

FABIAN TRACTS, No. 17.

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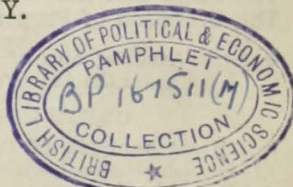
The Reform of  
the Poor Law.

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*Poor law.*

# The Reform of the Poor Law.\*

## I.—THE NEED FOR POOR LAW REFORM.

ONE of the most urgent needs for democratic social reorganisation is found in the existing system of Poor Law Relief. The present administration of the nation's provision for its poorer citizens is, in many ways, scandalously harsh to those who have the misfortune to be driven to accept the pauper dole. The ruling classes have deliberately made the lot of these poorer citizens so degraded that the more sensitive will die lingering deaths rather than submit to it, whilst others prefer going to gaol. In the hope of getting rid of the burden of maintaining the poor, and of throwing every one upon his own resources, the comfort, self-respect and personal dignity of whole generations of paupers have been, since 1834, ruthlessly sacrificed. Although no instructed person would for a moment venture to run any risk of restoring the evil days of the Old Poor Law, it is time to recognise that the present system must be fundamentally reformed. After fifty years' trial it has failed to extinguish pauperism and destitution. It succeeds in obviating any but a few cases of direct starvation; but it does not prevent a widespread demoralisation. It often fails to rescue the children from a life of pauperism, and the aged from public disgrace. More important than all, it fails utterly in its chief and most important purpose, of encouraging the provident and the worthy, and discouraging the spendthrift and the drunkard. It is, indeed, now coming to be denounced by experienced philanthropists as the greatest of all the existing hindrances to provident saving, and an instrument of serious degeneration of character among the English people.†

Nevertheless, such is the neglect of social reforms that neither the Liberal nor the Conservative Party so much as mentions Poor

\* The greater part of this Tract is reprinted, by permission of the proprietors of the *Contemporary Review*, from an article by Sidney Webb in that magazine for July, 1890, under the same title. Besides the authorities incidentally referred to, the following works may be mentioned as dealing with the English Poor Law:—Sir F. M. Eden's "State of the Poor"; Sir G. Nicholl's "History of the English Poor Law"; Dr. F. Ashcroft's "English Poor Law"; Rev. T. W. Fowle's "The Poor Law" (a convenient manual); and, above all, the great Poor Law Report of 1834, republished by the House of Commons in 1885 as "H. C. 347," price 2s. 5d.

† See "Thrift and Independence," by Canon Blackley; Mackay's "The English Poor"; the Charity Organisation Society's publications, *passim*; Fawcett's "Pauperism"; and the evidence given before the Select Committee on National Provident Insurance, H.C. 270 of 1885.

Law Reform. The sufferings of the paupers, the degradation of the class from which these are mainly drawn, and even the neglect of the children among them, fail to interest either Mr. Gladstone or Lord Salisbury. For, indeed, the paupers have no votes.

Socialists, who object to an industrial system which condemns to pauperism one-tenth of the population, believe that the greater part of the need for Poor Relief would cease if the owners of land and capital were compelled to restore to the workers collectively the tribute of rent and interest which is now exacted from them individually. Nevertheless, in a land of accident and sickness, poverty cannot be wholly extinguished until a complete Communism is reached. Some system of relief of the destitute must therefore continue to exist for a long time to come. This cannot be left to private charity. Socialists assert, with Bentham, that all such Poor Relief should be administered under the fullest public responsibility by freely elected public bodies. They believe that any attempt to substitute the organisation of voluntary charity for public relief must prove even more disastrous than a bad Poor Law.

Moreover, it must not be forgotten that no scheme which aims at the abolition or diminution of the present revenue from Poor Rates can gain the support either of the public or of the political economist. These ten millions sterling, virtually a share of the rental of the country, are as much the property of the poor as their wages, and no proposal can be for a moment admitted which contemplates the absorption of this tribute by the landlords or the middle class. National Insurance or Poor Law Reform can alike be but suggestions for the better administration of the collective revenues of the poor—all that is left to them in place of the monastic endowments, the mediæval charities and the common lands.

#### II.—THE NUMBER OF OUR PAUPERS.

Those who talk glibly about the abolition of the Poor Law can hardly have any adequate conception of the extent and character of the pauper class. It seems to have been assumed by the authors of the Act of 1834 that real destitution might fairly be regarded as an exceptional and accidental state, and that the awful permanence of the pauper class was merely the result of the demoralising old system. This idea is encouraged by the optimistic statistics reiterated by the Local Government Board, which show: "That the mean number of paupers relieved in the parochial year ending at Lady Day 1889, was smaller in proportion to the population than in any other parochial year included in the table. It amounted to 795,617, or a thirty-sixth of the estimated population."\* Including Scotland and Ireland, the total becomes over a million.

