



## PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

# MOTHERS' PENSIONS.

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In the *Christian Commonwealth*, a well-known English publication, of July 4th last year was given a very interesting account of an interview with Judge Henry Neil, author of the American scheme of mothers' pensions. This scheme has been very rightly termed "the greatest asset of civilization." Child-poverty is the only sort of poverty that matters; the adult who has been poor as a child will never get the chill of poverty out of his bones, but he will die and make room for a better-nourished generation. There are, no doubt, property-owners in America who tell Judge Henry Neil that it is confiscation to tax one man's property to pay for the education of another man's children. We have scoundrels of this sort in England too; some day they will perhaps have the opportunity of saying it to a higher Judge than Judge Henry Neil: "He will send them to the place He reserves for those who have learned to say 'Our Father' but have not learned to say 'Our Children.' The one without the other cannot be; also it is unbusinesslike folly." Thus wrote Mr. George Bernard Shaw in a letter to Judge Henry Neil. There are few men in England at the present time to whom a letter of this kind would have quite the meaning it has for Judge Neil, for he has been the chief instrument in bringing about a great reform in the methods of child-welfare in thirty out of the forty-eight States of America. He has converted about three-fourths of the population of the United States to his enlightened ideas as to what is the duty of society to the children committed to its care. He has taught the United States, at any rate, to say "Our Children."

This problem of the children is not a problem of one country but of all the civilized world; it is the problem of taking care of the children who have been, by any of the million chances of life, bereft of one or other of their natural guardians, or who are at the risk of privation and misery because their parents are unable to provide properly for them. The English remedy for this great evil has been to provide "homes" or institutions where the children could be cared for; under the Poor Law mothers and children were taken into the workhouse, where the children were brought up from earliest infancy under distressing conditions. Poverty has been regarded as a crime, and Poor Law officials have rarely been found to possess too much patience, sympathy, or tenderness in dealing with their charges.

The general treatment accorded these unfortunate children has very much improved in England since the time of Dickens, when *Bumble* and *Oliver Twist* only too faithfully represented every-day conditions. Scarcely a child now remains under the old order of things; separate buildings have been provided, or the children, singly or in couples, are boarded out amongst respectable cottage folk, whose homes are constantly and unexpectedly visited. The children under this system attend the elementary school in the neighbourhood like ordinary children, and bear no mark of any kind to show that they are brought up by the State. Private enterprise and

benevolence also provided places of refuge for children left destitute, and George Mueller's Homes at Bristol, Spurgeon's Orphanage, and Barnardo's Homes became world-famed.

In all these institutions, however, whether private or public, one vital element was wanting, and that element is the purpose of Judge Neil's scheme to provide. He is one of the men who have the courage to say that the love of even an imperfect mother is better than the watchful care of the most perfect official, and that a real home, however poor and ill-managed, is better than the best-appointed institution. It is bad policy to raise children in large groups, but it has also been found that home-life is better even than little "groups"; that Mother's love, like mother's milk, is a scientific necessity. You can put a baby into a cleaner bed than its mother's, give it cleaner cow's milk, and tend it with the most scientific and sanitary care, yet it will pine for the want of a mother's coddling. It needs the mother's love.

Judge Neil, a typical American, full of energy, shrewd, clear-headed, wise, and practical, had no thought six years ago of devoting himself to a work of this kind; he was a business man living in the outskirts of Chicago. One day he paid a visit to the Juvenile Court of his town and sat beside the Judge, a personal friend. A poor woman whose husband had been dead three years appeared with five children; she had tried to maintain her family by charring. She was now too ill to work and the landlord had given her notice to leave her home, so she had come to the Court for aid. In the usual way it was arranged that one child should go to one institution, another to a second institution, etc., and all, even the youngest, were taken away from the mother, who probably would never see them again.

"Is this the help you are going to give this mother?" asked Judge Neil. "Wouldn't it be better to take her out to the back of the Court and shoot her now that you have taken the children away from her?" He asked who met the cost of the institutions, and was told that each received \$10 per month for each child from the county rates. "Why not pay this \$50 to the mother and allow her to keep her children?" asked Judge Neil. "Because the law says we must take the children from her and place them in institutions." "Well, why not change the law?" In that question the Judge dropped a seed which grew and flourished, and the harvest is a great social reform. For to-day more than 100,000 children are maintained at home by and with their mothers at the cost of the State.

Speaking of the relative cost of maintaining children in institutions and paying pensions to mothers, Judge Neil pointed out that the "mother method" is the cheaper. "We have found," he said, "that the average cost per child is from \$25 to \$30 a month in a public institution, and that an allowance to the mother of one-third that sum is sufficient to provide food, clothing, and shelter." In the case of institutions, buildings have to be erected and salaries paid to officers.

Mr. Neil was asked why only one State (Michigan) provides for the children of unmarried mothers. "There is a great prejudice in our country," he replied, "against any effort that would seem in any way to give the slightest countenance to illegitimate children. I hold that the child ought not to suffer; it could not help its parentage, but we shall have to wait for the evolution of a right opinion upon the question."

Judge Neil also explained that children both of whose parents are bad or untrustworthy are dealt with by the authorities as before, and the children are boarded out with families to get as much home-life as possible. "We do not regard it as a charity," said Mr. Neil, "but as a national obligation; therefore we preserve the mother's self-respect; the remittances to the mother are sent regularly by post; we do not concern ourselves with the question as to how it comes about that children are left or how the mother is made dependent upon the State, but we are concerned with the fact that the children are helpless, and the wise State regards the child as the real foundation of national life and upon whom every care should be bestowed."

What is Canada, what is British Columbia, doing for this class of children, who form part of the foundation of our national life and upon whom every care should be bestowed? If we have an interest in the future of our country, that it shall be

free and strong and progressive, then we must look well after the upbringing of our children, every one of them, so that the poorest—the most neglected—as well as the more fortunate ones, may have the chance of a good home-life with a mother and grow up respected and honoured citizens of a great country.

The Social Service Committee of Toronto are making efforts to impress upon the Ontario Government the wisdom of undertaking a scheme of mothers' pensions. We too, as women and mothers, must use our best efforts to guide public sentiment in this Province in the same wise direction.

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SELECTED LIST OF PUBLICATIONS ISSUED BY DEPARTMENT OF  
AGRICULTURE, VICTORIA, B.C.

- "Finance in Relation to Women's Citizenship," by A. C. Flumerfelt,  
Circular Bulletin No. 13, "Root-seed Growing in British Columbia."  
Circular No. 20, "Seed-growers' Directory, 1917-18." (This contains some valuable articles on seed production.)  
Circular Bulletin No. 22, "Medical Inspection of Schools," by Dr. H. E. Young.  
Bulletin No. 78, "Boys' and Girls' Competitions, Year 1918."  
Department of Agriculture Annual Report, Year 1917. (Contains report on Women's Institutes for same year.)  
Rules and Regulations, Women's Institutes.  
*The Agricultural Journal* (monthly, with Women's Institute section).

Write to the Secretary of the Department for a full list of bulletins and circulars.

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