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Editorial and Publishing Offices

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THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE

THE report of the Scott Committee on Land Utilization in Rural Areas completes the work begun by the Royal Commission on the Distribution of the Industrial Population, the terms of reference of which excluded the consideration of agriculture; and although its major and minor recommendations are sometimes rather confusingly blended, the report is clearly a reconstruction paper of the first importance. It has life and colour and gives substance to some of those aspirations for an ampler and more satisfying national life which the War has accentuated. Moreover, like the interim report of the Uthwatt Committee, it reiterates the importance of immediate action. A survey of the report appears on p. 448.

Broadly speaking, the Scott report, like that of the Barlow Commission, centres upon two main recommendations: first, that there should be national long-term planning for industry and for agriculture in England and Wales; and secondly, that for that purpose a national planning authority should be set up. Both principles have been restated by the Uthwatt Committee in its report, and the Government has repeatedly announced its adherence to these views and declared its intention to establish the requisite planning authority. The Scott report should dispose of whatever hesitation has been responsible for the protracted delay in bringing intention to performance. The final argument is convincing: "It is our firm belief that a vital incentive to the war effort is the presentation of a clear picture of a better world which lies ahead and which, if plans are drawn up and the essential preparations made in advance, can be achieved after this struggle is over. To delay planning and the legislation to carry the plans into effect until the time for action is upon us—the end of the war—we believe to be a fatal error."

That is the fundamental conviction behind all the pressure for planning for reconstruction both nationally and internationally, and the case for immediate planning could scarcely have been put better than by the Scott Committee.

This conclusion is reinforced by the melancholy record of the effects of the Town and Country Planning Act, 1932, and the Restriction of Ribbon Development Act, 1935, reviewed in the sixth chapter of the report, which deals with planning powers. This is a striking illustration of the futility of any piecemeal attack on the problem. Despite its complexity it must be tackled as a whole, though strangely enough, there are matters in which the majority report consistently fails to do so—notably in regard to agriculture.

The poor equipment which Great Britain possesses at the moment for dealing with the most pressing tasks in this field gives special interest and importance to the recommendations of the report in regard to machinery. Here the Committee, assuming that the policy of the Government involves the establishment of a Central Planning Authority, proposes that machinery should be set up now to make plans for

the use of land, and that the necessary legislation should be passed so that the plans can be put into operation immediately on the cessation of hostilities. The report outlines a definite scheme of work to be accomplished in five years, and it distinguishes carefully between planning and development—between the formulation of a national plan and its execution.

Planning, the Committee considers, should be the function of the planning body within the Government, and development the concern of the separate Ministries. Moreover, despite insistence on a Central Planning Authority, the Committee does not regard its recommendations as involving any specific form of Government machinery. In fact, it considers that the establishment of a separate Ministry of Planning is undesirable and that it is impossible to visualize a Central Planning Authority taking over the execution of planning proposals or any other form of development in those spheres which are the direct concern of existing Ministries. The proposals involve a transfer from the Ministry of Works and Planning, as constituted under the recent Act, of all planning functions, in order to separate them from the development functions of that Ministry.

As to the machinery, the Committee appears to be unanimous. When we come to the general character of our future policy and the aims that should guide our plans, there are serious differences of opinion between the majority report and the minority report signed by Prof. S. R. Dennison. On many questions there is indeed agreement, for example, in regard to the restoration of the village crafts and the improvement of rural life, but Prof. Dennison in his minority report puts forward an entirely different outlook and perspective, and his criticism is both trenchant and fundamental. The question he raises as to the relative efficiency in use of our resources is the one which gives the report a major claim on the attention of scientific workers.

In their introduction the majority, while endeavouring to evaluate and assess the significance of the permanent physical factors in the shaping of the countryside, have sought to avoid the temptation of looking back to the past and seeking to perpetuate it, and in their recommendations they clearly seek to look forward and to visualize many changes. They recognize that British agriculture, however vital to the nation in time of war, cannot be maintained in the same position in time of peace. The conditions to be imposed on constructional development in the countryside must be such as will be consistent with the maintenance of a prosperous and progressive agriculture. The Committee is mindful, too, that the pre-war prevalence of malnutritional disease must never again be allowed to recur.

The gravamen of Prof. Dennison's criticism is that, while facing change, the majority are afraid of it; they are excessively tender to the general body of agricultural interests, allowing it too large a say in matters which concern the nation as a whole. He disputes entirely, for example, the whole idea on which is based the recommendation of the majority that land which is included in one of the categories

of good land should not be alienated from its present use unless it can be clearly shown that, on balance, it is in the national interest that the change should be made; he would throw the onus of proof not on the applicant who seeks to make the change, but on the agricultural occupier or interest, who should be required to show cause why land should not be diverted to some other use. In this way, he argues that, using the machinery of planning control, while the best land would not be unnecessarily alienated from agriculture, constitutional development would not be hindered by the maintenance of land for agriculture unless a clear case of national advantage were established.

Prof. Dennison maintains that the majority are inclined to treat village life and agriculture too much as if they were museum pieces and to preserve them by methods which threaten the standard of life both of the villages and of the nation. Fear of the disturbing effects of the introduction of industries to the countryside leads his colleagues, in his view, to overlook the advantages they would bestow. Moreover, while evidence was submitted that changes in agriculture may well result owing to national nutritional needs, the bare fact is noted in the majority report, and it is left to Prof. Dennison to elaborate the point. His observations on the probable effect of the new ideas of nutrition and protective foods on agriculture is only one example of the way in which his minority report gives precision and incisiveness to a document which, despite many admirable features, is somewhat discursive and vague, and lacks the lucidity of the Barlow Commission's report.

