

40.0320 HEALTH,  
AGRICULTURE

*M. Lindstedt*

AND THE  
STANDARD of LIVING

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A Record of Three Speeches by

Sir John Boyd Orr,

M.D., D.Sc., LL.D., F.R.S. (Guest of Honour),

The Right Hon. Lord Horder,

G.C.V.O., etc.

The Right Hon. Lord Sempill,

A.F.C.

at a dinner held under the auspices of The Economic Reform Club at the Savoy Hotel, London, on February 24th, 1939.

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# HEALTH, AGRICULTURE AND THE STANDARD OF LIVING

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The following three speeches were delivered at a Dinner given by the Economic Reform Club at the Savoy Hotel on February 24th, 1939. The evidence they present, authoritative and disinterested as it is, is of such national importance that in the near future it may come to be regarded as the initiation of a new era in our social, economic and financial progress, when "the welfare of the State" will at last cease to be conceived apart from the health and welfare of the Community.

These proceedings of the Economic Reform Club, reported in full in a Special Supplement to "The New English Weekly" were also reprinted and received a considerable circulation apart from that Journal. The demand for copies, however, has exceeded all expectation, and the present edition has been prepared in response to numerous enquiries. It has been slightly abbreviated, re-edited and arranged in a smaller and more convenient format, and is republished by the Club Committee. For, in their opinion, the important questions involved cannot be too widely known, and should be acted upon without delay.

VINCENT C. VICKERS,

*President,*

The Economic Reform Club.

Sir John Orr, M.D., D.Sc., LL.D., F.R.S.

introduced by the Chairman, Vincent C. Vickers, Esq., spoke as follows:—

Mr. Chairman, My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I appreciate the honour of being invited to this Dinner. I appreciate still more the responsibility of accepting the invitation to speak on "Health, Agriculture and the Standard of Living." These are subjects of the greatest national importance. **A healthy, vigorous population and a prosperous countryside are the true foundations of national greatness. These are real assets, more important for the future of our race than all the wealth of the City of London with its loans, credits and overseas investments which are largely paper money which might blow away in the storm of another international economic crisis.**

The standard of living is of vital importance to millions of our fellow countrymen whose standard is so low that they cannot get sufficient of the necessities of life to enable them to attain full health and the joy of living which accompanies health.

The majority of well-to-do people do not realise what a large proportion of the population falls below the poverty line nor what a low standard the poverty line represents. Unless we have a clear idea of what the present standard of living is and of what it might be if we utilised the resources we have, we cannot appreciate the importance of the problems of health and agriculture.

### Minimum Diet.

There have been many investigations on this subject and the results of them all are in general agreement. Mr. Seeborn Rowntree's recent exhaustive enquiry on the cost of living and the needs of life gives as good a picture of the present state of affairs as any of them. Mr. Rowntree tried to ascertain the lowest wage on which a family with three children could be supported. He estimated the cost of the minimum requirements of physical efficiency. We will consider here only the diet he aimed to provide. He based his diet on the British Medical Association minimum diet. To make it as cheap as possible, he eliminated butter and whole milk and substituted margarine and tinned separated milk and he assumed that the bread would be baked at home. The kind of diet which he devised for the money he thought should be available, viz. 20/6d. per week, was probably about as good as could be got for that expenditure. It contained one cheap but fairly good meal in the middle of the day. The other meals consisted of the cheapest foods which would satisfy hunger. The basis of both the breakfast and tea was tea, bread, and margarine. Tea, which corresponds to the dinner of the well-to-do, consisted of tea, bread, margarine and jam with one day of the week a herring and another day of the week a kipper. Supper consisted of bread, cheese and cocoa five days of the week with lentil soup and bread on Sunday and, for Monday, bread and any lentil soup which was left over from Sunday. That is not a diet on which you can rear a healthy race. But Mr. Rowntree was forced to the conclusion that there are millions of our fellow countrymen who are so poor that they cannot afford as good a diet as that. He proposes that an effort should be made to bring the standard of living of the poorest up to that

standard but he would allow a "breathing space" of five years to make the necessary economic adjustments.

Is this country so poor that it cannot feed its population properly or are the well-to-do in this country so indifferent to the welfare of the millions of their fellow countrymen, who are ill-fed, that they are unwilling to make an effort to develop the resources of the country to raise the standard of living of the unemployed, and the working class families with children, up to a level at which they would be able to attain health and physical fitness.

