

Endowing Motherhood

Some Advantages That Would Accrue.

By J. W. MACMILLAN.

The giving of allowances to widows with families of small children has become a familiar thing. Several of the Provinces of Canada have such laws, and other Provinces are planning to enact them. They rest upon the principle that the mother fulfills a duty to the state and renders it a service when she trains her children for citizenship. The next logical step would seem to be the endowment of motherhood. A committee in Great Britain has recently set forth a scheme for this purpose, which is attracting attention.

The plan is confessedly but the beginning of a policy which will eventually bridge the economic gulf between the childless home and the home with children. The ideal would be to accurately and completely pay to the mother the full cost of bearing and rearing children. But at first it is suggested that payments should end when each child has reached the age of five years. They begin eight weeks before the birth of the first child, with a weekly sum of about three dollars for the mother, with an additional dollar and a quarter for the first child, and eighty-five cents for each subsequent child. On the basis of population and birth rate in 1911, the scheme would entail an annual state expenditure of about seven hundred millions of dollars for the British Isles.

Advantages that would accrue.

The committee points out in its report that a number of advantages would follow. The first is that it would solve the vexed question as to the relation of man's and woman's wages. The theory has been that woman's wages may be less than man's, as being calculated on the basis of her own support, whereas the man's wages are calculated on the basis of the support of a family. Thus, where the production of a woman is equal or nearly equal to that of a man employers will tend to give her the preference, with disastrous results to men and the families dependent on them. Yet, when the slogan of "equal pay for equal work" is raised it is at once met by the objection that a man has a family to support while a woman has only herself. Of course, many a woman has dependents relying upon her earnings, and many a man has not, yet there is a sufficient difference to make the objection plausible.

In the second place the present theory of wages handicaps the married man as compared with the single man and the father as compared with the childless. It puts a premium on celibacy and childlessness. If it is desirable to maintain the race it is bad policy to penalize parenthood.

In the third place the present theory of wages does not fit the needs of the family with precision. It recognizes but does not solve the problem of family support. It makes no difference between a large and a small family. It makes no provision for periods of unemployment. It hangs the welfare of the child on an exceedingly slender thread.

Mother Gives Service to the State.

In the fourth place the present theory of wages ignores the mother. It belongs to an outworn age when the woman had no rights and no responsibilities except through her husband. It is now recognized that the mother of a family is giving service to the state and that her life deserves sustenance on that account. If she goes out to take care of another's children she receives food, lodging and pay; but if she stays at home to care for her own what she receives depends not on the value of her services but on the ability and good fortune of her husband. A breakdown in his health or the collapse of his job may cut off her income and her power of nurturing her children.

Again, the effect on the birth-rate would be ex-

cellent. If there are any classes in the community which tend to have too many children they are probably already up to the physiological limit of prolificity, and no bonus or premium would multiply their offspring. On the other hand there is reason to believe that the more prudent and cautious working people are deliberately limiting their families on economic grounds, and the endowment, by removing the financial difficulties in the way, would probably increase the birth-rate in the very families where it is most desirable that it should be increased.

Would Result in Lowering Wages.

The obvious objection to the scheme of course, is that it would result in a lowering of wages. The experience of Britain under the unreformed poor law of the early nineteenth century is recalled, when every generous addition to the pauper classes was immediately subtracted from the current wages. The committee is so conscious of this danger that it suggests that a national minimum wage law might be enforced in connection with the endowment scheme, to prevent such a result. Just at present, in the Whitley scheme and similar devices, the trend is away from governmental action. Labor, conscious of its strength, wants to have the thing out with capital apart from all outside interference. Thus the movement on behalf of a national maximum working period and a minimum wage is halted. But the delay cannot be more than temporary, for the interest of the community in the bargaining between capital and labor is too vital to be disregarded for long. The consumer stands to win or lose by the fixing of wages and hours, for these things are paid for in prices. It will not do to permit a conspiracy between employers and employees to mutually benefit at the expense of the public. It is quite possible that an organization representing a trade, and thus possessing a monopoly, should set both profits and wages at an unreasonably high figure and shove the load upon the community.

Not Necessary To Wait for Minimum Wage.

However, the committee which is launching the plan for endowing mothers does not think that it is necessary to wait for the national minimum. They believe that wages, like most other human phenomena, are not determined in a simple manner but are the result of a complex of circumstances. In this complex can be discerned the worker's productivity, his power of bargaining, and the number of his competitors. All these are co-efficients of the standard of living. Everything which increases the income and the security of income for the worker increases his efficiency and so increases his earnings. Even his courage to strike would be augmented by his knowledge that his cessation from labor would not mean the utter destitution of his family. In the words of the report:

"A regular and more adequate family income would create a better background for the men now in those (that is, the lower-paid) trades; their organization would grow stronger, their efforts would be more sustained; and their view of the world would change from passive acquiescence in a state of things which kept themselves and their families below the level of even physiological subsistence to active determination to better their condition in ways they had not dreamt of before."

Symptoms of New Social Concept.

Such is the proposal. It has behind it the names of such people as H. N. Brailsford, Eleanor F. Rathbone, K. D. Courtney and Emile Burns. It may or not become realized in legislation. The significant thing is not so much what it is in itself as what

it is in its associations and suggestions. Fifty years ago the same class of persons as is now represented by Mr. Brailsford and Miss Rathbone were agitating for factory laws. They were moving heaven and earth to get children released from working sixteen hours a day, and to bring women up out of coal pits. The judgment of mankind today is unanimous in approving the factory acts which they secured the passage of, and recalls with wonder and shame the opposition which sought to prevent such elementary justice. The factory acts represented nothing more than a protest against cruelty. They being with the S.P.C.A., and the formation of the Societies for Improving the Conditions of the Poor. They continue the wave of individualistic humanity which liberated the slave.

But such proposals as the endowment of motherhood are symptoms of a new social concept. It is the right to live, the right of every human being to taste and see that life is good. Health insurance, unemployment insurance, compensation acts, minimum wage acts, enlightened relief distribution and the like are all outcroppings of the deep assent of modern society to the doctrine of the essential value and dignity of human life. The same indignation which, by processes of slow growth, came to attend the crime of murder, because it destroys human life, is becoming attached to the poverty, insecurity, ill-health and fear which rob life of its jobs for very many of our fellow creatures. The sacredness of life is inherent in life itself. It does not depend on the usefulness, on the wholesomeness, or the virtue of the life. It is as much murder to kill a cripple or a criminal as to kill a saint or a movie-goddess. Everybody has the right to live, and to live in decent and comfortable and secure conditions. All these new proposals, which sweep on their conquest of civilization, are devices for the accomplishment of the purpose that the social mind of civilized man has embraced, to abolish the physical handicaps which interfere with each achieving the life which his nature, as a human being, requires for its own fulfillment.



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