A million of our fellow-citizens in pauperism is more than a trifle. But that is not the whole tale. It has been pointed out over and over again that the Local Government Board statistics of pauperism, and especially the references to "one thirty-sixth of the

\* P. lxi of C—5813.

population," are misleading. They record merely the number of persons in actual receipt of Poor Law relief on one particular day. But Poor Law relief is now usually given for short periods at a time; and a large proportion of those who become paupers during any one year are not in receipt of relief during the whole of the year. The plan of granting relief only for short periods at a time is steadily becoming general.

In 1857, a careful computation was made in various ways of the number of different persons who, during the year, were paupers at one time or another. The total was found to be  $3\frac{1}{2}$  times the number for one day, and this calculation has since usually been accepted.\* Hence, instead of 2·8 per cent. we get nearly 10 per cent. of the population, or at least 3,500,000, as the class actually pauper during any one year.

Nor is this the worst aspect of the case. While a man or woman is in the prime of life, and free from sickness or accident, it may be assumed that pauperism is relatively exceptional. The appalling statistics of the pauperism of the aged are carefully concealed in all official returns. No statistics are given by the Local Government Board as to the percentage of aged paupers. No information was given on this point, even in the census of 1881. Although the occupations at each age were then obtained, the Registrar-General discreetly and humorously merged all paupers over sixty in the class "retired from business," so that the enriched army contractor and his aged workpeople were combined to swell this one category.

◦ In 1885, Canon Blackley found that in his parish, 37 per cent. of the deaths of persons over sixty, during fifteen years, had been those of paupers. He obtained returns from twenty-five other rural parishes, and found that 42·7 per cent. of deaths of persons over sixty were those of paupers.† Returns obtained from twenty Unions in England, selected entirely at haphazard, and including metropolitan and provincial, urban and rural districts, show the following results :

	Indoor.	Outdoor.	Total.
Total paupers in 20 Unions... ..	12,669	15,922	28,591
Number over sixty-five years of age	4,332	7,112	11,444
Percentage ... ..	33	45	40
Number over seventy years of age...	2,728	4,728	7,456
Percentage ... ..	21	30	26

If we may assume these Unions to be fairly representative of the whole—and the results coincide closely with those given by other tests—it would follow that out of the 817,190 persons simultaneously in receipt of relief in England and Wales, on the 1st of January, 1889, there would be at least 250,000 over 65, and 200,000 over 70 years of age.‡ At the census of 1881, the percentage of persons over

\* See Dudley Baxter's "National Income," p. 87; and Mulhall's "Dictionary of Statistics," p. 346.

† Report of Committee on National Provident Insurance," p. 159 of H.C. 208, 1886.

‡ See House of Commons Return, No. 36 of 1890.

those ages to the whole population was 4.57 and 2.64 respectively. Among the estimated population on January 1, 1889, of 28,628,804, there would accordingly be about 1,309,000 persons over 65. One in five of these is a pauper. There are approximately 756,000 persons over 70. Of these two out of seven are permanent paupers. Of the 250,000 paupers over 65, about 200,000 get outdoor relief; of the 200,000 over 70, about 150,000 receive this weekly dole; the remainder are in the workhouse infirmary, or aimlessly gazing at vacancy in the dreary "idle room" of the workhouse itself.

Extending these statistics roughly and hypothetically to the United Kingdom, with its million of simultaneous paupers, and its 38 millions of population, we find about 1,700,000 persons of 65 years of age, of whom about 325,000 are permanent paupers; and about 1,000,000 persons over 70, of whom 250,000 are permanent paupers. Other statistics go to confirm this broad result.

In London, one person in every five will die in the workhouse, hospital or lunatic asylum. In 1888, out of 79,099 deaths in London, 41,505 being over 20, 10,170 were in workhouses, 7,113 in hospitals, and 380 in lunatic asylums, or altogether 17,663 in public institutions.\* Moreover, the percentage is increasing. In 1887 it was 20.6 of the total deaths; in 1888 it rose to 22.3. The increase was exclusively in the deaths in workhouses and workhouse infirmaries. Considering that comparatively few of the deaths are those of children, it is probable that one in every four London adults will be driven into these refuges to die, and the proportion in the case of the "manual labor class" must of course be still larger.

