

PAUPERISM AND POVERTY.

BY THOMAS JONES, M.A.,

Professor of Political Economy in the Queen's University
of Belfast.

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At the end of 1906 the Vice-regal Commission on Poor Law Reform in Ireland presented its Report and issued a statistical appendix and a volume of evidence running into a thousand closely printed double columns. Three years later a Royal Commission appointed to review the Poor Law of the United Kingdom issued a Majority Report and a Minority Report, and is now in course of publishing some forty volumes of appendices dealing with every phase of public assistance to the poor. Without pretending to have read the whole of this vast material, or to have entirely mastered the details thereof, I wish to invite your attention to the main practical proposals placed before us, and the theories of pauperism by which they are supported. I think it is important that we should reach some understanding of the theories before discussing the proposals. We all bring to the study of the Reports certain views—firmly or loosely held—of legal, economic, and moral dependence. These views are, in varying degrees in each of us, the result of reading, observation, discussion, suggestion. The opinions of most of us will have been largely moulded by the theory of pauperism which has dominated official and academic thought for three-quarters of a century. Confronted as we now are with Reports which challenge the orthodox tradition, it is necessary that we should subject both the facts and the theories of pauperism to as fresh and unbiassed an examination as is possible for us.

Professor Dicey has traced in an illuminating series of lectures the influence of public opinion upon the course of legislation in this country. There were, he tells us, three main currents of legislative opinion in the 19th century :—

- (1) The period of old Toryism or legislative quiescence (1800–1830).
- (2) The period of Benthamism or Individualism (1825–1870).
- (3) The period of Collectivism (1865 onwards).

The new Poor Law of 1834 falls into the second period as “the most celebrated piece of legislation which can be

attributed to the Philosophic Radicals." It may, indeed, be questioned whether a Poor Law of any kind is consistent with the principles of a thorough-going individualism, but "instant abolition" was an impossibility even to the bold surgeons of 1834, as it is to the majority in 1909. Even as late as 1872, at the end of the second period, Professor Fawcett was hoping for the gradual abolition of the Poor Law. But there are only faint traces of that hope in the Majority Report. It accepts the view, for example, that outdoor relief has become "so definitely and absolutely a part of the administration of the country" that it cannot be wholly abolished, though it is hoped "that in the course of a few years it will shrink to small proportions." (Part VII., Section 218.) The substitution of the soft-sounding "home-assistance" for the harsh associations of outdoor relief is significant of the change wrought since the days of Fawcett and the founding of the Charity Organisation Society.

There were three great objects before the Commissioners of 75 years ago. They wished to dispauperise the able-bodied labourer, to succour the non able-bodied in appropriate institutions, and to set up an effective centralised machinery for the administration of relief. In regard to the first object alone did they achieve anything approaching a complete measure of success. With regard to the second and third objects the policy of 1834 has failed, or rather it has never been fully tried. In the draft of proposed measures which Chadwick submitted to the Cabinet, the following passage occurs :—

"Thus, when a town which contains four or five parishes, each with its respective workhouse, is incorporated, each house may be exclusively appropriated to a particular class of paupers. The old and impotent might be placed in one house by themselves, the whole of the pauper children may be placed in another house, the able-bodied females may be placed in a third of the workhouses, and the able-bodied males may be placed in the fourth house, the best adapted for discipline and regulation. Each class may thus receive an appropriate treatment : the old may enjoy their comforts, the children may be educated properly for service, and discipline and rigour may. . . be concentrated to stop the influx of pauperism from the able-bodied."

Aggregation for the purpose of segregation was one of Chadwick's favourite maxims, but he was quickly thwarted in his attempt to give effect to it because of the cost involved, and the result is the general mixed workhouse of to-day, denounced in all three Reports. The third object of the 1834 Commissioners—an effective centralised machinery—

has not been realised. The central control has frequently been vacillating and incompetent. If bourgeois and labour guardians have been guilty of appointing relieving officers from among their friends and partisans, no more exalted motives have inspired many of the appointments of the Local Government Board.

