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The Government as Publishers

From "The Blue Book Monthly."

The British Government is the largest publishing firm in the Empire, and in respect of the finish, the advertisement, and the distribution of its wares it is the most unbusinesslike. By the expenditure of a small annual sum in advertising its publications, seeing that they are easily obtainable throughout the trade, and sending out review copies, their sale might be increased tenfold. Why these things are not done we do not profess to know, but one may suspect that it is merely because it has been made no one's business to look after them. Yet the Government's responsibility to the public in this matter is great. The development of political intelligence and social consciousness depends in no small degree upon the manner in which the social enterprise of supplying the raw material of political thought is conducted. The first need, no doubt, is to stimulate the imagination; but the humbler task of supplying the material for the awakened imagination to play upon is scarcely less important, and we are entitled to demand that it should be done with at least as great a measure of efficiency as is displayed by the private purveyor of, let us say, novels and biographies. Mr. Edmond Holmes, the former chief inspector of elementary schools, made the distinction between "information" and "knowledge" one of the principal bases of his criticism of our system of popular education. Perhaps the same distinction is at the root of many of the difficulties of the self-expression of the whole nation in its political life. There is too much dilution of knowl-

edge into information, and of information into something worse. We must learn to take our national publishing more seriously if the democracy of forty-five millions in these islands is to know itself. It is the duty of the Government not merely to publish reports, returns, and statistics, but to publish them in a form and in a manner which will make them as accessible as possible to every intelligent citizen. Primarily, the object of such a policy is the political education of the people; but as an incidental result, the net cost of official publications might be substantially reduced by a more enterprising attempt to induce the public to read them.

In this connection the history of the Reports of the late Royal Commission on the Poor Law is particularly instructive. The authors of the Minority Report issued a special edition thereof clearly printed and in octavo form, convenient to handle. Of this special edition some 13,000 copies were purchased by the public, and its popularity induced the Government to take the unprecedented course of printing and issuing an official octavo edition of both reports. The total Government sales (including sales of the original folio edition) up to March, 1910, amounted to 8,130 copies of the Majority Report, and 8,450 copies of the Minority Report. Thus the publication, advertisement, and sale of an independent edition of the Minority Report not only stimulated the official sales of the Majority Report as well, but actually resulted in more official copies of the