

THE GREAT BRITISH MIGRATION

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THE evacuation of school children from vulnerable areas in Britain to safer areas in the rural districts was one of the most striking events which marked the opening of the present war. Those who witnessed it will not readily forget it—the endless procession of school children, accompanied by parents and teachers, marching past in countless rows, each with gas mask and satchel in hand. Spectators could not watch them unmoved. Here was part of the precious young life of the nation, being swiftly and systematically shepherded away to places of safety from an enemy who in his ruthlessness would make no distinction between combatant and civilian, and who would shower his murderous bombs and poison gas on defenceless women and children. This was the grim fear that hung like a pall over the nation during those early September days. But the children marched on, many of them singing, open-eyed and unafraid. Hitler was just another bogey man! And this strange thing called the evacuation was an extra bit of luck, an unexpected extension of the summer holidays!

Mr. Chamberlain himself characterized it as the “greatest social experiment which England has ever undertaken.” This pronouncement almost implies that the effort was successfully carried out, and that the results were satisfactory. That is far from being the case. Indeed even now (end of January) it may be too early to pronounce judgment on the scheme, for the movement is still in progress; “evacuees” are still being conveyed to the country and others still continue to return home, but not even the Prime Minister’s most sympathetic admirer can claim full success for the scheme. Nor, on the other hand, can it be adjudged a dismal failure, in spite of the assertion of one of Britain’s leading editors that the scheme “lies extensively in ruins”. This article is therefore an attempt on the part of one living in Scotland (the situation in England is not dissimilar) to evaluate the whole project as fairly as possible, and while pointing out certain weaknesses it possessed and revealing certain deplorable social conditions which the evacuation brought to light, to show that the project in itself was not the ineffective thing its critics declared it was, but that certain unlooked-for elements came into play which completely nullified its object

and purpose. The justification of the writer is that he lives in a vulnerable area from which nearly 16,000 children and adults were removed on September 1st and 2nd, and that he took some little part as a school chaplain in the work of evacuation.

At the outset a fact which is widely overlooked ought to be stated: the evacuation took two forms—public and private, both of them being entirely voluntary. Private evacuation was undertaken by the well-to-do or the “better classes”, who could afford to move their children to safer areas. In some cases not only families but whole schools, mainly expensive residential schools, have been transported to country districts. And they are still there, happy in their new surroundings. Apart from the pain of separation from their parents, the lot of these children is only a little less comfortable than being at home. From the point of view of safety, there is no doubt that they have been given the better chance. In this respect private evacuation has been a notable success.

But our concern is with public evacuation, which the Government undertook as one of the primary measures for the safety of the people. “The aim of the Government Evacuation Scheme”, said the official memorandum, “is to provide facilities for the removal from the more dangerous and congested areas to less dangerous areas of certain groups of people whose removal is desirable on both national and humanitarian grounds.” These groups fell into four classes:

- (1) School children, teachers required to continue the education of the children, and helpers to assist in caring for them.
- (2) Children of pre-school age accompanied by mothers or other persons responsible for looking after them.
- (3) Expectant mothers; and
- (4) Adult blind persons.

The plans for evacuation were carefully, even elaborately, laid. It is altogether wrong to think that the scheme was hurriedly put together and fell to pieces through the immediacy and the urgency of war. It was a governmental scheme, and all the knowledge and ability of the government departments concerned were thoroughly utilized in formulating and carrying it out. Further, local authorities, welfare organizations and school teachers in the receiving areas—all of them people

on the spot—worked in close co-operation with the government departments months before the outbreak of hostilities, and covered the ground literally and metaphorically, so that everything pointed to a well-conceived and efficient scheme. It was a triumph of organization for all concerned—especially for the transportation companies who effected in the space of two or three days this unprecedented migration by road, rail and water, with scarcely any dislocation of regular traffic. Why, then, it may be asked, did not the evacuation work out in practice as outlined on paper?

There are several answers to the question. First, the time was unpropitious. A large proportion of the children either had not returned from their holidays or were but newly returned, and the schools had scarcely opened for the new term. Had the holidays not intervened, the parents in particular might have been gradually educated in the details of the evacuation, and so would have been better prepared to meet this sudden and overwhelming change in their conditions. Also, this is adduced as one of the reasons why so many children from the congested parts of certain cities left home in such a neglected and unkempt condition. This reason, however, does not provide full extenuation, although in fairness it should be stated that when a later evacuation took place, and doctors and nurses had had time to examine the children, no such reports were received as those which at first shocked the nation and provided material for spiteful broadcasts from Germany.

Further, in spite of the ability with which the evacuation plans were laid, certain blunders were perpetrated by the authorities, as in the choice of certain sites for receiving areas. For example, children from one vulnerable area on the east coast were sent to a district within a few miles of another vulnerable area on the same coast. Again, the receiving area was in some cases situated an hour's run or less on the bus from the evacuation area, thus tending to keep unduly open communication between the children's homes and their new billets. And further, difficulties of a religious character were created when Roman Catholic children were moved to districts where neither priest nor chapel existed.