Service to one of the political parties has not seldom been rewarded by an inspectorship or similar post. The general result has been that the Local Government Board "has allowed to continue without any inspection at all what amounts to one-third of the total Poor Law expenditure, and probably to more than one-third of the work of the Guardians." It has been overcome by the local authorities not solely or mainly because the latter were extravagant or wilful, but partly because they were uninstructed in "the principles of 1834," and partly because those principles themselves were inadequate to the situation, and the central authority failed to substitute others for them. Here, as we shall show presently, is the taproot of the whole Poor Law jungle.

The "principles of 1834" were briefly that :

- 1 (1) the rates should be used to relieve destitution, not poverty ; and
- (2) the condition of the pauper should be less eligible than that of the independent poor.

The "machinery of 1834" proposed by Chadwick to enforce these principles was :

- (1) the workhouse test for the able-bodied ;
- (2) classification in and by means of institutions for the non-able-bodied ; and
- (3) central control exercised through salaried officers imposing uniform administration throughout the country.

It is plain that the schemes of 1906 and 1909 revive several features of the policy recommended by Chadwick. But, as already stated, his second and third proposals were not adopted. The workhouse became the dreary and indiscriminate refuge of all sorts and conditions of poor men, women, and children. The policy "of entrusting the execution of a scientifically conceived Act to popularly elected authorities" was contrary to the wishes of Chadwick, its principal contriver. To the end of his long life he never ceased to complain that his plan—the plan consciously or unconsciously derived from Bentham—"never had a fair trial, because its working was not confided to trained, salaried, and, therefore, responsible officials."

What would have happened if his scheme had been given a full and fair trial we cannot say. What we do know is that

the Poor Law system of to-day stands condemned by men of all parties. It is full of contradiction within and without, it is beset by rival agencies which did not exist in Chadwick's day, and which can do the work of public assistance more efficiently than the Poor Law does. How has the confusion arisen? What ways of escape are suggested by the three Reports respectively?

II.

The present chaos in Poor Law theory and practice is to be traced to four main sources :

- (1) the inadequate diagnosis of pauperism put forward in the Report of 1834 ;
- (2) the propagation of the inadequate "principles of 1834" in an exaggerated form by the "strict" school of administrators ;
- (3) the contradictory policies of the Guardians who from time to time and from Union to Union have loyally obeyed, vigorously opposed, or half-consciously ignored the "principles of 1834" ; and
- (4) the growth of agencies of public assistance outside the Poor Law and in competition with it.

The Commissioners of 1834 concentrated their attention on "the great source of abuse" in their time, viz., the outdoor relief afforded to the able-bodied. They illustrated its evil results from every point of view. They traced these evils entirely to the indolence and improvidence of the poor wrought upon by a bad administrative system, which enabled its operators "to regulate the distribution of the parochial fund" so as "to extract from it a profit to themselves." A pernicious system of allowances in aid of wages had demoralised employer and labourer alike, and converted both into parasites preying on the rates. That this diagnosis of the situation contained a most important element of truth is undoubted, and was indeed demonstrated by the improvement which followed upon the application of the Workhouse Test. But that it was a wholly inadequate interpretation of the facts is equally proved by a study of the period before and after the reforms of 1834. What amazes the modern reader of the Report is its almost entire neglect of the economic causes of distress which play so large a part, for example, in the Majority Report of 1909. It is absurd to imagine that these economic causes came into being *after* 1834. "The eighteenth century wore on to its close, and the next century began; year by year the condition of the working classes in England became more gloomy. An astonishing series

of bad harvests, a most exhausting war, a change in the methods of industry that dislocated old ties, combined with an injudicious Poor Law to bring the working classes into the greatest misery they have ever suffered, at all events since the beginning of trustworthy records of English social history." So Professor Marshall has written in his "Principles." I have already emphasised this point in a report to the Commission,* and therefore, instead of repeating what I have there said, I will quote in my support from a recent article in the *Sociological Journal*. After characterising the Report of 1834 as a "wildly unhistorical document," Mr. Tawney summarises the economic anarchy of the time in these words :

