coal Merchants' Federation:

	Reading	Norfolk and Suffolk	Yorkshire
Tonnage sold yearly ..	13,963	19,714	17,427
Buying price at pit ..	24/5	21/6	23/3
Railway rate	12/3	12/3	4/7
Merchant's margin ..	13/8	13/2	12/5
Selling price.. ..	50/4	46/11	40/3
Profit.. .. .	1/3	2½d	1/- loss

And here are figures which do not purport to have been calculated on precisely the same basis and which are therefore not strictly comparable, though they do afford a basis for illuminating comparison. They were submitted to the Monckton Committee by the Cooperative Union on behalf of retail cooperative society members of the Cooperative Coal Trade Association:

	Midland	Northern	Southern
Tonnage	481,497	87,911	785,652
Price delivered Co-op. depot	26/8	28/-	34/3
Expenses	8/9	6/-	10/11
Surplus per ton	2/11	2/5½	2/5½
Selling price.. .. .	38/4	36/5½	48/7½

In comparing these figures it is relevant to set the private merchants' 'margin' alongside the cooperative societies' 'expenses' for the respective geographical areas. These latter, it is true,

are not strictly comparable; but assuming that Norfolk and Suffolk may be compared with Midland, Reading with Southern, and Yorkshire with Northern, we find that the private merchants were working on margins greater than those of the cooperative societies to the tune of 51%, 25% and 207% respectively. Even rejecting the last figure as inadmissible on the ground that like is probably not being compared with like, it still seems beyond all doubt that the private merchants require margins considerably in excess of those which content the cooperative societies. Unless and until the merchants choose to take the public more into their confidence, therefore, the public will not unnaturally conclude that the merchants' excessive margins allow for hidden items such as directors' fees that might more reasonably be classified under the heading of 'profits'. But it does not need the publication of trading figures to convince people that a coal merchant gets far more out of the business than a coal miner gets. Coal miners do not generally live the lives of affluent middle-class people, residing in comfortable homes, running motor cars; coal merchants quite generally do these things, and the public will draw the natural conclusion—that merchants' rake-off makes coal dearer than it need be.

HOW TO CHEAPEN COAL

How then can consumers free themselves from the toll levied by coal merchants? The first and obvious method would be for the public to change over from the private merchant to the cooperative society. In 1936 the Cooperative Movement's share of Britain's retail coal trade was only 13.8% (in the current rationing period, cooperative registrations for rationed goods account for roughly one-quarter of the population). There are many districts where the cooperative society does not bother to retail coal at all. It is purely a matter for speculation what would happen if the voluntary effort, devotion and enthusiasm ever put into Labour and Socialist political activity had been diverted to the purpose of extending cooperative trading. What is quite certain is that great numbers of politically-conscious working people in this country have not yet awakened to the vast possibilities which mutual trading offers them of taking direct action against the capitalist system. What is no less sure is that the cooperative societies for their part have not always made the most of modern advertising and publicity devices, or bent their energies as fully as they might have done to the task of making their localities 100% cooperative. Their policy has always been to sell at roughly the same prices as the other merchants, relying on the

dividend to attract new customers. It may well be that, if they would sell at the lower prices made possible by their lower costs, they could increase greatly the number of their customers. It stands to reason that, if the cooperative societies could drive the private merchants out of the coal business altogether, coal would be cheapened because, apart altogether from the cooperative dividend on purchases, apart also from the lower margins to which the cooperative coal-distributing concerns work, the effect of monopoly would be to get rid of the terrific waste involved when numerous competing dealers serve a single street. And there can be no conceivable objection from the consumers' standpoint to a cooperative monopoly, which returns its trading surpluses to consumers as dividend on purchases, while holding quarterly or half-yearly meetings at which consumers may state publicly any grievances they may feel against the directors whom they themselves elect from time to time.

FASCIST TENDENCIES IN BRITAIN

What else might be done to cheapen coal distribution? The Chamber of Coal Traders in evidence before the Monckton Committee recommended a reduction in the number of distributors through the slow method of restricting entry into the trade. To debar new entrants by law would, of course, mean conferring a legal monopoly on the people already in the business—a form of industrial organisation bearing a distinct resemblance to the Fascist State. Before the present war, the British 'National' Government's agricultural marketing legislation tended in the same direction; moreover, the collieries had begun to organise themselves on the Fascist model, enjoying—while uncontrolled—statutory powers conferred by a sympathetic Government on a reactionary and restrictive-minded collection of iron and steel interests and business men of Victorian outlook. Thus the restriction project is not so fantastically impossible of achievement as a healthy-minded citizen might at first suppose. But the Cooperative Movement, to its credit, strongly opposes this view that the distributive coal trade should be made a legal monopoly of the existing traders, or at least of a limited body of traders. All it asks is that any new entrants to the coal trade, whether private firms or cooperative societies, should be required to accept the full responsibilities of coal distribution on a permanent basis all the year round, conforming with a defined standard of labour conditions. There is much to be said for this, but it does not meet the problem we are here investigating, namely, how to cheapen coal distribution by eliminating the waste inherent in present methods.