Nor is there much hope of appreciable reduction in these figures at any early date. The proportion of paupers to population has remained practically stationary for the last twelve years.† The steady diminution in the number of able-bodied adults relieved is counterbalanced by an equally steady growth in the number of sick persons and lunatics, for whom collective provision is now made, as well as apparently by a slight rise in the number of the children and the aged. We may for some time to come reckon on having to make constant public provision for the needs of a million people in receipt of relief, representing a pauper population of at least three millions. It accordingly behoves us to see that this collective provision is as far as possible prevented from having demoralising or other injurious effects. Collective provision, when not combined with collective control of industry, may easily become demoralising to character and detrimental to the best interests of the recipients; and against this danger we must jealously guard. But we need not deliberately add to the possible objective demoralisation of the collective provision an unnecessary subjective demoralisation due to public stigma or disgrace. We must depauperise our deserving paupers. The whole range of Poor Law experience up to 1834 appeared to show

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\* Registrar-General's Report, 1889, C—5846, pp. 2, 72 and 94.

† See Local Government Board Report, C—5813.

that public boards could not be trusted to discriminate between individual cases; and the cast-iron rigor of the New Poor Law was the inevitable result. What we have been learning since 1834 is that discrimination must be more and more exercised between classes of paupers, not between individual cases, and that any Poor Law reform must necessarily proceed on this basis.

We have hitherto been so impressed with the danger of increasing the number of the shiftless poor, that we have managed to exercise a degrading and demoralising effect on those persons, many times more numerous, whose poverty is their misfortune, not their fault. We must now try a bolder experiment in what is necessarily our great collective laboratory of individual character. The time has come for us to maintain not only the bare existence, but the respectability of the aged, infirm, and orphaned poor, rather than content ourselves with the mere repression of the idle rogue and vagabond, whom the existing social order has often demoralised beyond redemption.

### III.—STATE PENSIONS FOR THE AGED.

The Poor Law Commissioners did not, in their great Report of 1834, recommend the withdrawal of outdoor relief from the aged or the infirm. The common impression that they advocated the total abolition of outdoor relief is incorrect. The whole drift of their conclusions is against any subsidy in aid of wages; but they did not regard collective provision for old age as any real allowance in aid of wages, in the sense of wages being likely to be higher if no such provision were made. Modern political economists cannot do otherwise than confirm this view.

No determined attempt has accordingly been made, except in London, Manchester, and a few other places, to abolish outdoor relief to the aged; and the statistics already quoted appear to prove that at least one-fifth of the people who attain the age of sixty-five are compelled to resort to the relieving officer for that bare subsistence upon which they linger out their lives.

Nothing can be more discouraging to provident saving, even where it is possible, than our present practice in such cases. When a man is absolutely destitute we provide for him a bare subsistence. If he can manage to save, by the time he is sixty-five, as much as £150, he can provide for himself and wife practically as well as he and she would be provided for if they had saved nothing at all. Once past that minimum, there is every inducement to save which "gentility" and independence can offer. Anything short of that minimum is virtually useless. Poor Law relief cannot legally be given except to the absolutely destitute; and the aged domestic servant, or farm-laborer, who has accumulated £50, must dissipate

that small hoard before his future will be secured from want.\* The man who has a shilling a week from his friendly society is legally no better off than he who has nothing.† Both must be just kept alive, and legally neither can demand more.

Now the virtual minimum which enables an aged couple to dispense with poor law relief is far beyond the reach of a large proportion of the population. Instead, however, of encouraging them to save as much as they can towards their support, we, in effect, discourage them by making them no better off than those who save nothing at all.

Would it not be better frankly to recognise the provision of a minimum pension for old age as a collective charge? Every person must necessarily pay rates and taxes in one shape or another all his life long. It seems desirable to promote in every way the feeling that "the Government" is no entity outside of ourselves, but merely ourselves organised for collective purposes. Regarding the State as a vast benefit society, of which the whole body of citizens are necessarily members, the provision of pensions to the aged appears to be an obvious expansion of the Democratic idea.

At present we give a superannuation allowance to about 160,000 retired civil servants, military and naval officers and men, policemen, postmen, &c. The system is being extended to elementary school teachers and nurses. In all these cases the pension is given practically as a matter of right; it is granted in addition to whatever may have been saved by the recipient; and it carries with it no stigma of public disgrace.

We also give what are virtually superannuation allowances to 250,000 aged paupers, besides workhouse accommodation to 75,000 more. In their case the pension is awarded as of grace; it is only awarded where there are no savings, or where the savings have been consumed; and it is accompanied by public opprobrium and legal disqualification for the duties of citizenship.