"Industry had been through the crisis of substituting machinery for hand labour. Town crafts had been overwhelmed in the rush of child labour made possible by the sweeping away in 1813 of the 16th century system of regulation; village textile trades, since the 16th century the stand-by of the agricultural population, were being killed by the factory system; between 1780 and 1830 some six million acres of land had been enclosed, and the agricultural labourers cut off from their valuable rights or privileges—it does not matter which—of common. In fact, there had been between 1760 and 1834 a wholesale redistribution of property. On the top of all had come the high price of the Corn Law period, and a series of depressions. These things by themselves were sufficient to make the years between 1815 and 1840 a period of acute distress. Not one of them is more than mentioned in the Report of 1834 In short, from the historical point of view, the long-accepted theory that the distress of 1790 to 1834 was due mainly to administration of the type of the so-called 'Speenhamland Act of Parliament' must be pronounced a mere figment. When that is once admitted, the whole body of Poor Law doctrine built upon the theory that distress then was, and now is, mainly due to personal causes, crashes to the ground, and the student realizes, with something like horror, that three generations of men and women have been sacrificed to what, when it is examined critically, turns out to be nothing more nor less than a gigantic historical blunder."†

Destitution is the result of defective personal character; the firm and regular offer of the workhouse will convert the potential pauper into an independent labourer; in any case, the condition must be made worse than that of the free labourer; thrift, occupational improvement, manly independence, domestic peace, follow in the wake of strict administration. So runs the doctrine, and it is supported by an appeal to a number of stereotyped verbal categories like Destitution, Independence, Pauperism, Deterrence, which have become in many ways misleading and mischievous. The whole Poor Law vocabulary is a survival of conditions which have ceased to exist, or rather which existed only to

* "Out-Relief and Wages" [Cd. 4690], 1909.

† "The Theory of Pauperism." By R. H. Tawney.—*Sociological Journal*, October, 1909.

a limited degree when the phrases were first coined, and which have existed to but a limited degree ever since. "Mental habits continue long after the economic conditions which fashioned them have disappeared, and popular beliefs reflect the passing of nature's deficit, while the actions of men who hold those beliefs are chiefly governed by the new age of surplus in which they live. The economic revolution is here, but the intellectual revolution that will rouse men to its stupendous meaning has not done its work."* These words truly describe the position of Poor Law opinion and practice to-day. Progress is blocked because men are swayed by phrases which have ceased to correspond to facts and the facts can only be seen in the light of the labels tacked on to them. A million men, women and children of all sorts are grouped and classified as paupers. They are hidden away in a General Mixed Workhouse. We are so engrossed in the upward and downward movement of "the percentage of pauperism" that we are prone to forget that the figures represent healthy and sick, virtuous and vicious, idle and industrious, fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. It is only when marched through a workhouse for the first time that some of us realise that "pauper" is another name for human beings. I went last week through the Belfast Workhouse with a colleague. The scene was new to him, and depressing in the extreme. His comment in effect was this: Whether the Majority or Minority are right, it is plain that all this is wrong. If many more of the general public could be taken in the same way through these dreary barracks we should quickly see an end to the Irish workhouse.

When we turn to examine more closely the history of Poor Law administration as distinct from the doctrine taught in official reports and by Guardians in public conference, we shall find innumerable departures, good and bad, from the orthodox tradition of the Workhouse Test. The Commissioners of 1834 had mainly the able-bodied in mind. They say comparatively little about women and children, the sick and the infirm, though they do distinctly lay down that there shall be separate buildings for the indoor treatment of the aged and really impotent, the children, the able-bodied females, and the able-bodied males. "Each class might thus receive an appropriate treatment; the old might enjoy their indulgences without torment from the boisterous; the children be educated, and the able-bodied subjected to such courses of labour and discipline as will repel the indolent and vicious." We have seen that this sound policy was not at once carried out for reasons of expense, nor has it been carried out to this day wherever the General Mixed Workhouse

* Patten.—"New Basis of Civilization," p. 11.

exists. On the other hand, it is true that in many Unions, especially in the larger urban centres, separate and special provision has been made for educating the children, nursing the sick, and sheltering the aged and friendless. And this has sometimes been done on so generous a scale that we may say of the Guardians—in the language of Professor Patten—“that their actions . . . are chiefly governed by the new age of surplus in which they live.”