There is no longer any doubt about the effect of bad feeding due to poverty on health. The subject has been studied by League of Nations Committees, consisting of physiologists, agricultural experts and economists. To quote the words of the **Rt. Hon. S. M. Bruce of Australia**, who has shown a great interest in agriculture in relation to health and economic prosperity, the reports of these Committees show that **"poverty is directly correlated with ill-health, diseases and premature death."** We do not need to go to the League of Nations to learn this. Our own health statistics show that the incidence of many diseases, such as rickets, tuberculosis and bronchitis, is from two to three times as high among the poor as among the well-to-do. Probably the best indication of the health and vigour of the community is the ability of women to rear children. Infant mortality among the well-to-do is just over 30 per 1,000; among the working class, it is over 70; among the unemployed, it is over 100. There is reason to believe that if the poorer families were supplied with sufficient of all the necessities of life, their infant mortality rate would be reduced to about the level of the rate amongst the well-to-do. There

are thus many people suffering from ill-health who need not suffer from ill-health and many children die who need not die.

**What are we doing to rectify this state of affairs?**

We provide school meals to some of our necessitous children. At maternity clinics and child welfare centres some foods of special health value, such as milk and cod liver oil, are given free or at reduced prices to necessitous mothers and their infants. The Government Advisory Committee on Nutrition has strongly recommended the Government to bring the milk consumption of children up to a pint and a half per day. We have a scheme whereby school-children can get one-third of a pint at half price. Then we have innumerable charitable organisations. All these measures do a great deal of good. The extension of these measures in the last few years has been of great value in the elimination of the worst cases of malnutrition. But they only touch the fringe of the problem. If we are going to build up a healthy race we must build from the bottom upwards. We must take means to improve the diet of the poorest twenty-five per cent. of the people in this country. When we do that we will have as low an infant mortality rate and as fine a physique in our country as some of the more favoured European countries and our own Dominions.

Medical science knows what is necessary to eliminate these preventable diseases. It knows the kind of diet which is fully adequate for health. Agricultural science knows how to produce in abundance all the additional foodstuffs needed to bring the national dietary up to the optimum standard. It is no longer a scientific problem. It is an economic problem. As Lord Horder has well expressed it **"health and physical fitness are hammering at the door of economics."** Biological science has come to

the end of its tether. Therefore, although I am not an economist and know nothing about the mysteries of finance, I am going to venture to refer to the economic and financial aspects of health and agriculture.

**The twin problems of the depression in agriculture and malnutrition due to poverty are only special aspects of the world-wide economic problem which shows itself in the difficulty of finding profitable markets, the slowing down of industry, the contraction of international trade and the increase of unemployment.**

To meet these difficulties, those who control the means of production and distribution have evolved a new economic policy according to which industrial and trading concerns with common interests combine to eliminate competition and share the existing markets, regulating production and sales at a level which will keep up prices and maintain profits. While such a policy may be quite legitimate for big business which does not pretend to have any objective except profit making, **it is not in the interest of the general community to apply this policy to trade in the necessities of life.** Yet it has been applied to the produce and sale of food.

Let us consider the problem of health and then the problem of agriculture in the light of this new economic planning.

The Government Advisory Committee on Nutrition have approved a dietary standard which they consider necessary for health. Though there are differences in the health value of the diets of families on the same economic plane, the average diet of the wealthier half of the community comes up to this standard. But the diet of the poorer half falls below this standard and the poorer the family,



the worse, on an average, is the diet. To bring the national dietary of all classes up to that standard, we need a great increase in the consumption of animal products, fruit and vegetables. Lord Astor has estimated that we would need 2½ million more cows. We need a corresponding increase in fruit and vegetables. We need more eggs, more meat and more fish.

But a diet on this standard costs, at present retail prices according to district and season, somewhere about 7/6d. to 10/- per head per week. That cost puts it beyond the purchasing power of the great majority of working class families with children.

If the nation awakened to the importance of national health and physique, and decided to make the diet of the whole nation fully adequate for health, we would find ourselves faced with the need for increasing the supply of the more expensive foodstuffs and for decreasing the retail prices to enable them to be bought and consumed.