When we examine the system of evacuation, we see that the unit was not the school but the family. On the face of it, that looked a sensible and kindly arrangement. But it did not work out in practice. Mothers naturally did not want their families to be broken up. The members of the families were of different

school age, or even pre-school age. Another family, similarly assorted, would be billeted along with them, and at once adjustment between the two families, not to mention the members of the household on whom they were thrust, became a difficult matter. And in so many cases the evacuated families were unaccustomed to the habits and customs of the homes to which they were sent. Such conditions may be blithely endured during a few brief weeks of holiday time, but they become intolerable when lived under the shadow of an uncertain and fear-ridden "duration".

It is contended by some that the homeward trek began as soon as payment for billets became compulsory. The facts do not bear out the statement; or, to be strictly accurate, it was true only in a comparatively small number of cases. At first payment was optional, but later on payment was insisted on from all who could afford it. In necessitous cases it was waived. The rates were as follows: for unaccompanied children \$2.60 per week for one, and \$2.10 each for more than one. This covered full board and lodging and all care, but not the cost of clothes and medical expenses. For persons other than unaccompanied children the charges were: \$1.25 per week for each adult over 14, and 75c. for each child under 14. This charge covered shelter, and access to water and sanitary arrangements. These payments were quite moderate, and only in a small degree contributed to the return of the evacuees. The homeward trek had already begun: compulsory payment did no more than supply an extra impetus.

The chief elements which militated against the successful working of the evacuation scheme were human and social. Not all the billets of course were suitable, i.e. for the new purpose to which they were being put. As one official who was closely connected with and took a prominent part in the work of evacuation recently said: "The quality of the accommodation was sacrificed to the amount." The officials of the Public Health Department, in their zeal to provide accommodation for as many evacuees as possible, and doubtless having regard to the crowded conditions under which they usually lived, were inclined to overlook the suitability of the accommodation for the purpose required. And they certainly forgot to take account of the inevitable reaction that would be produced upon householders by the presence of too many visitors compulsorily quartered upon them for an indefinite period of time.

When we come to consider the human factors, one is compelled to admit that in the matter of adjustment the mothers

were more blameworthy than the children who were evacuated. This may sound a strong indictment, but it brings us up against a state of mind which the conditions of modern life or a too generous system of social legislation had created. Either the natural beauty of the rural scene failed to impress them, or its effect was soon blotted out by social and personal considerations. The quietness of the country frightened them. The cottar house or the farm house, the residential house or the mansion house, was no substitute for the liveliness and the friendliness of the tenement "stair-heid". And what could the country offer in lieu of the glamour of "the pictures", and what plain and wholesome fare could approach the tastiness of "fish and chips"? True, the children would in time have adapted themselves to their new surroundings; not so the parents. City conditions had laid too strong a hand upon them, and kept them in thrall. Even the black-out of the cities was preferable to the natural darkness of the country.

Not a few of the mothers were frankly disappointed. They had expected a good time—where everything would be done for them; but when they discovered that their own active effort and co-operation were necessary, the prospect looked drear and depressing. Then came a pitiful wail from the fathers. They, the breadwinners, were being neglected in the city, and were finding housekeeping (the word "batching" is unknown over here) a sorry job. And some husbands and fathers were reported to be having a good time, too good a time, indeed, for the peace of mind of the exiled wives and mothers. So still another impulse to return home was provided.

According to the latest figures given in the House of Commons by the Minister of Health, of 734,883 unaccompanied children evacuated since the beginning of the war, 315,192 or nearly 43% had returned by January 8. Of 260,276 accompanied children, 223,381 or 85% had come home. And of 166,206 mothers evacuated, 145,681 or 87% had returned. The inferences that may be deduced from these figures are obvious, and bear out the conclusions of the preceding paragraph. The percentage of unaccompanied children still in the receiving areas is 57; which is a wonderfully good showing, in view of all the circumstances, and especially in view of the fact that evacuation was voluntary. It is the children accompanied by their parents who have returned in large numbers, and for this the parents must bear the responsibility. In addition to the considerations already mentioned, it would appear that the mothers were unable completely to visualize the situation, and all the elements of danger it contained

both for themselves and for their children. Because the Germans had dropped no bombs so far, they concluded that none would be dropped. The inconvenience, the discomfort and the dullness of their new surroundings were less to be endured than the depredations of an uncertain foe! So they preferred to take the risk of returning home. They failed to realize the humanitarian motives of the Government behind the evacuation scheme, and they took no account of the extraordinary cost and effort required to put the scheme into operation. But we must not be too hard on these shortsighted, unimaginative and distracted mothers. Even though their homes are of the humblest and poorest kind, the family circle still binds them together, and the dearest spot on earth to them is beneath their own roof-tree.