In England and Wales on any given day there are approximately half-a-million outdoor paupers, or two outdoor paupers to one indoor. It had been the original intention of those who framed the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 that all out-relief to the able-bodied should cease on July 1st, 1835, but it was ultimately left to the discretion of the Commissioners to introduce the prohibition gradually. Able-bodied pauperism is now almost confined to the large towns. The out-relief problem of to-day is for the most part concerned with sickness, accident, widowhood, and old age. If some work-houses are palatial and mirror an age of surplus, out-door relief reflects “the passing age of nature’s deficit.” The grants are so meagre as to cause positive suffering. Guardians try to compensate for inadequacy of knowledge by inadequacy of relief. Little or no supervision is exercised over the housing conditions, with the result that many paupers are living in the most insanitary surroundings. Here and there over the country aged folk are living in a state of neglect, a source of danger to themselves and to their neighbours, and their homes and persons are sometimes indescribably loathsome. The same contrast of surplus and deficit is presented in the treatment of the children. On the one hand you have the cottage homes condemned by the majority for their increasing elaborateness and growing cost of maintenance. “The original idea of a cottage home was a real cottage, but the cottage has now become a villa.” [Part IV., Section 374.] On the other, you have the neglected child of the over-worked widow. By far the greater number of children under the Poor Law are those of parents receiving out-relief. Dr. Vail, a Special Investigator, is quoted as stating that “in many cases the amount allowed by the Guardians for the maintenance of outdoor pauper children cannot possibly suffice to keep them even moderately well.” Again, “No Board of Guardians, so far as my investigations go, takes any interest whatever about the placing and starting in life of boys who have had out-relief, nor does it try to help them to any technical training.”

The fourth and last source of Poor Law confusion to which I shall refer is the existence of a vast network of ameliorative agencies which did not exist in 1834, and which to-day, paid for out of rates and taxes or charitable funds, compete with

the Poor Law in eagerness to serve the community. The striking changes wrought in 75 years have been most ably traced by Mr. and Mrs. Webb, and I need only recall the main outlines of their picture. In 1834 there was no public authority to whom the care of the various classes of poor could be entrusted. There was no sanitary authority charged with the prevention of all disease and with the cure of such diseases as are infectious. There was in 1834 no education authority, charged with the schooling of all children, and having its own network of schools, and staff of teachers. There was (outside the Metropolis) no force of salaried police whose business it was to prevent the public nuisance of vagrancy. There was no systematic prison organisation nor any idea of curative treatment of those compulsorily detained. There was no public provision at all for idiots, defectives or epileptics. There was no public authority dealing with unemployment. There was, in 1834, no idea of a national service of pensions, providing superannuation for all over 65 who need it, completely divorced from the Poor Law.

“The Poor Law Commissioners of 1834 were therefore compelled to recommend that a new authority should be established, to deal with all the classes for which public provision had then to be made. And this provision, however diverse in character it needed to be, was governed by the only factor then common to all the classes, namely, that of being in need of public aid. This was called destitution. Hence the conception of pauperism.*

By to-day public provision has been extended to one class after another quite apart from the test of destitution until the expenditure on Poor Law relief is only a fractional part of the amount spent in the aggregate by the State on various forms of public assistance. Over against the statistical decline in legal pauperism must therefore be placed the array of subsidised agencies operating on a vast scale outside the Poor Law altogether.

“To-day, a sum of nearly 70 millions is being annually spent out of the rates and taxes of the United Kingdom in providing maintenance, education, and medical treatment for the various sections of the poorer classes, ten times as much as in 1834, though the population has not quite doubled . . . This huge amount is being expended by all sorts of local governing bodies, competing with each other, overlapping each other's operations, and duplicating each other's services. Their work is more or less supervised by half-a-dozen different

* Sidney Webb in *Clare Market Review*, June, 1908.

departments of the National Government, acting on the most diverse principles, without consultation with each other, and often diametrically at variance with each other Altogether there are, in the aggregate, many more people being wholly or partially maintained out of the rates and taxes by the Local Health Authorities, the Local Education Authorities, the Local Lunacy Authorities, the Local Pension Authorities, and the Local Unemployment Authorities than there are by all the Poor Law Authorities put together."

Then, further, outside and beyond these activities of the State you have the ubiquitous and multifarious and chaotic ministrations of the charitable public. Glasgow and London alone, we are told, spend £11,000,000 every year on charity, or more than half the total expenditure of the Kingdom on Poor Relief. In November last the Glasgow Charity Organisation Society published "a statement based on ascertained facts prepared by the Society" which showed that "at least 20,000 individuals are known to have asked assistance from two to six Societies with the view of getting help from as many as possible."

