

X

## The Food Problem in Canada

The fact remains that the United Kingdom may find itself in a serious situation before next harvest unless the masses reduce consumption by more than 5½ per cent—their record up to date

By W. W. SWANSON, Ph.D.

Criticism is the breath of politics as competition is the life of trade. And yet both can be overdone. It has been discovered that competition carried to excess destroys itself and business with it; and similarly criticism, if it does not contain constructive suggestions, is as effective as beating the air. Mere fault-finding has never accomplished anything; and the leaders in Canadian public life, burdened as they are with the most terrible responsibility ever thrust upon the Dominion's statesmen, require consideration and not a little sympathetic encouragement on the part of all.

Mr. Hanna, in particular, fronts a serious situation, and carries heavy responsibilities. It is not to be expected that he can accomplish wonders overnight; or that he is, in fact, a Wonder Worker or Medicine Man. His great good sense, his resistless energy, and his analytic mind have carried him far in social service in Ontario; and all intelligent citizens expect that, if given a fair interval of time, he will tackle his present job with both hands and accomplish something worth while. It is distressing, however, to note that each time Mr. Hanna issues an order bearing on the food situation in this country, the interests concerned immediately clash with him, and determinedly seek to override his decrees and judgment. Witness the reception given to his recent decision to prevent the further sale of package foods. Either Mr. Hanna and his advisers have given due consideration to this particular question, or they have not. If they have, no protest should move them from their purpose; if they have not, they are unfit to control and manage so vital a governmental department. We are convinced that the former is the case. Mr. Hanna should stick to his guns.

Sometimes one becomes hopeless and discouraged over the general attitude of the masses of the people in this country with respect to their attitude to the war. Beyond peradventure it has remained largely a spectacle—a far-off struggle that concerns Frenchmen and Russians, Germans and Turks, but that does not touch Halifax or Vancouver. Despite the anguish of those who have lost sons and brothers, the majority of the people continue to look upon the war as a great show. The repulse of the Italians, and their staggering losses in men and materials, surely should have saddened and solemnized the most lighthearted. But these events scarcely moved us. It is imperatively important to know in our inmost hearts that Lloyd George is right—a thousand times right—when he warns his countrymen in particular, and the Allies in general, that the present generation may live to see the destruction of civilization and the resurgence of barbarism. But what has this to do with the food situation?

### A WARNING.

Mr. Hoover, a week or two since, warned the American nation that France, with respect to many basic food materials, was on the border line of want and misery. Italy has temporarily given way before the sledge-hammer blows of Von Mackensen, because socialism has made rapid headway in the nation and has evidently tainted the armies. The spread of socialism, and also anarchism, at least during this period of stress in the Peninsula, is almost entirely a problem of food and coal. Little has drifted to the outside world concerning the riots last July in Turin and Milan; but sufficient is known to shake the equanimity of every thoughtful Canadian. Italy must have food, coal, and other vital materials if the nation is to preserve its morale, and the army its fighting vigor. Lack of food, more than any other factor, has brought paralysis to Russian arms. The United Kingdom itself, despite assurances from Mr. Lloyd George and other publicists, faces the most trying situation in the dearth of necessary food supplies, and the constant diminution of shipping facilities. The British harvest this year is below the average, and Lord Rhondda is gravely concerned for the future. In view of all these undisputed facts the Canadian people must be jarred into a full realization of their import, and of the absolute necessity of curtailing consumption, eliminating waste, and speeding up production of food supplies if Potsdam is to be prevented from throttling the democracies of the world. Surely no one could face a more difficult and try-

ing situation than a Food Controller, whether in Canada, the United States, or in Europe. The United Kingdom has been the most successful of all the belligerents in solving quickly the problems raised by the war; but the food problem yet presents almost inextricable difficulties. A short time ago the 4-pound loaf was fixed at 9-pence, following the fixation of meat prices. To Canadians, the price of bread in England seems very low; but it must not be forgotten that the Government has promised to make up any losses ensuing to the bakers by subventions secured from taxation. Notwithstanding all that has been accomplished, however, the cost of living continues to soar in Great Britain. At the end of August retail prices showed an advance of 25 per cent over retail prices in August, 1916; and an advance of 106 per cent over similar prices at the outbreak of war. It is to be observed that this 106 per cent increase is reckoned on a budget fashioned on a pre-war dietary; but it is reasonable to assume that the British people have effected certain economies in consumption. As the Labour Gazette (British) points out, if eggs were omitted from the dietary, margarine substituted for butter, and the consumption of sugar and fish reduced one-half as compared with consumption before the war, this percentage of 106 would be reduced to 67. The rise in the cost of living of a working-class family since the outbreak of war—including in that cost rent, food, fuel, clothing, light, etc., and increases due to taxation—is estimated by the London Economist to reach at least 85 per cent.

