

Housing in Great Britain

Shortage of men to build houses more formidable obstacle than even the increased cost of materials — Three Housing Acts have been passed in a year

By J. W. MACMILLAN.

Lord Roseberry, in a famous speech, once said that Britain had a way of "muddling through" her difficulties. The expression deserves to be discounted as a rhetorical figure, used within the most intimate circles of the national family. The rest of the world may not use such licence of speech. The story of the political career of the little island called Great Britain is not the story of a muddle. It is not a story of blundering and luck. It is rather a story of compromise, of feeling the way, of courage to do new things when they had to be done. It is the kind of action which is neither doctrinaire nor reactionary.

A new chapter, of the same character, is being written today in respect of housing. For, while, all the world groans and suffers from a shortage of houses, Great Britain is the only country which has evolved and launched a genuine programme of national house provision. Other lands have offered subsidies, or cheap loans, or allowed exemption from taxation, or forbidden the raising of rents, or passed angry resolutions denouncing the greed of landlords. But Britain is the solitary land which has a scheme at work which honestly promises to put roofs over the heads of her homeless citizens.

Of course, the war stopped all ordinary building. And the prodigious increase in the cost of building prevented the normal activities of house-construction being resumed after the war was over. During the period preceding the war 100,000 houses had been built each year in Britain, to take care of the normal increase in population and the substitution of new houses for those destroyed or worn out. Thus, when the armistice was signed, and the British people felt free to take stock of home conditions they computed that they were 500,000 houses short.

Even in peace times this would have been a formidable prospect. To multiply the output of one association of trades by five immediately and suddenly would have called for an exertion of labor and capital almost, if not altogether, out of the question. What then could be done in the very crisis of the upheaval and destruction caused by the war? The building trades had lost 200,000 able-bodied and skilled men by reason of the war, or one-fourth of their working-force. Moreover, the cost of materials had advanced enormously. Existing buildings had been neglected for five years. It seemed as though this preliminary item, of the repair of the houses in use, would more than exhaust all the efforts of the building agencies.

It was apparent that the government must come to the rescue. When private enterprise fails, and the thing is necessary, the state must act. The average man seldom observes how many services of this nature have passed, one by one, from private hands into state management. The building of houses seems to be in process of transition now from being a matter for unaided performance by private parties to being a state affair. The government of Britain set about feeling its way (or "muddling through" if you like) to the solution of this overwhelming problem.

Three successive Housing Acts were passed within a year. To examine these in turn to see the fashion in which this process of feeling their way was begun, continued and ended in this particular juncture.

The first act was passed in July, 1919, even before the armistice. It laid the responsibility of initiative and decision as to the form of scheme to be employed upon the local authorities. The government insisted that they should provide housing for the working-people of their districts. The government undertook to guarantee the local authorities against substantial loss, and kept for themselves the control and supervision of the schemes which the local authorities should adopt. It was found that this programme was ineffective. It broke on the rocks of finance. The local authorities were unable to raise the money needed to start their schemes.

Accordingly, the second act was passed, in December, 1919. It gave new powers to the Ministry of Health, under whose control the whole housing enterprise had been put, by means of which grants could be given to persons or associations who would build houses for the working classes. The grants were to be proportioned to the cost of the house, and ran from £130 to £160. The houses thus subsidised were to conform to certain standards, as to size, location, and the like. There were to be no more than 20 to the acre in cities, nor 8 to the acre in the country. Thus the government sought the co-operation of private enterprise. It was natural enough, when private builders had been aghast before the enormity of the problem, that the government should have turned in other directions for aid. But it became apparent that the builders, after all, were the people who could build if they received sufficient help. But this second act did not succeed in starting any general amount of house-building. The grants offered were too small.

Hence, a third act was passed in May, 1920. The grants were increased, in each case, by £100, so that they now run from £230 to £260. And the housing department was widely decentralized, so that administration offices have been established in many parts of the kingdom. It had transpired by this time that the demand for houses was much greater than had been estimated a year before. Not half a million, but eight hundred thousand houses were required to give decent lodging to the nation.

It is only a couple of months since this third act became law, and the information I possess is not right up to the minute of writing, but it seems probable that the needed houses will be built. By the middle of June plans for over 200,000 houses had been sanctioned, and contracts had been signed for the erection of more than half of them. There will be 100,000 new houses before the winter sets in. Housing Committees have been formed in a number of places, the local authorities have taken courage, the Manchester Building Guild is at work, many individuals are asking for the grants, and so, in one way and another, the foundations are being dug and the walls going up.

An interesting feature is the device being generally employed by the local authorities for raising the money. They are issuing local housing bonds, of £5 denomination, running for short terms, and appealing to the local loyalty of their taxpayers for their purchase. The result has been very favorable in some localities. In London, for instance, £500,000 was taken up within two weeks. Without doubt the entire

amount of five millions will be underwritten by the people of the city.

As was to have been expected, a comprehensive study of the whole problem of housing the nation opened up a number of questions of great interest in themselves.

One of these was the tenement or apartment block question. Some advised that overcrowding in the bigger cities should be relieved through vertical rather than lateral expansion. In other words, they urged the construction of multi-story buildings, and would have made the streets of London resemble those of New York. The Ministry of Health commented on this proposal thus:

"It has been represented that it would require no interference with existing industries, and that the piling up of the population in lofty buildings would enable considerable open spaces to be left below, which could be used as recreation grounds for children or as parks and gardens. Nevertheless, we are convinced on the evidence before us that this system is quite unsuitable for a working-class population who are dependent on their own efforts for domestic services and the care of their children."

Never was the tenement house system condemned in a milder fashion. A study of the tenement commissions, vexations and sorrows in such a metropolis as New York would have given a severer tone to the paragraph quoted. But the decision was right, however placid the grounds upon which it was reached.

Another interesting question is the factory in the city. It will probably amaze many ambitious city-folk in Canada, who plot and toil to draw manufactures to their beloved cities, that in Britain they are trying to keep the factories out of the cities, and even to remove those to the country which have unfortunately gotten into the cities. The proper place for a factory is a "Garden City." There have been such in Britain for some years, and they have proved their worth. Limited to a population of from thirty to fifty thousand, with an agricultural belt surrounding the urban area, and the residential section kept free from the factory section, the ideal situation for a manufacturing plant is to be found. There is a strong movement in England looking to the eradication of factories from cities. Commerce and business are to be retained in the central area, but the factories are to be located on the outskirts, or installed in the garden cities.

"Housing," a magazine published by the department of that name, says in a recent issue,

"In London, especially, the removal of factories is a matter of great importance in view of the growing urgency of the traffic problem, which is almost as serious as the housing problem itself. From the manufacturer's standpoint there are sound reasons for removing his industry into the outskirts, where land is cheap, especially in cases where expansion has become necessary; business and commerce (as distinguished from industries) will continue to be concentrated in the central districts. Another desirable result would be to retard the encroachment of commerce on housing, and thereby reduce the total amount of new housing to be provided."

The most obstinate problem of all is that of the slum. The few efforts which have been made to reconstruct slums have accomplished nothing worth while. Better houses seem to invite another class of population, and the evicted slum-dwellers crowd into some other slum, making it still more unspeakable than before. The Ministry of Health points out that the slum problem involves with it questions of housing, transport and industry. These have not yet been dealt with in connection with each other.