### **Agriculture.**

Now look at the agricultural problem. With the exception of the war years, agriculture has for many decades been, on the whole, unprofitable. Wages have been lower than those paid to skilled workmen in any other industry and farm work, especially some of the branches, such as dairying, poultry and fruit growing, requires more skill and training than is necessary in some of the industries which pay nearly double the wages. In spite of low wages a considerable proportion of agricultural produce has continued for many years to be sold below the all-in cost of production. Prices have not been sufficient to maintain land, buildings and equipment in a state of efficiency. The part of the

industry which has survived has done so because it has been living off its capital. **Many millions of pounds are now needed to recondition the industry and bring it into a state of efficiency.** During all these years, food has been sold off the farmers at less than the true cost of production. Consumers have been subsidised at the expense of British agriculture.

With the further fall in prices, at the crisis of 1930, the industry was virtually bankrupt. Government schemes, based on the 1931 and 1933 Marketing Acts, were designed to raise prices by regulating supply to economic demand by means of Marketing Boards given monopolies supplemented by quota schemes to make the monopolies complete by controlling production and imports.

These schemes, which maintain prices by producing an artificial scarcity, benefit the producers. But the benefit is at the expense of the consumers. Milk production is now profitable. But the retail price of milk is higher than it is in most other countries. Wheat growing is profitable. But the subsidy for the wheat farmer is paid by a tax on flour, which, in the present year, will amount to about  $\frac{3}{4}$ d. for the four-pound loaf.

For the wealthier half of the community, these indirect taxes on food are not important because the proportion of the total income spent on food is small. **But the poorer the family, the higher is the proportion of the total income spent on food.** In some families, it amounts to as much as 70 per cent. The poorer half of the population are thus forced to make contributions to assist farmers, many of whom, in spite of the depression in agriculture, are still better off than they are. **There are few farmers who are as poor as the two million unemployed.**

## The Fallacy of Restriction.

The most unfortunate feature of this policy is the restriction of the amount of food allowed to come on the market. It is suggested that we may have a further restriction on the imports of mutton. But all the beef and mutton at present being produced or imported is presumably being eaten. Therefore, for the benefit of the producer in this country, some are to be deprived of meat and the rest are to pay a higher price. But the evil does not stop there. It involves a further restriction on inter-imperial trade to the detriment of the Dominions and of our own exporting industries.

Most people now realise that **this economic planning for scarcity has been unsuccessful**. The recent demonstration of the unemployed, asking for food or work, and the threat of the farmers to march to London to call attention to their plight, show that our agricultural and public health measures have not dealt with the fundamental cause of malnutrition due to poverty and of the depression in agriculture.

A policy of restriction might be justified as a temporary emergency measure, like throwing the cargo overboard to lighten the ship in a storm. As a permanent measure, applied to food, it is indefensible. It retards the improvement in national health and physique. It prevents the expansion of agriculture and allied industries. It tends to stabilise the present stagnation of trade with resulting unemployment and poverty. **Worst of all it tends to foster class hatred against a system which seems to be run in the interests of the favoured few.**

The time has come to abandon this policy, which is fraught with danger to the whole economic and social structure.

Let us examine the position anew on the assumption that the objective of the Government is to promote the welfare of the whole forty-five million inhabitants of this country.

The basis of human welfare is health and the first essential for health is an adequate diet. If the nation is to enjoy an adequate diet, we must increase the production or imports of animal products, fruit and vegetables, and the retail price of these must be brought within the reach of the poor.

On the other hand, the additional foodstuffs cannot be produced unless the farmer is guaranteed a price big enough to induce him to increase production.

Here is the crux of the whole problem. **We need money to bridge the gulf between what the farmer needs and what the poor can pay.** We have tried to make the farmer subsidise the consumer. Then, in the last seven years, we have tried to make the consumer subsidise the farmer. Both methods have failed. **The money must be found where the money is or, if that process is going to be too painful for those who have the money, our financial experts must devise ways and means of adjusting the volume of money to our potential wealth so that we may apply our scientific knowledge to the resources of our country to bring our national food supply up to our national requirements.**

We need the food. We have the land to produce it. We have two million unemployed wanting work. If we say we cannot produce the food which the nation needs because we cannot find the money, what we are really saying is that we cannot produce it under the present economic and financial system.

The amount of money needed would not be so very large. If we could balance the total amount which has been spent to assist agriculture with an equal

amount to help to bring retail prices within the purchasing power of the poor, we would have a fund large enough to initiate a new food policy which would reconcile the interests of health and agriculture.