The rise in the cost of living, however, does not so much concern us as the providing a living itself to British workers and soldiers. Lord Rhondda has recently issued a solemn warning to the people of the United Kingdom that all is not well in the food situation, and that supplies of foodstuffs must be conserved. To use Lord Rhondda's own words, it is his policy "to fix the price of those articles of prime necessity, over which I can obtain effective control, at all stages from the producer down to the retailer." As is well known British prices, so far as they are fixed for food or the raw materials of industry, are based on the principle of allowing to the producer and to the middleman a reasonable profit based upon pre-war estimates. Prices, even when so restricted, are bound to be a good deal higher than they were at the outbreak of war. The reason is simple. To quote Lord Rhondda further, we may say that he finds that prices are high because of "inflated currency at home and inflated prices abroad, these being constant factors in the rise of retail prices; the former arising from the vast quantity of loaned money, the latter from a genuine world shortage owing largely to increased consumption by the armies in the field." It may be added that prices are high in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, not only because of these factors but because of the shortage in the world's harvests.

### A SERIOUS SITUATION.

As has been remarked we are not so much concerned, however, with high prices, as with the providing of Great Britain's fighting and working forces with adequate food supplies, as also those of her Allies. It is true that the withdrawal of 25,000,000 men from production to engage in the business of destruction has required the providing of a reserve army, at least equal in numbers to the first, to keep it provisioned and munitioned. This in itself has caused some falling off in food production, at least in the ordinary output of foodstuffs in every belligerent country. The loss of tonnage has also seriously affected the European situation—but after all these factors are well understood and lie on the surface. British statesmen are most concerned with impressing upon the people the urgent necessity of economizing in consumption, else the submarine may become fatal in its menace to national safety. We may feel cheered at Mr. Lloyd George's strenuous defence of his government's management of the food problem; but the fact remains that the United Kingdom may find itself in a serious situation before next harvest unless the masses reduce consumption by more than 5½ per cent—their record up to date.

Lord Rhondda has been severely criticized for not effecting greater economies in food consumption, on the one hand, and for neglecting to check suf-

ficiently profiteering, on the other. It is more than suspected in England, indeed, that this cheap 4-pound loaf was meant as a sop for the working classes, and to stifle the growing resentment against food plunderers. However that may be, it is well to point out that merely cheapening the price of food will not, in itself, remedy the situation—the conserving of food supplies. In fact, it will have the quite contrary effect. The United Kingdom is swiftly approaching a point where price control must go hand in hand with a wide rationing system.

### IN CANADA.

Turning directly to the situation in Canada and the United States, we find that as yet—aside from high prices—the people do not realize the vital bearing of food conservation on the winning of the war. It must never be forgotten that prices and profits are of quite secondary importance; the great fact to keep before us is the furnishing of food to Great Britain, France and Italy. Mr. Hoover, the American Food Controller, has accomplished much of value by direct action in that direction. He has recently furnished France with sugar, and is now turning all his attention to the obtaining of essential supplies of wheat, bacon and fats.

It must not be overlooked that both Canada and the United States, essentially democratic in outlook and government, are ill adapted to dealing with the problems arising under price fixation. Where drilled and dragooned Germany failed, it can hardly be expected that individualistic nations will achieve immediate success. Germany, owing to her long history as an absolutist State, might have achieved success, even conspicuous success, in fixing prices if the right methods had been pursued. But Germany failed dismally, because her organization and methods were, for once, at fault. As will be recalled the German government first fixed maximum food prices; then commandeered all food supplies; then put restrictions upon consumption; and finally forbade the feeding of wheat and other supplies, fit for human consumption, to animals. If Germany had tried all these methods at one and the same time she likely would have succeeded. But when the farmers discovered that they could make better profits by feeding wheat to cattle and swine than by selling it on the open market for human consumption, they naturally did so. Upon the Government's preventing this action, the farmers slaughtered their animals. Meat became for a brief period almost a drug on the market, but only for a period. There followed great dearth in meat products, and fats became unobtainable. When food supplies were commandeered, it was discovered that production fell off; so that one device after the other abjectly failed. Germany finally adopted all these expedients; but the barn door was locked after the horse had been stolen.

### STABILIZE PRICES.

Mr. Hoover is endeavoring, along with Mr. Garfield—American Fuel Commissioner—to profit from Germany's mistakes. The United States has been trying to stabilize prices, rather than to fix them, especially in the matter of foods. This is done by investigating conditions in the several local communities, and by preventing extortion on the one hand, and needless regulation on the other. It is interesting to note that Mr. Garfield has handled the coal situation with conspicuous success. Coal prices are fixed at the mines, as are profits to coal retailers. After October 1, retail prices were fixed in every community, on the basis of the cost of production at the mine, the cost of transportation, and a reasonable profit to the retailer. In Canada, Mr. McGrath has notified retailers not to charge prices that will give them profits in excess of 50 cents per ton—a reasonable regulation for all concerned.

In the United States the government, under the Lever Act, has placed the most drastic powers in the hands of the President to do all things necessary to control fuel and food prices. Indeed, the President can cause to be done simultaneously everything that Germany has attempted to do serially. As everyone must know, under this provision, maximum prices have been fixed for sugar in the United States, during the period of artificial scarcity while France was being supplied. It strikes us, notwithstanding Mr. Hanna's doubt, that much can be accomplished in the Dominion to the same end. Profiteering must be smashed, among the little men as well as among the food barons. Investigations, undertaken by the Boards of Trade and other local bodies, working in harmony with the Food Controller's committee and local producers, can and should do much to determine fair and reasonable prices in this country. The most imperatively important problem, however, is to bring home to the people the absolute necessity of conserving food supplies. And this cannot be done by price regulation alone. If education will not do it, the card system will have to be introduced.