

CURRENT MAGAZINES

RECONVERSION IN THE POST-WAR WORLD

In the Hour of Deliverance—Mr. W. Steed, in the *Contemporary*.
Education for Freedom—Dr. R. M. Hutchins, in the *Christian Century*.
Poison in the Academic Ivy—Mr. J. A. Brandt, in the *Saturday Review*.

DURING the years which began Sept. 3, 1939, the word *Conversion* was on many lips. It was applied to the rapid passage of industry from a peace-time to a war-time basis such as the national purpose required. One remembers with gratitude and with pride how willingly, indeed eagerly, the hardships and sacrifices of this change were accepted. Factories engaged in one sort of production had to be overhauled and adapted to a different sort. Countless new structures had to be erected, at maximum and too often dangerous speed. The whole population had to be registered for service, leaving it to the Government to decide not only which industries should be allowed to continue and which should be suspended, but also in what sort of work the individual should engage. Forms of manufacture judged superfluous were stopped by the simple process of withholding their necessary material, or withdrawing their workmen to some State-imposed task. The worker's freedom of choice was limited, as labor exits became unobtainable and employees were "frozen to their jobs". One could illustrate from a multitude of novel constraints and novel prohibitions: from the whole machinery of war-time prices and rental boards, of rationing and wage-fixing and selective service.

A question of increasing interest debated just now in the critical press is "How long are they going to last?"

I

Enjoined as an aspect of war effort, these distortions of normal business would naturally cease with the war. Some of them have already ceased, since war necessities have changed, rendering their purpose no longer urgent, or showing that it can be fulfilled by ordinary methods of production. But how far will such relief extend, and how soon may it be expected, even if the national peril were past? Mr. Dewey's campaign for votes in the American presidential contest showed how influential was the argument that "Conversion" has been so much enjoyed by the national leaders who imposed it as to make all hope of "Reconversion" depend on a change of national leadership. Vast audiences all over the United States were moved to excitement and

anger by the warning against bureaucrats whose appetite for power had grown by what it fed upon:—chiefs of the regime begun eleven years ago under the name "New Deal", who clutched at the chance to continue it when the alleged emergency of unemployment had been followed by the real emergency of the war.

By what means, Republican orators and journalists demanded, shall the tenacity of those bureaucratic fingers be relaxed? How shall escape be achieved, back to "the American way of life"? None could mistake the passion with which this appeal was heard and echoed; the enthusiasm of response to Mr. Dewey's call for a crusade against dictatorship at home not less urgent than the crusade against dictatorship in Europe. It is widely believed that if the war had ended last fall, nothing could have stopped such growth in the vote of 21,000,000 Americans supporting the Republican protest into a vote sufficient to sweep the Democrats from power. Everywhere the most effective, and apparently the most embarrassing, of challenges to the Roosevelt regime was the demand "Tell us about Reconversion".

To tell their audience about this was to run risk with very different groups of the Democratic following. Not merely with influential bureaucrats bent on perpetuating their own power, but also with men who saw in the new State management of industry a means to achieve such social reform as they had long desired but had judged impossible. Zealous reformers noted with delight how obstacles had been cleared out of their way. No longer, surely, would they be stopped by the objection that such and such hardships in the economic order were unalterable by law; that the cost of living was determined by natural forces as far beyond legislative control as the movement of the tides; that inequalities of income must be accepted, no less than inequalities of physique, as part of the fixed destiny of mankind. Had not the Boards charged with regulating war-time wages and prices shown State direction of this sort to be altogether practicable and wholesome? Was it not at length clear that, for a reason taken as adequate, the proportions of wealth and poverty could thus be transformed, and that the familiar satire on "repealing Laws of Nature by Act of Parliament" came from men pretending lack of power when the true hindrance was lack of will?

A result of such reflection was that the old eloquence about sacred "personal liberties" had lost its appeal. Mr. Hoover's book, *The Challenge to Liberty*, would have had a great public a generation before it appeared, but the "New Deal" had thinned

those ranks much more than the author knew. Proposals for what is called "Social Security" have been multiplied of late. Their advocates always take for granted a readiness to maintain in time of peace those practices of government regulation imposed on "free enterprise" as an exceptional war-time requirement. "What we can do to protect our rights against Hitler, we can do to protect our fellow-citizens against grinding penury: to win a Second World War is not more urgent than to prevent a Second World Depression, and the means are at our disposal": so runs the argument. The air resounds with projects of a "planned" or a "managed" economy, always involving continued State interference with a personal initiative which we had been asked to suspend only "for the duration". A truly remarkable alliance is this—perhaps more fitly called "co-belligerence"—between those ambitious of personal dominance and those keen for social justice! They agree on the instrument. What neither group desires to see is "Reconversion"—to an economic order they both know too well.