ECONOMISING MAN-POWER

During the past few months traders themselves have been considering moves designed to anticipate possible Government action to economise man-power through ordering the block distribution of coal—that is, putting an end to competitive deliveries in the same street. One proposal was to parcel areas out among the existing traders, each to take over a volume of custom proportionate to the trade he had been doing in the past. In this way, a given number of streets become the monopoly of a certain trader. Actually, an elaborate organisation was set up in the summer of 1940 to do this very job; but in the 2½ years which have since elapsed it appears there are not more than two or three localities up and down the country where anything effective has been achieved. This organisation has proved itself to be one of the most effective pieces of camouflage the war has yet produced. There is not the faintest likelihood of block distribution being done on anything like a large scale voluntarily by the traders themselves, who make no secret of their detestation of it on the simple ground that it would set a limit to their future opportunities of making profits through interfering—doubtless permanently—with the goodwill they have established or the consumers' inertia of which they have taken advantage. How far, then, would it be possible to enforce block distribution by Government action against the will of the traders concerned? The justification for such enforcement would be the pressing need to release petrol, rubber and man-power; and already a Government Committee under the chairmanship of Lord Perry has recommended block distribution as a means of economising labour in milk distribution.

Lord Perry proposed that the distribution of milk should be confined in any given rating area to two concerns only: the one, an amalgamation of all the local private firms already competing in the business; the other, the local cooperative society. A local rating area is now suggested as the geographical unit for block distribution as applied to the case of coal, because the rating authority is the body appointing Local Fuel Overseers under the Fuel and Lighting Order of September 1939; and, of course, if something like a monopoly of coal distribution is to be created, there will have to be control by the local authority. Revisions of the 1939 Order have been made from time to time, but its main features remain. Consumers register with their customary retailer and retailers in turn register with the Local Fuel Overseer. It is here suggested that Local Fuel Overseers should be given power to compel all the retailers in their area to join a local amalgamation of private coal merchants, placing at its disposal depots, transport

and stocks. Similarly cooperative coal merchanting in the area would be compulsorily unified if more than one cooperative society were already operating. In the case of the private amalgamation, profits would be distributed on the basis of the proportion of the trade done by each in a datum period; but there would have to be an adjustment in respect of the labour conditions accorded by each. Some private coal merchants pay higher wages than others, while a few—a very few—give their staffs occasional bonuses and even make superannuation provision. Such items, properly regarded as distribution costs, would have to be allowed for in computing the share of each of the amalgamated firms. In the amalgamation itself, labour conditions would have to be levelled up to a recognised minimum agreed nationally or by districts between employers and Trade Unions. The trading figures, state of stocks and all other relevant particulars of the amalgamation's (as of the cooperative society's) operations would be open to the inspection of the Local Fuel Overseer, whose powers would have to be extended to enable him to take any steps he saw fit to ensure supplies being adequate and to prevent anything like favouritism in the treatment of customers. It would be obligatory on the amalgamation (or cooperative society) to procure its coal from the nearest source where stocks were available.

Such is the outline of the scheme which, whatever its imperfections, does at least afford the opportunity of bringing something like order out of the present chaos of competitive coal distribution. One great merit of the scheme is that, given war conditions and the imperative need of economising man-power, no obstacle stands in the way of its accomplishment.

MUNICIPAL DISTRIBUTION ?

You may ask at this point : why not give local authorities power to go into the business of coal delivery? Certainly there is little difference from the organisational point of view between, on the one hand, the house-to-house collection of domestic refuse, and on the other hand the door-to-door distribution of coal. No one in his senses would suggest seriously that municipalities should abandon the collection of garbage and leave the job to be done by competing firms seeking each to make a profit by charging householders every time they lifted the contents of a dustbin! Indeed, if the distribution of coal were beginning for the first time tomorrow in a Britain where coal had never been distributed before, the job would fall to the local councils as a matter of course. But with the present party complexion of the House of Commons there is little chance of permissive powers

being given to local authorities to organise the distribution of coal in their areas, even though it were proved positively that such a measure would help the war effort. Even a House of Commons with a strong Labour majority could not hope to legislate the private merchants out of existence by handing over the whole business to local authorities to run as a monopoly. The most a Socialist Parliament could do would be either (a) to give municipalities permissive powers to engage in coal distribution—in which case most of the local councils would do nothing about it because, having Conservative majorities and therefore being opposed in principle to interference with private profit-making, they would regard such powers as iniquitous; or (b) to give local authorities compulsory and monopoly powers, in which case the expropriated merchants would have to be compensated. Much, of course, would depend on the compensation terms. It is usual in such cases to capitalise the trader's actual profits over a period of years, on the assumption that he might reasonably have expected to go on making the same profits for the future, if he had not been expropriated! In the case of coal distribution, however, it is quite reasonable to assume that every coal merchant in the country may be driven out of business in the predictable future, due to technological progress which may well substitute electricity for coal alike in domestic and industrial establishments, or which may stimulate the domestic use of coke and other smokeless by-products of industrial processes. So recently as November 9 last, the financial columns of *The Times* reported Dr C. A. Stine, scientific adviser to the du Pont organisation (an immense American industrial firm), as saying that war compresses into three or four years the scientific progress that would normally require as many decades. The present, therefore, is certainly no time for compensating dispossessed coal merchants whom technology may dispossess without any compensation at all. If, as is quite possible (and certainly desirable) the immediate post-war period is going to see the nationalisation of the coal mines and the development of a unified and nation-wide fuel and power policy, surely the better business for the nation will be to keep out of coal distribution and aim at supplanting it by distributing to consumers their heat, light and power in the form of electricity conveyed over wires.