The vice of Poor Law literature has been to shut its eyes to all this State and voluntary activity and to be for ever discussing the rise and fall of "pauperism" as if it were an entirely isolated disease, fundamentally different from all other features of the body politic. Once we escape the trammels of Poor Law terminology and face the facts we shall see that a reduction in the amount of legal pauperism may be a good but may also be a bad symptom. You may cut down out-relief, fill your workhouses and reform nobody. You may cut down out-relief, force the applicants into "independence" of the Poor Law, only to find them presently dependent on everything else—on the labour of children, on pawnshops, on shelters, on missions, on landlords, on neighbours in the East End and on servants in the West End." The decline in pauperism or legal dependence is absolutely no proof of a growth of moral independence. "You may sweep the dirt of your room under the sofa, but you do not get rid of it."

III.

Let us now examine the specifically Irish problem in the light of these reflections. I speak with diffidence on this section of my subject, because of inadequate knowledge, but on grounds of general principle, and waiving minor details, I think I can find much in the Report of the Viceregal Commission to illustrate and support the position I have taken up. A Poor Law system was imposed upon this country from without. In England the workhouse was devised to make the lazy and idle seek employment which was to be

had. Here the difficulty was to find employment for men who wanted to work. The Irish Royal Commissioners of 1836 made a more penetrating analysis of the situation than their English predecessors and launched a programme of economic reform which it has taken 70 years to get under weigh. In Ireland you had a rapidly multiplying population crowded upon the land and with insufficient employment. In England you had a rapidly multiplying population crowded in the towns with abundant employment and on the land a population demoralised by a vicious allowance system begotten by an industrial revolution. The one called for development of resources, the other for control of a rapidly changing environment. But the same remedy was prescribed for both patients, and while it served as a temporary tonic it left whole classes almost as badly off as before. And so in 1906 you have the Viceregal Commission declaring that the "low level of subsistence and comfort throughout nearly all Ireland, with the poverty and destitution resulting therefrom, cannot be effectively relieved by any Poor Relief Law such as that of 1838."

But, leaving the wider economic question, let us look more closely at the present system and the reforms proposed. Nearly one-third of the institutional poor in Ireland are sick, nearly one-third more are aged and infirm. Here, as in England, the qualification of destitution, literally understood, has broken down. The Viceregal Report declares that:—

"The great majority of those who are treated in these Workhouse Hospitals [*i.e.*, in the rural districts] are no more *paupers* in the ordinary sense of the word than the tradesmen or other independent but humble earners who are afforded gratuitously in cities the great advantages bestowed by those hospitals which are maintained to a large extent by voluntary contributions."

In other words, the class relieved consists of farmers, labourers, and tradesmen or their families, but because of the workhouse tradition of deterrence these sick persons, whose restoration to health is of great importance to many, are provided with the roughest beds, in unplastered and unceiled rooms, are attended upon by degraded unpaid inmates as nurses, and are, in a word, treated much worse than are the lunatics. Similarly, we are told, out-relief is often, indeed generally, "given to persons who, though poor, are by no means destitute of resources and means of livelihood. The boundary line has in practice been extended from destitution to poverty, with the result that the number of possible applicants is much increased. Instead of out-door relief being the sole support of the destitute, it has become merely an item in the receipts of the poor person." They add that this is not at all what was intended, "but the system seems

to be popular, and it appears to have taken root." Since this Report was written the State has once more intervened with support for a large section of the aged poor by means of pensions.

I proceed to take the main recommendations of the admirable Viceregal Report and to pass some brief running comments upon them.

- (1). *The present workhouse system should be abolished. The various classes of inmates, except children, should be segregated into separate institutions.*

With this proposal I presume we shall all heartily agree. The mixed workhouse stands condemned in all three Reports not only for the evil it does but for the positive good it prevents. Once it goes it will be easier for all of us to think oftener of constructive help and less often of deterrence.

- (2). *A State Medical Service should be established and the cost thereof defrayed out of money voted by Parliament.*

This is the boldest suggestion in the Report, but it will not surprise anyone conversant with Irish vital statistics and with the part sickness plays as a factor in pauperism. Though the majority reject this proposal they have written in their English Report these words :—

- "It is probably little, if any, exaggeration to say that, to the extent which we can eliminate or diminish sickness among the poor, we shall eliminate or diminish one-half the existing amount of pauperism."