But both have a heavy fight ahead, for with very powerful forces "Reconversion" is a battle cry. Over against the groups I have named as zealous to keep the social order "converted", there is a public with no such motive either to favor or even to tolerate continuance of bureaucratic ways. A public concerned to restore individual activity, under a government effective, economical and unobtrusive! From that quarter comes a quick and fierce negative in reply to the question "Do you want to see continued in time of peace the methods and machinery of social management that have met the needs of war?" The average British or American citizen exclaims "God forbid".

He is so resolute about this because, for one thing, he feels how wasteful the war-time economy has been, how recklessly extravagant are officials controlling funds on the scale of our Victory Loan; how the corruption always rampant in such circumstances should be subjected to stern discipline at the earliest possible moment. He has indeed learned during the war years how his government can multiply the national fighting strength by its use of emergency powers. But he has learned also how the damage and the losses due to such exceptional procedure are such as only a dire emergency can justify us in incurring. Like morphia or cocaine in an illness, to be welcomed when the need arises, but a habit-forming drug, to be given up as soon as one can dispense with it! Proposals that after the peace there should be extension rather than curtailment of State control seem to many

an observer like regarding cocaine or morphia as a food. Even those most readily acquiescent in the rhetoric of patriotism, straining acknowledgments to "our admirable Administration" and postponing criticism while the national peril demands unity, have begun to lose temper with a plea that bureaucracy—called, for propagandist preference, "managed economy"—must outlive the war. Sometimes even that "it has just begun"! Like another Cicero to another Catiline, they exclaim angrily "How long wilt thou abuse our patience?"

II

The problem of what should be re-converted, and what should be left (for peaceful industry) in just the new shape which war needs imposed upon it; is a problem surely to be solved by appeal to experience. Abstract terms either of abuse or of compliment, such as "regimentation", "laissez faire", "planned economy", "bureaucratic interference", are of question-begging deceptiveness. In this respect the war has been illuminating, for it has compelled actual trial where we had long disposed of a problem by some plausible or pleasing assumption. Never again, surely, shall we hear that prices and wages "must find their own level", or that it would do more harm than good for the State to try to prevent such exploiting of a public emergency as can bring huge fortunes to a few while the multitude are driven to ever more desperate economic straits. Though we must expect again extremely complicated puzzles of unemployment after this war, it is unthinkable that in any quarter these will be dismissed—as they were so often in the years after 1918—with some aphorism of mere excuse. From what expert authority the Premier Baldwin of twenty years ago got his principle that "Public Works are no remedy for Unemployment", he did not then disclose. Doubtless from some economic guide similar to the Nassau Senior of a hundred years earlier, who warned the Cabinet of his day that enactment of a Factory Act or a Mines Act would mean "the beginning of the end of Britain's commercial prosperity"! What can be achieved by the State as an employer has been shown by experiment on a great scale, and its risks or drawbacks (like those apprehended from legislation about mines and factories) are now beyond the stage of either random guess or imposing epigram.

There is one field, however, in which many an experiment of the war years has shown that the sooner we can safely go

back to pre-war method, the better. All that the business men of a community have said against State interference in business applies with still greater force to State interference in education. The worst demagogic tirade against "capitalism" has had its fitting counterpart in tirades against "the traditional university system," and proposals of change in the two fields show in equal degree the rashness of presumptuous ignorance. Already in both they have had a dangerous popular success. Tumultuous applause greets the rhetorician in many a public hall when he demands a "State-managed economy", on the assumption that such management will be free from the familiar selfishness of private ownership. The speaker commonly evades the very pertinent question whether Mussolini and Hitler have not been the most conspicuous examples of such State control, whether the transfer of all vital industries to "Government" (that is, to politicians) might not well be followed by such lobbying and such graft in a legislature as would reach a level even below the lowest that has so far disgraced us. Nothing surely can be more obvious than the reflection that whether a "managed economy" will be less or more humane than "free enterprize" depends on the directors who are managing it, and that to assume—despite all our experience of party politicians—that we can safely transfer to their control the whole residue of our economic liberties upon which they have not yet laid hands is to merit the quiet comment of John Huss upon the old woman who threw yet another faggot upon his pyre, *O sancta simplicitas!* She believed, doubtless, in a "managed" religion, like the managed education which we are now so often asked to substitute for free intellectual activities.