It may have been humane considerations like these that induced the Government to make their scheme a voluntary one. In any case, they must have argued, democratic Britain was not ready in September 1939 to accept a compulsory scheme. It is easy to say after the event: The Government should have taken a strong stand at the outset, and made their scheme a compulsory one. There is no doubt but that there would be more evacuees in the country today, but what a host of problems they would have taken with them! There is one element in the life of Britain which constitutes a prime obstacle in the way of successful evacuation, and which scarcely a war will remove, namely, class-consciousness. To one returned to Britain after spending a goodly portion of his life in Canada, nothing has brought home more forcibly than the evacuation the differences that exist between the classes and the masses in this old land: the poor, the working class, the lower middle class, the upper middle class, the people of independent means, the aristocracy and all the rest. The higher one rises in the social scale, the broader do the lines of demarcation become. But the differences are more acute between the "means" than between the "extremes".

In view of the facts stated, it may be asked: Has the Government's experiment, then, been a fiasco, and have the results been so small as to make the expenditure involved a waste of good money? To adopt that view is to fail to appreciate a situation that was tremendously difficult and complex. For after one has taken a full and impartial view of the case, the balance would appear to lie on the side of the Government—a small balance, but one that is by no means negligible. For it takes the form of many happy children (Would there were more!)

who have not only got used to their new conditions, but are actually enjoying them and are benefitting from them. Their improved physique tells its own tale, and their bright eyes look out on a scene more pleasing than they have ever known. Rigid lines are slowly breaking down, and friendships are being forged which will remain strong for many years. The children are making their irresistible way into the hearts of their adopted parents.

Such, then, is evacuation in Britain after five months, still a thorny problem, which some view with despair of its solution, and which most thinking people in the land regard with a large measure of concern. "What further steps, if any," they are asking, "do the Government propose to take in this most serious affair?" There are three possible courses:

(1) First, to accept the present situation and, human nature being what it is, to make the best of a bad job. This is not to imply that further evacuation is to be discouraged. The Government believe strongly in the wisdom of evacuation, and they have not written *finis* to their scheme. As already stated, evacuees are still being sent to the country; nay more, evacuees who have already been sent to the country may return thither, though not necessarily to the same billets, so long as no objections are raised to them on the ground of undesirable habits or bad conduct. But what of the evacuees who have come back to the city and will not return to the country? The Government must make provision for their safety also by increase of existing defences against air raids. The schools, moreover, when surrounded with sand-bag structures or provided with underground brick or cement shelters, cannot provide adequate protection for all the pupils. They must therefore attend school on the double-shift system, or else attend small classes in private homes; while those whose parents do not insist simply roam the streets at their own sweet will, thus offering more problems for overburdened authorities. And all because in vulnerable areas education is not obligatory. The safety of the child is the first consideration of the State: his education in time of war is a matter of secondary concern.

(2) The second course would be to make a fresh start with the scheme in the light of experience gained, and seek to persuade a doubtful and almost disillusioned populace of the undoubted advantages of evacuation. Considerable educational propaganda on the part of the Government would be necessary here. The working of the scheme itself, too, would need overhauling: perhaps a change in personnel so far as responsible

authorities are concerned; certainly a more liberal and effective use of the school teachers; and last but not least, the exercise of more care and common sense in the allocation of billets.

(3) The third course would be to make evacuation compulsory. Is the country ripe for such a drastic measure? There are many who believe it is. It may sound heartless to say it, but only one argument is necessary to enforce it: namely, a successful enemy attack from the air with incendiary bombs and high explosives. If such an attack were launched and proved effective, the fear in the hearts of the people, which was so real in September but which appears to be dormant now, would be so acute that they would flee in their thousands from the attacked cities, glad to put up with any discomfort so long as they could escape the terror that flieth by night and the pestilence that wasteth by noonday. Such an exodus, however, could only be attended not alone with riot and confusion but with serious loss, as under existing conditions it would be quite impossible to effect a transmigration as successful as in September.

If compulsory evacuation were adopted, it is doubtful whether existing accommodation in rural districts would prove on revised lines either adequate or suitable. There is therefore a growing opinion in the country in favour of school camps. Such camps would be advantageous in many respects, especially in regard to sleeping, eating, recreation and the like, but one wonders whether they would be sufficiently comfortable for school children during weather conditions as severe as those experienced this winter. And once again, the expense of creating such camps would be enormous.

So whichever course the Government may pursue, they are faced with heavy expense. But when the nation's money is being poured out like water, and when the young life of the nation is endangered, who is to boggle at expense?

The desperately serious fact is that every day brings us nearer to the time when the enemy is expected to launch his murderous attack on the towns and cities of Britain. The Government may therefore feel compelled to adopt drastic measures to ensure the protection of defenceless people in dangerous areas. Surely the civilian population, especially those who have hitherto shown themselves to be stupid and inconsiderate, should be prepared to accept without complaint or protest whatever measures the Government deem it wise to adopt. The task of winning the war is heavy enough: evacuation must not be allowed to increase the heaviness of that task.