If, therefore, we are to strike effectively at one of the most prolific sources of pauperism we must seek out disease before, not after, it has become chronic. We must dissociate the treatment of sickness from the Poor Law and deal with it as a health problem and not as a poverty problem. To do otherwise will be to duplicate services over the country which, it is certain, will not easily co-operate, and which will perpetuate that confusion of principles and methods which undermines independence. Automatic tests will be applicable to much of the work of the State Medical Service. Malingering there certainly will be, but its evil will be far outweighed by the spreading of health with the hope and courage and delight in work that normally go with it.

- (3). *Destitute respectable widows with only one legitimate child should be eligible for out-door relief.*

The discussion of out-door relief in the Viceregal Report appears to me inadequate and unsatisfactory. It is surely not enough to say that the system has taken root and is popular. The deeper question is :—What good purpose is

served? Are these doles doing any good? Ought they to be increased? Are they going to the right people? Is there thorough inquiry into other sources of income? Are the children of out-relief parents being properly nourished, clothed, and schooled? Are they living in wretched insanitary dwellings and growing up into another generation of weaklings? I should urge the cleansing of the out-relief lists, the granting of adequate help after the fullest inquiry, the appointment of women inspectors in the towns, and the co-operation of friendly visitors in the supervision of the cases. To move from an indoor system to an outdoor system without taking these precautions, as I fancy the Belfast Guardians are doing, is simply to manufacture wholesale deceit, to distribute aimless doles, and to pauperise in the worst possible sense.

- (4). *Infants should be placed in "Nurseries" and all children between infancy and maximum limit of age should be boarded out.*

This, I think, is sound policy, and I do not think the discovery of suitable homes should be insuperable. The scheme of the minority breaks down here, as you have no educational machinery corresponding to the public authorities in England and Scotland. But the difficulty can be got over to a great extent by adopting the boarding-out system, on the one hand, and the State Medical Service on the other. It would be the duty of the latter to institute a system of medical inspection of school children throughout the country. Special provision, possibly in the Nurseries, would have to be made for children waiting to be boarded out, and for children detained in labour-houses for short periods.

- (5). *Vagrants, casuals and similar classes should be committed by a Court of Justice for detention in labour houses.*

This raises the question of unemployment and the treatment of the able-bodied which would require a paper all to itself. I will only say that here again I incline towards the Minority Report—with reservations. I am not sanguine that we shall reform the vagrants and casuals now in our midst. For them I would provide a colony on the lines of Merxplas, near Brussels. Given a complete system of Labour Exchanges they could be used to ascertain whether work was to be had or not. Repeated refusal to take up work or repeated loss of work from personal causes would mark a man out for one or other colony in a series graded according as the reformatory or penal purpose preponderated. In the seaport industries it will probably be necessary to bring pressure to bear upon employers if a serious effort at de-casualisation is to be attempted. For the unemployed artisan I would lay

all the stress on the insurance principle and none whatever on relief works.

(6). *Administration.*

I have left this to the last, though, perhaps, it should have been dealt with first of all. I will state briefly my impressions, I can hardly call them conclusions. I would enlarge the Councils of the Counties and County Boroughs and make women eligible for direct election to them. I would entrust to a committee of this body what remained of the work of Public Assistance after handing over the medical work to the Public Health Authority and the aged to the Pension Authority. It would supervise, *e.g.*, the boarding-out system and outdoor relief throughout the county. I would abolish the Guardians. To retain them only for the limited local responsibilities entrusted to them by the Viceregal Commissioners would, I think, tend still further to repel the best type of citizen. Further, if the new ideas of prevention, classification, and control are to be adopted, it means a revolution, and the average guardian is too wedded to ideas of deterrence, inadequacy, absence of inquiry, to rise to the height of the new policy with the vigour and courage necessary if we are to stamp out the worst forms of social parasitism. I would have nothing to do in Ireland with the complicated machinery proposed by the Majority, of Co-option, Public Assistance Committees, Voluntary Aid Councils and Committees. The County Council Committee should appoint a Registrar of Public Assistance, and he should have subordinates in various districts responsible to him. The Public Health and other officials should enlist the co-operation of voluntary workers, but these should disburse no moneys.