In the light of the foregoing considerations, one is driven to the conclusions: (i) that, if the coal mines were nationalised, some of the waste and cost of distributing coal would be avoided through direct sales to industrial consumers or to merchants, avoiding factors altogether; (ii) that so long as retail coal distribution continues, everything possible should be done by propaganda

and publicity to direct coal through cooperative and not private merchanting channels; and (iii) that national well-being requires the education of the public to use electricity, and not coal at all. A particularly hopeful approach to (iii) is to popularise all sorts of electrically-worked domestic labour-saving appliances, and to sell them on easy terms either through cooperative societies or the showrooms of electricity distributors. This last consideration raises the question of the dweller in flat or tenement who usually has little or no storage space for coal and who, during the shortage that marked the bitterly cold winter of 1941-42, often found herself at the mercy of dealers whom not even tips could induce to carry coal to upstairs floors. The ideal remedy is, of course, for such consumers to do without coal and to rely on electricity, which is by no means so costly as is commonly but erroneously supposed. Where tenement dwellers insist on having coal they are forced by lack of storage space to buy in small quantities. The dealer or hawker from whom they usually buy is a jobbing contractor who hauls coal only at winter peak periods. Such traders could hardly be incorporated with the merchant's local amalgamation as envisaged above—if only because they have little or no permanent capital to put into the pool. Yet in the past they have served a useful purpose by taking up part of excessive seasonal loads and acting as a line of defence for small consumers. If block distribution is to be enforced, these traders will have to be registered with the Local Fuel Overseer who, to avoid overlapping of distribution, will allocate districts to each. Coal will be supplied them only on the authority of the Local Fuel Overseer.

THE LUCK OF THE WEATHER!

It is no part of the function of this pamphlet to examine the reasons why coal was in short supply during the winter of 1941-42 or to criticise the Government's policy with regard to calling up miners for military service and not releasing them from the armed forces; but one thing stands out crystal-clear: there can be nothing like a fair distribution of heat and light in the absence of rationing on the basis of family needs. Nor can there be any fairness in rationing based on the previous consumption of a given household. To ration on the basis of previous consumption is to hit poor people and those who have been careful in the use of light and fuel. The only fair system of rationing is one based on the needs of so many people living in so many rooms. Sir William Beveridge's Fuel Rationing Scheme issued early in 1942 (not to be confused with the subsequent and more widely known

Beveridge 'security' report) was a workmanlike attempt to contrive a rationing system based on personal need. Admittedly it was complicated; but how could it have been otherwise when fuels in common use are so varied as to include coal, oil, gas and electricity? The scheme aroused the bitter opposition of the classes whose ample means enable them to use light and fuel prodigally and who would therefore favour either no rationing at all, or rationing based on previous consumption. These people's opposition, focused by the Conservative 1922 Parliamentary Committee, forced the withdrawal of the Beveridge rationing plan by a Government mainly Conservative in its political complexion. Nevertheless, so long as war industry continues to make heavy demands on Britain's coal resources, there is always the serious risk that a severe winter may find domestic coal in short supply. Given short supply or even the possibility of it, rationing is the only insurance against gross inequality of sacrifice and intolerable personal hardship.

There is only one sensible way to correct maldistribution, and that is to allocate supplies on the basis of ascertained consumer needs. Since the winter of 1941-42 some improvement has been brought about, due to the collaboration of cooperative and private trade organisations through the House Coal Distribution (Emergency) Scheme, working with the coal supplies officers. The allocation scheme is, however, incomplete as it does not work effectively in relation to district and depot supplies and to merchants' requirements. There is therefore yet no complete scheme of distribution that can be considered fair to all merchants and consumers all over the country. Even in divisional allocations there is the defect that estimates of area requirements are made by Divisional House Coal Officers who do not work to any common formula. The Beveridge Fuel Rationing Scheme, or something very much like it, would have had to be implemented by now, amid something like panic and confusion, but for the supreme stroke of wholly unpredictable good luck through which the opening weeks of 1943 were marked by mild and even genial weather! This happy fluke saved the Government from the contempt into which its surrender to the Conservative 1922 Committee might well have brought it, as a consequence of the widespread misery the poor would have endured if January and February had brought severe weather: much more important, it saved Britain and her allies from the calamitous impact of coal shortage on the war industries. This winter, indeed, we have been lucky; but history will record the Conservative 1922 Committee's opposition to rationing as among the less creditable incidents of the war.

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PAST AND PRESENT

G. D. H. COLE

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