

Protection as a Boomerang

The disposition to cast all one's burdens on the government is destructive of character in any population

By J. W. MACMILLAN.

They are passing resolutions in Regina calling upon the Dominion Government to guarantee a minimum price for wheat for several years in advance. I can imagine that eastern Canada will regard such a proposal as an alarming innovation, suggesting governmental action on novel and perilous lines, foreboding new-fangled policies of interference with industry filled with possibilities of harm. It will excite in many minds that quality of fear which attaches to the vast and incalculable; no one can tell what will follow from it, and no one can be sure that immense injury to the whole country will not follow from it. It appears so new, so revolutionary, so completely a reversal of the whole course and trend of legislation in the past, that it is to be regarded with doubt and dread.

Whereas, the fact is that such a proposal from the wheat-growing areas of Canada is the natural and inevitable consequence of governmental action in Canada during the last generation. It might have been foreseen by anyone who took the trouble to forecast the future. Now that it is before us it is an easy matter to discern the political habits by the logical operation of which it has been produced. Canada has educated herself in that direction.

For one thing, we have been trained to expect the government to assist our industries. Such is the meaning of the tariff which, with slight differences, both of the old parties accepted and enforced. So has it been with railways, banks, and such industries as cold storage and steel making. Manufacturers have commonly not been content with the advantages of customs protection, but have sought bonuses and exemptions from municipalities. Industry has never been self-reliant in Canada. We have toyed with "Manchester principles," but we have forsaken them in our practical undertakings. It has come to be the national habit, as soon as any business enterprise became self-conscious, for it to, make a pilgrimage to Ottawa, and ask for special privileges. And, to the same extent, it has become the legislative habit for the government to lend an attentive ear to their pleadings. Is it not to be expected that the farming industry, now that it is growing self-conscious, should follow the well-worn path of social habit?

LESS SELF-HELP.

For another thing, the appetite grows by what it feeds upon. The more state-help is given, the more will it be sought. The more state-help, the less self-help, is the inevitable result. No protected industry ever asked for less protection, but many of them have asked for more. No railway ever returned any of its land grants to the public. An industry is like an individual man; if he discovers some easy way of making money he will try to develop that way of making money. He will turn more and more from the old, toilsome way of hard work, to the more delightful and lucrative way he has discovered. The results are not happy for the character of the man, but he follows the path of least resistance, none the less. Now, the wheat-grower has had a taste of government guarantee of price. It is true that it is rather a fixing of a maximum than a minimum. He is not making more money to-day because of it than he would be making if it did not exist. Nevertheless it is a higher price than he ever got in times of peace. He is rich as never before. So as he looks forward to the end of the war and the return of normal conditions he foresees wheat dropping far below the \$2.21 which it now brings. Why not seek for state-help? It is what the manufacturing classes, whom he commonly distrusts, have done, and it promises to preserve his prosperity. The argument is wonderfully convincing.

FOR THE STRONG.

Again, governmental favors are not for the weak, but for the strong. It has been the closely-organized associations, with money and votes at their backs, which have been able to make governments listen to them. The man with the hod and without a dollar has stood little chance compared with the man who speaks for a large voting community, backed by the importance and weight which goes with the possession of funds. Well, the western farmers are now strong, both in organization and wealth.

They spoke with authority in the last election. They have their representative in the Cabinet. They are discussing politics in all their conventions. As Germany has found in the break up of Russia a chance to impress her resolute will upon that country, so the break up of the old parties in Canada has given the wheat growers a similar opportunity. Conscious of having been neglected by legislation for many years, esteeming themselves the victims of former days, what wonder that they show a disposition to assert what they consider to be their rights, now that their voice is being listened to!

I am not trying to estimate the likelihood of the resolutions recently adopted at Regina become the united demand of the prairies. It is too soon for that yet. Nor am I pronouncing upon the merits of the respective policies as to whether governments should "interfere" with business or not. That would take me into a political region which I do not wish to invade. My interest lies in the social situation which is revealed by such happenings as I am now discussing, and which, in my belief, have been commonly overlooked in our country.

