

The Part of Food Control in Reconstruction

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There are plenty of people in Canada to whom the word "reconstruction" is as meaningless as general mobilization and German depravity were in 1914. We do not see it, therefore we do not heed it. But reconstruction is as essentially part of what will come after the war as the restoration of our fighting men to their homes. Both must be organized, must be planned beforehand; they cannot be left to a haphazard chance. Things foreign to the British Empire as conscription was as late as 1915 are now integral parts of the national mode of thought.

What part can food control take in the vast remaking of Canada when peace once comes? It is hard to predict; as hard as it was in 1914 to predict that we should in 1918 be living under food regulation which runs from the Bay of Fundy to the White Horse Pass. We shall have to demobilize these food measures. Like the demobilization of the army it must be done with foresight or confusion will result. Indeed, it is conceivable — one hesitates to speak more than suggestively in things which are so new — that the number of those who must be fed from North America in the first few months at the close of the war may be greater than we have yet comprehended, and may demand even greater effort than we have to make at present. Food in Russia to-day borders the starvation stage. But we have at least the unction that we cannot reach these people; so we face no duty apparently. But when the means of entry are available, who shall say that our duty to feed a vast part of the 150,000,000 Russian people will not be as clear as to-day it is to feed the Belgian people? Then we know that until after the next harvest, when the returned soldiers have had time to settle into their home occupations, we cannot speak of a sufficiency of food in France, in Italy, in Great Britain, in Serbia, in Roumania, even in Bulgaria and it may be Turkey, while it is certain that the neutral countries, Holland, Denmark, Sweden and Norway will be in sore straits.

Under its authorization by the War Measures Act, the Canadian Food Board can only continue six months after the declaration of peace. One may imagine in the light of new conditions that that term will have to be extended. It will certainly be impossible to re-establish anything like normal conditions within so brief a span. Apart from this, there is the certainty that voluntary effort must continue. Restoring the world's food will take much longer than one season. Whether it would need a Food Board to direct what measures would then be necessary is another question. The essential thing is that we have come to regard food control and food rules which run into every home as a new factor for many possibilities in Canada.

The subject divides itself into two — the foreign phase, one of vast importance during the first few months following what we may predict will be the new Treaty of Berlin (more than the Disraeli-Salisbury pact, one of "peace with honor")! and the domestic phase, one of greater importance as the years roll on.

Canadian people have learned to eat less, to become more fit thereby, to eat more economically. They have learned to vary their diet more. They are less tied now to an all wheat, all white bread than formerly. They thus give a better chance to the small mixed farmer to make a living. This will tend to make the country more prosperous, and, in a small way, stem the rush of the rural population into the cities. In turn it will mean closer settlement, particularly in our Eastern districts, better farming and better roads, with all those amenities of civilization which today, above all epochs, are the consequence of good road travelling through the cheapening of motor cars. Then we have a new self-reliant feeling that city and near city gardens can be profitably worked; we have disabused the minds of people about the limitations of climate in producing vegetables, and we have got the Canadian-born to a point of enthusiastic self-help in horticulture which hitherto was the mark of the British newcomer. These surely are acquisitions which we cannot afford to lose the moment peace is declared.

Food control has so many advantages that it would be well if we could say it had come to stay. One among them would be its immense importance in solving some of the problems of poverty. That there will be poverty in some

districts immediately following peace, few people will deny. Everyone knows that money lightly earned is lightly spent, and despite the increase in the Savings Bank deposits, one may question whether it is commensurate with the unprecedented prosperity of the last twenty-four months. If, in wartime, we believe in actual saving of food through better distribution, through the avoidance of waste, were it not absurd to throw away that knowledge at any time? We cannot in decency take the short-sighted stand of the charity school boy, quoted by the Elder Weller, who doubted after he had learned the alphabet whether "it was worth going through so much to learn so little." If saving our national resources, saving child life, saving man-power (the term includes the new and mighty power of women), are part of our national reconstruction, it seems logical that a saving of that on which all these things must vitally depend should be accepted too.

Have we not set a higher standard for our retail food trades under food control? We know now how easily profiteering is controlled. The mere threat of publicity has been enough to check it among the greater trade corporations. There is no doubt that through the efficient working of Fair Price Committees and through the power of publicity in the local press, the feeling is spreading that it does not pay to be advertised as a profiteer. It will spread downwards to the smallest business. Perhaps fair price schemes will widen to include many other things besides foods and rent. The chief factor of restraint in excessive prices which is publicity, has been established and will be as useful in peace time as in war, for did not Burns put the simple Bible truth in homely language when he wrote:—

"The fear o' hell's a hangman's whip
To hold the wretch in order."

Regulated profits have also been accomplished through the working of the Food Board. It would be stupid to allow the principle to vanish immediately peace comes, only to revert to the old creed of trade. What the new order may be when "the old order changeth, yielding place to new" cannot be foreseen. But the greater national conscience will not suffer a moral reversion to the old style. It may be that excessive profits will be controlled by a system of super-taxation, to which there was a strong tendency in Great Britain under Mr. Lloyd George's budget of eight years ago. It is, however, for the good sense of the people to work out.

Better food distribution, the prevention of hoarding and hogging, working through the existing body of food retailers, might be considered things worth perpetuating. To the objection that it might interfere with the "right of the individual," the reply may be made that what before the war we were apt to regard with a hyper-sense of democracy as "interference," is just a thing which war taught us was laxity and lack of control by which profiteering and other forms of selfishness became possible. We may have to sacrifice the old pet notion of "liberty of the individual" for the broader idea of "service of the individual." Service and usefulness, rather than get-rich-quickableness should count for more. The improved bookkeeping which has been imposed by the Food Board methods on many small traders should compensate them for some of the difficulties; accuracy of record and proper discrimination between paying and non-paying goods on the grocery shelves will take the place of the old cry "The Consumer Pays."

These are only some suggestions which the writer puts forward entirely in a personal capacity for the consideration of others. Food Board work has been pioneer work in every country; it is a new science. It has not been tested in peace, but it seems, even on the face of it, a most necessary instrument in that big transition stage from the break-up of war and the rebuilding of half the continent which we shall know in the glad time which is to come as "reconstruction."

NOTE:—The above article gives the personal suggestions of Mr. C. B. Roberts as to what food control might do in peace time.—Editor.