The result in the first case is to encourage thrift and saving to supplement the pension, without the slightest demoralisation of character. The result in the second case is absolutely to discourage thrift and saving, and to break down whatever character had survived the losing fight of life. If we intend to give pensions to our aged poor, as we virtually now do, had we not better do so in such a way as to improve rather than to injure their character, and in a

\* A domestic servant who, with incredible perseverance and patience, had saved up some £60 or £70, found this little hoard gradually melting away in her struggle to maintain her respectability, and appeared before the Whitechapel Board of Guardians with the balance, asking what she should do. Legally, the board could have given no relief until the amount was dissipated. Ultimately an adequate annuity was privately purchased for her, the extra sum required being found by subscription.

† So absurd is this legal discouragement of saving, that a practice is growing up of allowing half of any such pension to benefit the pauper—thus, if he has two shillings a week from his club, the normal relief is reduced only by one shilling. This illegal expedient is connived at by the Local Government Board.



manner calculated to promote rather than to discourage their own efforts to provide for their old age?

This proposal, though it is essentially one for National Insurance, must not be confounded with the current schemes which bear that name. The poor of this country will never vote away the poor-rate. No Government is at all likely to attempt to collect compulsory insurance premiums from men already supporting their trade-unions and friendly societies, their benefit clubs and their building societies, and paying, moreover, a not inconsiderable poor-rate. Nor is there any reason for any such collection. The expenditure and the revenue sides of the Budget ought economically to be kept distinct. If aged pensions are desirable let us have them. When the funds come to be raised, let it be done according to the classic economic maxims of taxation. It is pretty clear that these maxims will yield no support to the imposition of what would be virtually a new poll-tax.

The Rev. W. Moore Ede suggests\* that certain payments might be required from the recipients of the aged pension as a test of thrift, and a means of improving character. Without for a moment countenancing the heartless hypocrisy which recommends "thrift" to men who are in deplorable need of more money to spend on the immediate well-being of their families, Mr. Ede may have good reason to think that reform may most easily begin by granting aged pensions at first only to those persons who can show that they have made some attempt partially to provide for their old age. At present such persons often end their days in the workhouse. A large number of those compelled in their old age to resort to this refuge for the destitute have made ineffectual efforts at thrifty provision for their declining years. In 1881, out of 183,872 inmates of workhouses (one-third being children and another third women) no fewer than 11,304 had been members of benefit societies. In 3,913 cases the society had broken up, usually from insolvency.† A better arrangement can surely be made. The possession of small savings, continued subscription to a friendly society or club, life insurance, or lengthy membership of a trade-union, co-operative or building society, might all be accepted as relevant evidence of providence. But the object of the measure would be defeated unless the thrift condition were made easy enough to be satisfied by the poorest class of laborers, of merely average foresight and strength of character. At present we fail to encourage thrift because we stigmatise all as semi-criminals who fall below a quite impossible standard. If we really desire to comfort and help the weak-hearted, and to strengthen such as do stand, we must pitch our requirements so as to be within reach of their attainment.

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\* "A Scheme for National Pensions."

† House of Commons Return, 1881, No. 444.

It will at first be contended by members of the Charity Organisation Society on the one hand, and by the officials of friendly societies on the other, that any such public provision of honorable pensions would seriously discourage and thwart the efforts now being made to create private superannuation funds. There is, however, good reason for supposing that this would not be the case. At present these efforts are hindered by the futility of subscribing for anything short of a pension adequate for maintenance.\* Anything less than this amount merely goes in aid of the rates, by reducing the amount of relief required. But once let the public pension be independent of other means, and it will become worth while to subscribe for an annuity of even sixpence per week. The great hindrance to saving at present is the hopelessness of being able to save enough. With a minimum pension assured, even the smallest addition becomes worth providing. If membership of a friendly society or a life insurance policy carried with it almost a certainty of an honorable State pension, instead of degrading Poor Law relief, the strongest possible encouragement would be given to the admirable efforts now being made by the existing popular agencies for saving which are already doing so much for the more prosperous of our artisan classes. At present they do not succeed to any extent in providing for old age. Their benefits for sickness absorb practically all the available savings of the poor. The cost of providing adequate pensions is found to be too serious for the great friendly societies, and for any but a few of the more powerful trade-unions. The financial equilibrium of some of these is more than doubtful. But small additions to the public pension could at once be made attractive to tens of thousands who could never aspire to obtain even ten pounds a year.

