

Housing And Health

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I cannot begin this subject without a few words of retrospect, and these are presented to emphasize the fact that Governments and people have neglected the words of warning and counsel which health experts have handed out to them in the past and politicians have turned a deaf ear to their suggestions, not only in Great Britain, but in Canada as well. Then, when confronted with the facts at a time of great national peril, they have suddenly become enthusiasts and even have posed as apostles of a new movement, forgetting, in their eagerness to do something, those who have, in a not very distant past, warned them of the very dangers which heretofore they would not even admit as existing in this country.

As great an authority as Sir John Simon, Medical Officer of the Privy Council of England, in 1866 wrote:

"When overcrowding exists in a sanitary sense, almost always it exists even more promiscuously in certain moral senses. To be subject to these influences is a degradation which must become deeper and deeper for those on whom it continues to work, to children who are born under its curse, it must be a very baptism into infamy.

These and other words even more pronounced on the evils of unsanitary housing were uttered more than half a century ago, and in the five decades which have elapsed, there have been those interested in the health of the nation who have repeated the warnings with emphasis—all to their credit—but they are forgotten and now the politician seizes on the facts when he is awakened from his Rip Van Winkle sleep, and takes all the credit to himself of making a great discovery.

Having made the discovery and been suddenly cast into the sea of difficulties which have grown up around him by reason of his failure to grapple with the problems of national vitality, like an inexperienced swimmer he flounders around and catches at the straw of "town planning," with the fond hope that this alone will solve the incalculable difficulties which menace our very existence as a nation.

After having put their hands to the plough, let me express the hope that they will not repeat the mistakes made by some governments who, in the past, were misled, and who, in turn, misled the nation into believing that they had stemmed the tide of national degeneration and that there was no such thing as physical degeneration of the people.

For note, as recently as 1904, the politicians of Great Britain were advised by an Inter-department Committee on Physical Deterioration as follows:

"The Committee thinks it well to state at once that the impressions gathered from the great majority of witnesses examined do not support the belief that there is any general progressive physical deterioration."

"Rookeries are being dispensed, enclosed yards opened out, cellar dwellings and back to back houses disappearing, etc.

At that time, also, the President of the Royal College of Physicians of London, said:

"The great progress made during the whole of the Victorian era has tended to preventing a general national degeneration."

The actual conditions were revealed in 1916, just twelve years later, and thus the general impression of witnesses both of church and state were shown to be as worthless as fallacious.

We pray God history may not repeat itself in this respect, rather that the people shall demand of governments—action—not voluminous blue books.

Nothing has been so emphasized during the war as the necessity for raising the physical standard of our population. The statistical records obtained under the Military Service Acts of the medical examination of men between the ages of 18 and 45 revealed such an alarming condition of physical unfitness as to call forth from the Prime Minister the grave warning that we could not hope to run an A-1 nation on a C-3 population.

What the Canadian Government has to report on the subject, I cannot state, as, up to the present time, it has not been possible for me to obtain the figures, but an American official, who has apparently been able to obtain

inside information, recently stated in Ottawa that they would be found higher than those of the United States. If so, they are a severe reflection not only on the government of Canada but upon the people themselves. We cannot ascribe the results to density of population, for the Government offers lands to all and holds out inducements to the people in Europe to settle in our midst. What is a population of eight millions scattered over our vast Dominion? That we have overcrowding of the most up to date variety in all of our cities is a fact, and, what is most to our discredit, is that we are doing virtually nothing to either stop the onward progress of unsanitary housing or to investigate or improve existing slum conditions. Whilst it is a fact that social welfare activities are seen everywhere busy treating the victims of these vile slum conditions, we are forgetful of the fact that we should aim at the annihilation of the slum home. Though there are several contributing causes for the C-3 population, it cannot be gainsaid that among the most important is bad housing.

Concentration of population in towns and de-population of the rural districts is one of the deplorable characteristics of modern civilization, and Canada is not one whit behind the older countries of Europe in this particular. Indeed, for so young a country of such vast area and small population, we are, in my judgment, the greatest offenders in this particular.

It is desirable and it is possible that all human beings should have ample air space surrounding the places in which they sleep, live and work.

As the individual is the unit which must be considered in discussing any problem of national efficiency, so the house or home is the unit to be considered in any town planning scheme which may be devised, and, as the house is the home or place where the majority of our people reside, in former days we said where people "lived," it is essential that we consider the effects for either good or ill that urbanization has upon health.

To begin with, the house may be an isolated one and bear no relationship to its neighbor, or presenting no conditions for ill due to contiguity. It may, however, possess structural defects or be so situated as to be an unhealthy house, i.e., a house which will, if used as a dwelling, prove a source of detriment to the health of those who reside therein.

Continuing the illustration, this house may prove to be a source of danger when in isolation, but let it become the nucleus of a village, then a town and later a city, and, by reason of the environment, those conditions having a tendency to effect the health of the one family which found a home within its four walls, are made infinitely worse, as the population without becomes more dense, and, in most modern instances in this country, the number of families within its four walls increases even at a greater ratio than the population in the environment.

There are several natural gifts to men which are given for his health, amongst them are light, air and water. These three, under normal conditions, are unbounded; they are the birthright of every man, woman and child in Canada, theirs by right of birth as sons of God. They are God-given for man and are not the peculiar property of the wealthy or the leisured classes, a fact which, in our modern community life, we have almost forgotten, although we sometimes strive to give the public good water, endeavoring by expensive processes to purify what was once of natural purity, but has become contaminated by our failure to prevent pollution. We have permitted the factory waste, the human and animal excreta to gain entrance, and pay the price for our faults in the way of expensive filtration plants; or, what is still more shortsighted and, in my judgment, criminal, rely solely on the feeble protection, much vaunted by those to whom a certain small class of the community would rely for health protection, of the so-called sanitary engineers, who tell that chlorination is the do all and the end all of purification. I am afraid to say that I am not one of those sanitarians who believe in this method as a process to be permanently relied upon, and would urge that, under