The difficulty—and the differences—between the majority and the minority reports—arises in the interpretation of what is meant by "the maintenance of a prosperous agriculture", "the well-being of rural communities" and "the preservation of rural amenities". In regard to the first, Prof. Dennison bases his argument on economic considerations and the relation of the maintenance of agriculture to the standard of life of the rural worker. Both the extent and the type of agriculture are involved, and although recent reports from the industrial side dealing with reconstruction recognize the importance of a correct balance between industry and agriculture, the majority report carries the analysis little further. Prof. Dennison considers that the assumptions of the majority report would only provide better standards of life for the rural worker at the expense of the community.

In a progressive society, the ultimate prosperity of agriculture must depend upon increased efficiency; but this is not necessarily achieved by increased output. Greater specialization may also be important, particularly in regard to improved nutrition. That depends upon the type of food as well as on quantity, involving more vegetables, milk and other protective foods which traditional agriculture in England and Wales has never supplied in adequate amounts; and as Prof. Dennison rightly points out, the needs of the consumer as well as the quality of the land must determine what shall be grown. The aims of agricultural policy in Great Britain should be, as Viscount

Astor and Mr. Rowntree put it, "to promote a happy marriage between nutrition and agriculture rather than to shut out overseas competition, to improve the conditions of the agricultural labourers rather than to increase their numbers, to treat agriculture as an industry or group of industries . . . existing for the purpose of satisfying human wants with the minimum of toil, rather than as a way of life to be preserved with the minimum of change".

The essential point in determining the type and size of agriculture is that the full measure of economic progress, the improvement of standards of living, can take place only if, as technique and economic conditions change, resources are no longer deliberately impeded in their movement from uses which yield a small return of goods to those which yield a larger return. To attempt to retain resources in any existing form of activity which gives a lower product than others, which are new and developing, must involve a loss to the community in general, in that standards of life as a whole are kept down. What has to be remembered is that, as Prof. Dennison again points out, for many types of produce we can obtain more food by employing labour and capital in manufacturing goods which are exported, and importing food in return, than we can by using the same amount of labour and real capital in agriculture to produce the food directly. This is one of the recognized advantages that Great Britain has over Germany, and the answer to the argument that a large agriculture must be maintained for purposes of security in time of war. The need is not denied, but it will not be achieved by methods which are wasteful of man-power in war as well as in peace. Malnutrition will not be conquered by growing more food at great cost, but by cheap food, obtained with the minimum expenditure of resources.

Social policy might well be directed to increasing the demand for the protective foods—for example, milk—so as to cushion any fall in the agricultural output in other directions, and this is a legitimate contribution to the well-being of rural communities which is not at the expense of the whole community. Prof. Dennison, however, differs from the majority of his colleagues in holding that the rural community, if it has lower standards as a result of lower wages in agriculture, should not be protected from the impact of higher standards. While supporting such recommendations for the improvement of rural life as spreading village colleges like those now established in Cambridgeshire, village halls, village playing-fields, and the universal supply of electricity, he holds that the introduction of a certain degree of industrial development offers the best hope of improving the social and economic conditions in the countryside. The two main advantages are the provision of alternative employment, usually with higher standards of living, and the introduction of improved physical and social services.

In regard to the preservation of amenities, Prof. Dennison challenges the majority view that amenities depend on farming, or even on a particular type of agriculture. Changes in the type of farming and the development of physical reconstruction may bring

changes in the countryside, but there is no reason why they should not create greater amenity than existed before. It is in fact difficult to conceive of a more fitting way to use land in the national interest than to use it for the new construction necessary to provide better living conditions for the people—and their children after them—now dwelling in congested towns. In particular, it is important not to attempt to preserve amenities which can only be preserved as long as full access to them is denied to those whose heritage they are.

Socially and politically, it is clearly undesirable to foster a cleavage of interest between agriculture and the rest of the community by isolating the countryside from the effects of the impact of town life. Agriculture and agricultural workers have a more positive part to play in the life of Great Britain, and they can only play it if they are brought more closely into touch with what is the major part of British life. Equally it is true that closer contact with the countryside is desirable to give balance and health to the industrial population, and an agricultural policy which accepts as inevitable an antagonism between town and country would be nothing less than a national disaster.

The happy marriage thus foreshadowed between agriculture and nutrition could have no more valuable consequence than that the changes in agriculture would involve a smaller number of workers in a prosperous agriculture providing adequate standards for the worker and making isolation as unnecessary as it is undesirable; such changes, if combined with careful control of constructional developments, would leave unimpaired the major amenities of the countryside, and also create new forms of amenity, all of which would be accessible to a larger proportion of the population than can enjoy the countryside to-day. Such a policy would firmly establish a harmony of interest between town and country which would make for mutual understanding, goodwill and the dynamic adaptation which Prof. Dennison is assuredly right in holding should mark a positive policy in the interest of the nation as a whole.

Whatever the difference between majority and minority reports in regard to outlook and policy, and as to the objective which should guide a national policy—and clearly these are great—there is agreement as to the imperative necessity for more effective planning of land utilization in England and Wales. Both apply pressure at the point at which the Government is most dilatory, and there will be grave dissatisfaction if there is now any further prolonged delay in providing the machinery and the legislation in readiness for the work to be done when the War is won. A large part of the means of establishing a policy which will command the full support of forward-looking minds in all parties is now in the hands of the Government, and though it is clear that there are fields in which policy has yet to be thought out and investigations completed, public opinion will assuredly look for the action which will equip the country to seize the opportunities which will presently be ours.