The organisation needed would be simpler than the present complicated system required to apply restriction. Marketing Boards would need to become National Boards responsible to the whole community. And, indeed, the community should have control of its food supplies. The objective of the Boards would be to increase consumption and production as rapidly as possible with the minimum interference with the normal methods of trade.

#### **A National Food Policy.**

Some of us have advocated a food policy based on national food requirements as the only means of abolishing malnutrition. But it has become obvious that we cannot have such a policy without changing the objective of national planning for agriculture. The more the position is studied, the clearer it becomes that making human welfare the objective in any measure dealing with food instead of being incompatible with national prosperity would be **one of the easiest methods of bringing about economic prosperity.** A League of Nations Committee of agricultural and economic experts of international reputation studied this question and the report shows that a policy which has for its objective raising the consumption of food up to the optimum standard would relieve the present deadlock of the economic system which is breaking down under the "burden of plenty" for which it cannot find markets. We have a market for foodstuffs in this country among the half of the population whose diet is inadequate for health. Every country has a market of the same nature. In Australia, probably thanks to the influence of **Mr. S. M. Bruce**

and Mr. F. L. McDougall, one of our greatest authorities on the economics of food, the Government has done an investigation on diet and health and found that even in a wealthy city like Melbourne, where the standard of living is higher than in this country, 21.7 per cent. of children of pre-school age show signs of malnutrition due to lack of sufficient milk, dairy products, eggs, fruit and vegetables. I venture to predict, when similar surveys are completed in different countries, the percentage of people requiring more of these foodstuffs will be higher than that found in Melbourne. Even in the wealthiest countries there is no lack of a market for foodstuffs which can be exploited, so soon as we have national food policies based on national requirements for health.

A national food policy on the lines suggested would reconcile the interests of the producer and the consumer. It would bring about "the marriage of health and agriculture." It would put a bottom into poverty. It would bring about a rise in the standard of national health and physique. It would bring prosperity to agriculture with increased employment. The prosperity would overflow into other industries. It would be the spear-head of a new movement for economic prosperity.

We have a new Minister for Agriculture — an excellent appointment. He has the confidence of the farmers and the goodwill and best wishes of everybody for the success of the difficult task he has been given. He will be successful to the extent to which he can get money which is the one thing the industry needs. We would have had, however, greater hopes if, instead of being appointed merely Minister for Agriculture, he had been appointed **Minister for Food and Agriculture**. He would then have had an opportunity which his predecessors never had. In that case, in addition to consulting

the farmers as to what they need to make farming profitable, he would have been able to consult the wives of the working class families as to what food they need to rear healthy children and what they can afford to pay for it. He could have consulted Medical Officers of Health in the distressed areas on the effect of bad feeding, due to poverty, on the health of the unemployed in these areas. Then, having considered both the production and the consumption aspects of the national food problem, if he were given the money and the powers, he could evolve a policy which would bring about the prosperity of agriculture on the broad basis of the welfare of the whole population. If he were able to do that, he would be more than a great Minister for Agriculture. His name would go down in history as the initiator of **the greatest social and economic reform of our time.**

### **The Foundations of Peace.**

An announcement that it has become the policy of His Majesty's Government to ensure that a diet fully adequate for health is to be made available for every member of the community and that farmers are to be offered a price which will induce them to produce the additional food needed, would be a new gospel for the poor and an assurance of prosperity for agriculture. It would open up vistas for the expansion of trade and industry. It would be the initiation of a new economic policy which every person could understand and which every person could believe in. It would lift the nation to a higher spiritual plane. We would be planning for human welfare instead of planning for the maintenance of narrow vested interests. We would have an objective worth while working for. The present feeling of frustration and doubt would be replaced by a spirit of optimism and purpose. It would be

an important practical step towards moral re-arming.

There are twenty-one countries with National Nutrition Committees working towards this objective. This new policy will undoubtedly come. When it comes it will be the first step for the relief of economic distress which is the cause of war. But will it come soon enough to prevent disaster? It is a race against time. The United Kingdom, the world's greatest market for food, holds the key to the position.

**We might well take the lead in a movement which would ultimately become world-wide. We might give leadership to a distracted and fear-ridden world. We might guide civilisation towards prosperity and plenty which are the only sure foundations for peace.**