

Our Obligations to the Returning Soldiers

R. O. WYNNE-ROBERTS.

At first sight the above subject may not appear to have much connection with municipal politics, but on closer study it will be found that there is a very intimate relation between the two.

Firstly: We must have international security against future troubles because the price of money and, therefore, the economy of the construction of municipal undertakings are materially affected by political disturbances. Peace must be firmly established for recrudescence of strife only means disastrous results to all concerned. Secondly: Returning soldiers must be employed, for unemployment will not only be harmful to the men, but will also cast a monetary responsibility on the municipalities, which cannot be accepted at present without a demur. Thirdly: The returning soldiers will constitute most valuable assets to the municipalities and must therefore be kept in the country. Unemployment will be conducive to migration to other places and countries where work can be found.

Much has been written and said about our duty to the returning soldiers, and without doubt, the public appreciates that everything possible should be done to help them. This obligation, however, seems to be left to the Dominion government and by then more or less developed to the Provincial governments and Municipal Authorities. There are, of course, organizations and commissions created to attend to the consideration of how best to deal with the question, and we must acknowledge that a great deal of excellent work has been and is being done on behalf of the returning soldiers. But the great and vastly more important problem of how to deal with the returning army (not small detachments of more or less disabled warriors) is still a matter awaiting solution.

Our popular scheme is to place the soldiers on the land. It is even suggested by some that war widows should also be similarly placed. Theoretically the idea is good, for there is ample room for colonization of settlers; land is available in the northern part of the provinces. Some derelict farms are waiting for tenants, and the life is healthy and vigorous, and good from a national point of view; yet, there are so many things to consider in this connection.

Soldiers Must be Assisted.

The unoccupied land for the most part is virgin, it must be cleared and broken, homes will have to be built, roads will have to be made, and rivers crossed, and the new settlers will have to maintain themselves while the above work is being carried on. Many of the returning soldiers, and of the war widows are not familiar with the rough life of settlers, or have agricultural experience, they will probably have little or no capital, and, moreover, even if immigrants have in the past voluntarily undertaken such work, and lived such lives, is this a just recompense for the hardships, sufferings and tribulations the soldiers have already endured on our behalf? Are they to encounter difficulties and fight circumstances which are new and severe? The soldier after many months of shifting from camp to camp, battle to battle, passing through stirring periods, seeing changes succeeding each other, surpassing any kaliedescope exhibition for variety and excitement, is not all prepared for the lonely, isolated life of a farmer. How then, are they to be induced to take up farming? The soldiers must in some measure be assisted. He must be placed on land that is reasonably ready for cultivation, he must have a shack-home within convenient reach of neighbors. In other words, it means the colonizing of the land by the establishment of communities. Somewhat on the lives of some villages in the West, created by Austrians and Russians, where some town life is enjoyed, the children can attend schools in comfort, the families can have free commercial, social and religious intercourse with each other, where a government farm instructors will be available to guide and counsel the soldier-farmer in his new vocation as to how best to conquer natural difficulties in the redemption of the land and building up comfortable homes and prosperous careers.

The proportion of men and women who will take to farming will absorb but a part of the multitude who must be considered. Agriculture and its allied industries must, and will constitute the backbone of Canadian development. There must, nevertheless, be other industries to provide employment for those who, for various reasons, will not be able to go on the land.

Suppose that peace was to be declared, say on November 1st — that is three months hence — then even the settling on the land, will be out of the question until the following spring, and if the soldier-farmers have to clear and break the land, what chances have they of reaping a harvest sufficient to carry them through the following winter? Even assuming that they will have the equipment and capital to carry out the work. Munition work will cease with a jolt. No European government will spend a cent more on instruments of destruction, for construction will have to be undertaken instead. They will set about to rehabilitate the hundreds of village and towns which have been ruthlessly destroyed, and normal industries must, by some means, be re-established or the conditions will then be worse than can be anticipated.

A New Canada After the War.

It will require time to re-arrange our industrial organizations and to re-constitute the former methods of employment of men and women. Almost everything will have to be re-cast, because Canada after peace will be different from Canada in pre-war days. All this will require time to develop, meanwhile the army of 300,000 men will be returned with despatch, for the ships will be urgently required to resume their ordinary business of ocean carriers, instead of as transports. The governments will cease spending the fabulous sums of money on munitions and will then begin to contrive methods, by which their huge debts are to be repaid. Money for enterprises will not be easily available except at increased rates. European countries will require enormous capital to place the refugees in what were formerly their homes, and to help them to restart life again, but fortunately no part of the British Empire has been seriously damaged, although there will be much to do in other ways.

We have commissions appointed to find out ways and means of helping our soldiers to make a living, but so far as published reports go, not many practical schemes have yet been announced. There is no doubt that the people generally are thinking deeply how to assist the warriors and furthermore, what individual citizens can do to assist when the occasion arrives, will be done most heartily. Still, so far as co-operative federal provincial and municipal schemes are concerned, which after all must be the primary methods of helping the returning soldiers to resume civil duties there is very little known.

We may be optimistic as to the future but optimism, excellent as it always is all circumstances, will not alone find the wherewithal to live, and even if the foregoing observations may be somewhat dimly tinted, it is well to be ready for such eventualities. If the future reveals better conditions we shall be that much more pleased.

In concluding my observations it may be well to state

Industrial Suggestions.

some of the ideas which have engaged my thought in this connection. I would like to see some of the captains of industry combine together to undertake a small share of rebuilding the devastated towns in the war zones. I have been advocating this plan for many months, and hope to see it develop. Materials will be required in huge quantities. Cement, pipes, doors, windows, paint, lumber, skill, vehicles, machinery, pumps, electrical goods, etc., etc., can be supplied by Canada. My idea is that a number of firms might form complete combinations, so as to be mutually assistful. The German idea of syndication, without its powerful methods, could be adapted, so that the combination could carry out the rebuilding of any village. Such an organized scheme would find employment at home for a large number of employees and the benefit derived therefrom would have its reflection on other Canadian enterprises. It will not do to leave such a scheme until peace is declared, for it would mean a serious loss of time to organize. Secure contracts and start work. I have given this scheme considerable thought and approached some firms a few months ago, but it was then too premature. The position is much more promising to-day.

The municipal authorities will doubtless do all they can, for their own sake, to create remuneration employment of the men, because failure in this direction will only mean a heavy burden on the rates to keep the families. Remunerative employment does not necessarily suggest a one-sided proposition, it is meant to imply remunerative from both sides — to the municipality as well as to the men.