Both President Roosevelt and Mr. Churchill have spoken repeatedly of a British and an American "way of life" which we are fighting to rescue and to preserve. Among its most attractive and gracious aspects was the disinterested pursuit of learning, taken by the British or the American university as its vital principle, but forbidden under a Nazi or Fascist dictatorship wherever it might interfere with docile subservience to the State. Observe the tone of many a memorandum, many a "Report" now conspicuously displayed in the press regarding what the university of the future in our own countries ought to be. Does it faithfully recommend return to the essentials of that way of life which we professed such concern to defend? Is it not rather, very commonly, a recommendation to forget

disinterested learning and to concentrate youthful minds instead upon what is relevant to the two paramount objects of the writer's concern—national defence and national trade? When President Roosevelt announced in his last Message to Congress that he would ask for the enactment of universal military service for Americans after this war, it was received in many quarters with an acquiescence (in some even with an approval) which was truly startling. That a long and furious resistance will be offered before Conscription is accepted for the United States as part of the national routine, like the routine we so much condemned in the Germany of Kaiser Wilhelm II, I do not for a moment doubt. But we have come a long way towards change from that way of life to which we proclaimed such devotion when an announcement of the sort could be let pass with relatively little demur. That our young men (and presumably also our young women, if the sharing of military defence between the sexes is to continue) should after Peace be required, generation after generation, to sacrifice so much of the best years of their life to training for the technique of war, is an outcome remote indeed from any suggested previously in the eloquence of our leaders about "a new and better world". One might have hoped, at least, that the stern experience of these last grim years would have put an end to the delusion so often in the past propagated in conscriptionist advocacy, about the moral and physical improvement which universal military training produces. What it *does* produce, we now accept as among the sacrifices we have to confront in a desperate national emergency. But that it is intrinsically desirable, only the most credulous of wishful thinkers or the most unscrupulous of propagandists can now continue to urge. Fifty years ago Germany was convulsed by that revealing book *Life in a Garrison Town*. Zealots for post-war Conscription in our countries would do well to submit the purple patch in their account of moral and physical improvement, for annotations by the local Director of the Department of Public Health or even by the local Chief of Police. Not continuance of this war-time regime, still less its extension, but reconversion to a pre-war order is what we there urgently need. And it would have the advantage of coincidence with what (surely-sincerely?) we said the war was being fought to secure. Of course it is impossible unless we can construct a reliable international scheme of security—such as the one projected at Dumbarton Oaks. But that, again, was among our declared purposes. Are we forgetting that also?

Short of universal Conscription, many a proposal one sees advanced involves a like departure from the ideals which we had avowed. Scheme after scheme for pulling the universities to pieces gets its popular plausibility from the assumption that students should be trained above all for some service to the State, that their college period of three or four years should have as its primary directing principle not that of opening their minds to intellectual treasures and enabling them to enter into an intellectual birthright, but producing in them the maximum efficiency which the State can turn to its purposes of trade or—if needful—of war. That young men and young women can and should have their faculties best awakened and developed by studies with which neither war nor trade has anything to do, was an assumption of that "way of life" set for us in our university traditions. Literature, science, philosophy, history, exploration of "the best said or done" by the great thinkers and artists of the past, occupied fully the ingenuous undergraduate mind, and to suggest that these studies should be rudely suspended in favor of a "National Defence" course or a course on how best to promote "our commercial supremacy" would have seemed shocking. The reply will, no doubt, be made that a great deal we have been forced to undertake would have seemed shocking in the calmer atmosphere of half a century ago, but is not on that account to be condemned. I grant it. Was it not, however, our argument that through the temporary suspension of liberties and opportunities we prize we should be able, after peace had been reestablished on a basis more secure than ever before, to bring back such precious things in our heritage? What, then, of the proposal that there be no such "reconversion", but that, in the very spirit of the dictatorial regimes we have fought so hard to overturn, we should subordinate the higher learning so long "disinterested" in our universities to some requirement of an all-devouring State?