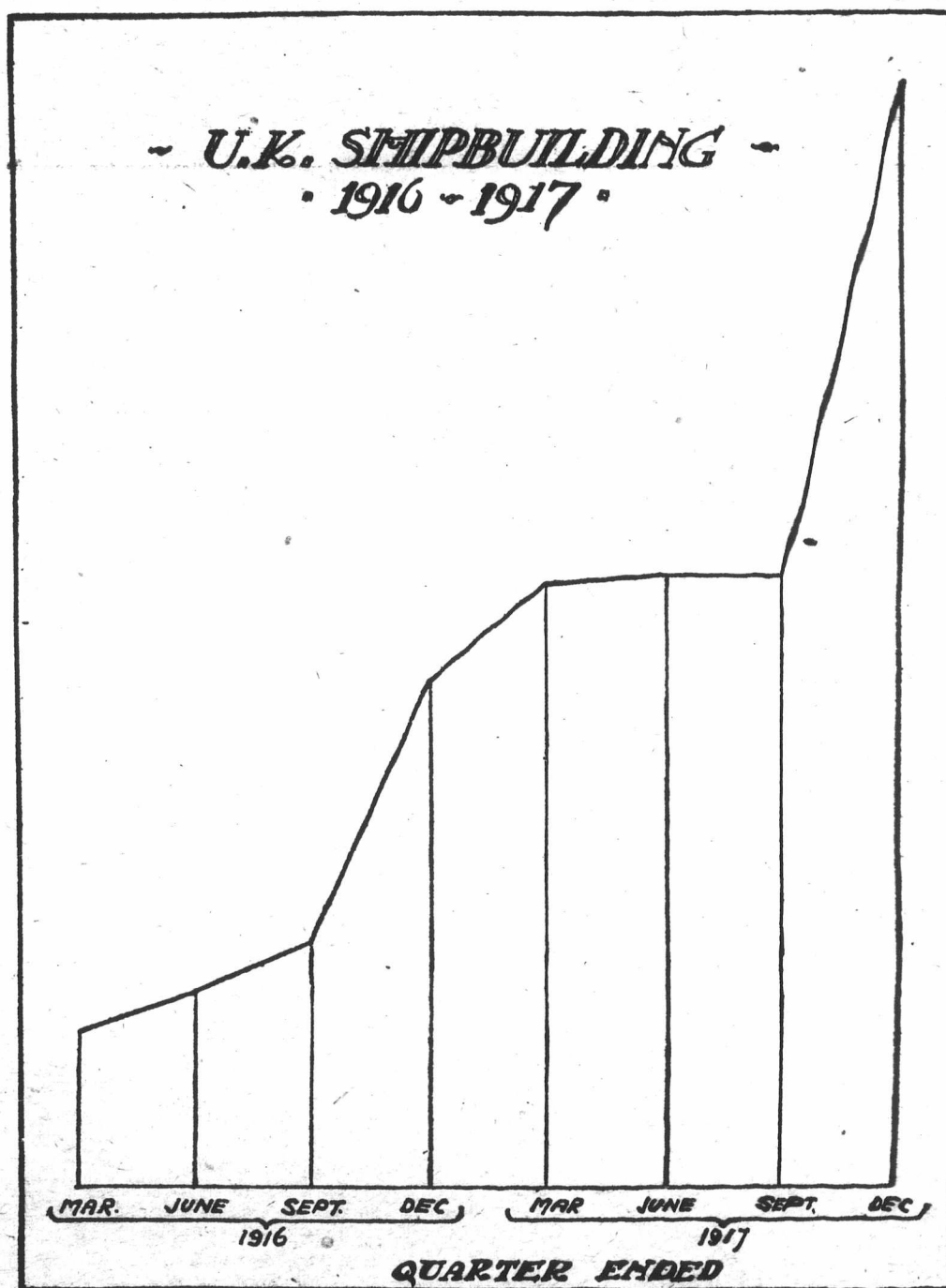
GOVERNMENT CONTROL.

All who are interested in social welfare are at one in looking for an extension of government control of industry. They see that without laws regulating hours, conditions of labor, and wages for the weaker classes of workers, there will result such a lowering of the standards of living, and such a de-

gradation of human life, as must react injuriously upon the people of the nation. So far, then, I am not one of those who hold to the police theory of government, and am prepared to be sympathetic to governmental assistance to private enterprise where the results will be of general social benefit.

At the same time it is impossible to ignore the fact that governmental action tends to weaken the fibre of the individual spirit. A nation which is all government is a weak nation. The social organization of a people should include many vigorous departments besides the political. When religion leans on the state it grows rancid. When art leans on the state it decays. And when industry leans too hard on the state it loses those qualities of enterprise, courage, self-resource and self-reliance which are the very life-blood of all human activity. In the long run the prevalent supineness will react upon the government itself. You cannot get golden conduct out of leaden instincts.

Economic poverty is one thing and sociological poverty is another. They generally go together, for the latter will infallibly produce the former. We call sociological poverty that incapacity on the part of the people to organize and discipline themselves in innumerable forms of association for carrying on industrial and commercial activity. Co-operation and the division of labor are what transform raw materials into human wealth. Without these no abundance of material resources, no accumulations of capital, no possession of ingenious machinery will enable a community to amass riches or to live in material comfort. These two forms of association depend on the characters of the associating individuals; upon the volume of desire, ingenuity, persistence, courage, sociability and honesty which they possess. The disposition to cast all one's burdens on the government is destructive of such character in any population.



HEIGHT OF BRITISH SHIPBUILDING.

The diagram shows the maximum reached in the United Kingdom shipyards at the close of 1917. Later figures given by Sir Eric Geddes emphasize the need for greater effort.