It makes no particular difference that "the State" in our countries has no individual *Fuehrer* or *Duce* or *Caudillo*. What I have in mind is the popular demand, cunningly adopted as a slogan by too many university leaders whose desire is first and foremost to ingratiate themselves with the multitudinous vulgar, that subjects of "practical utility" be given far more attention, and that the traditional studies of "mere useless learning" be relegated further and further into relative neglect. A "useful" study is, in the vulgar reckoning, either one which serves the student's needs by conducting him to lucrative employment, or one that prepares him to serve the country's

needs in conflict with her enemies and her trade rivals. Like the employers of the "hungry forties", in the England of a century ago, who saw no reason why a boy should go to school if his employment at a power loom or down a mine shaft could be made to "promote the industrial supremacy of this country"!

A glance at recent university calendars, showing courses of instruction and requirements for degrees, relaxation of "imperatives" and multiplication of "options", will reveal how far the downward trend has gone. The true perspective of options and imperatives in education, no less than in food, is fairly well fixed, as the great educators of the past understood. But there is little respect, naturally enough, among those who have not begun to understand it, for the inherited system of educational hygiene. The present riot of caprice is not simply, or indeed chiefly, a product of the war; the tendency was already manifest in the years just before the war, but it found a chance of stimulus in the plea—too often the pretence—of war-time necessities. Those great essential disciplines, organized and arranged by university leaders of the past, have been steadily discountenanced, while in their place may be noted all sorts of educational counterfeit. Nothing is too ridiculous now to appear under some title of "social studies", "applied psychology", "vocational guidance", "business administration". A despairing professor of physics recently told me that he gets from the schools students in physics who don't know the multiplication table: "they should at least be able to multiply by 12"—surely a minimum requirement, but doubtless "social studies" had obstructed arithmetic, as a like preoccupation notoriously obstructs both spelling and grammar. The trouble thus begins early, but the universities suffer from it in the most conspicuous degree. Lord Bryce made many a caustic reference in his *American Commonwealth* to this transatlantic burlesque of the academic purpose. It was followed, after more than half a century, by Mr. Abraham Flexner's great exposure—showing how American Boards, whose members are themselves commonly quite ignorant of the literature or the science, the philosophy or the history which their university trusteeship gives them the opportunity to disparage, had often changed academic life into a mere *simulacrum* of its past. Lawyers are shocked by the advertisement of a San Francisco legal firm "We know the loopholes of the law", and clergymen have often read with disgust the Saturday night announcement of San Francisco spiritual exercises. Institutions of higher learning should be the last to drop into a like vulgarity, but we know too well the

professions of an academic patent medicine, the "intelligence testing" which promises to detect in ingenuous youth the likeliest aptitude for making money soon, the testimonials from "our graduates" recording (like cures in the familiar letters from grateful patients) how quick in their case was the fulfilment (in cash) of what had been undertaken. In his recent book *On Education*, so admirable although in places so sombre, Sir Richard Livingstone writes:

The advertisements, cheap newspapers and films of a country are the best index of what appeals to its masses. What view would posterity form of our civilization from these manifestations of its taste and intelligence?

A glance at the astrological magazines with which the Ottawa news stands are now strewn suggests the answer of which as Canadians we should be ashamed.

A hundred years ago there was a craze for phrenology, not very different from that which now revels in the imposture of Intelligence Quotients, and even when at its worst less contemptible than the present astrological mania. Even Richard Cobden, hard-headed as he was on Corn-Law questions, would call at a phrenological tent from time to time to have his bumps re-examined! But, before long, scientific criticism made an end of phrenology. When will a like service be rendered against the frauds of the present?

Here is indeed a call to re-conversion, for things were not always as bad as they have lately become, and there was an excuse for slipping—amid war-time pressure—if we can only recover our balance as that pressure is relaxed. There must be an end to the educational short-cuts camouflaged as "accelerated courses". There must be restoration of the educational fundamentals temporarily displaced or suspended. There must be no more entrusting of higher educational direction to men with repute as "great organizers", "of great executive ability", but themselves shockingly ill educated. Mr. Flexner's book called forth from many observers of universities in the United States a chorus of eager approval. None perhaps better, or going further to the heart of the trouble, than this from a satiric humorist: "The leader we need for educational direction is not the sort of trustee whose personal contact with literature is limited to the book he got last Christmas, and through which he will not have ploughed his painful way until another is pressed upon him next Christmas by the well-meant generosity of a friend."

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