There is a further direction in which these public pensions would encourage individual effort and social sympathy. Nothing is more brutalising than the manner in which the grown-up children of paupers are virtually encouraged to treat their aged parents. The Guardians have the greatest possible difficulty in obtaining contributions from sons towards the maintenance of their pauper parents. The money is given grudgingly, *because it merely saves the rates*. But once let it become possible for the poor, as it is for the middle-class and the rich, to soothe and comfort the declining years of their parents by those small gifts which cost so little and mean so much, and we may have at least a chance of awakening those filial feelings which go far to humanise and elevate personal character. If a son's assistance to his State-pensioned father or mother means the addition of tobacco or tea to their bare subsistence, that assistance is a

\* "The Manchester Unity has long desired to establish annuity or superannuation benefit funds; to commence at sixty-five is recommended, and not less than 5s. per week. The cost of such a benefit has hitherto proved deterrent." (Evidence of Mr. Watson, actuary to Manchester Unity of Odd Fellows, before Committee on National Insurance, H.C. 270, 1885, p. 66.) "After two years only four members had joined the fund." (Evidence of Mr. Holmes, a director, p. 59.)

great deal more likely to be given than when it means merely the reduction of his parent's cost to the parish. At present we deliberately dry up and starve the higher feelings of the poor.

Some persons will be frightened at the cost of providing any widespread system of aged pensions. It must, however, be remembered that the proposal involves really no new expense to the community. The aged poor are in any case maintained at the cost of the able-bodied workers; and the substitution of pensions for Poor Law relief is merely a readjustment. It may be assumed that in the United Kingdom to-day there would be about 1,700,000 persons over sixty-five. Of these probably 150,000 already receive public pensions of one kind or another, and about 325,000 are in receipt of Poor Law relief, costing on an average £10 10s. 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ d. each annually.\* What proportion of the others would be eligible for and would apply for a pension it is impossible to predict. If the pension of £10 per head were made universal the extra cost involved would be covered by less than a quarter of the yield of a re-assessment of the present (nominal) four shillings in the pound Land Tax.

If the pension were made payable at seventy years of age, only 2 $\frac{2}{3}$  per cent. of the population would be alive to claim it, or just a million for the United Kingdom, of whom probably 250,000 are already paupers, and perhaps 100,000 public pensioners. The extra charge involved would, in this case, not exceed threepence in the pound on the Income Tax.

But a beginning might be made by sanctioning a certain number of pensions every year, within a fixed limit, the number being gradually increased so as to absorb more and more of those who would otherwise end their days as paupers. It must never be forgotten that the object of the pension system is not only the comfort of the individual pensioner, but also the stoppage of the degradation and demoralisation of the existing pauper class. The main object is to avail ourselves of the salutary aspect of individual responsibility by removing the present hopelessness. We must put some water into the pump in order to make it draw.

#### IV.—EFFICIENT EDUCATION FOR THE CHILDREN.

As the State undertakes to fulfil all the duties of parentage to over 50,000 children (this is the average number of indoor pauper children: 32,000 of them are actually orphans),† and prevents, moreover, any interference by their relatives in the matter, it is clear that the State is bound, as a matter both of morality and public policy, to ensure that these duties are fulfilled in the very best possible manner. The Government should, at any rate, set, as a parent, a good and not a bad example.

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\* Local Government Board Report, p. lxxix. C—5813.

† P. 279 of C—5813.

The grim principle of the 1834 Commissioners, that the pauper's "situation, on the whole, shall not be made really or apparently so eligible as the situation of the laborer of the lowest class," cannot, even by the blindest devotee of the now discredited *laissez-faire* principle which so misled the able authors of that remarkable report, be held to apply to orphan children whilst the situation of the children of the lowest laborer remains below the level of nurture and education at which they can be prepared for the struggle of life. To manufacture paupers wholesale inside the workhouse, merely because individual parents are doing so outside, has proved too stupid even for the scientific Poor Law pedant; and a vast improvement has taken place in the care of indoor pauper children.

Boarding out is still restricted, both by its limitation to orphan or deserted children, and by the difficulty of securing efficient supervision; but 3,778 were boarded out on July 1, 1888,\* and, in the great majority of cases, were found to be well cared for.

The facilities for boarding out and emigration, now confined by the order of the Local Government Board to orphans and deserted children, might well be extended to other pauper children. It is even suggested by experienced Poor Law workers that the children of permanent indoor paupers might equally be boarded out, just as they are now sent away to the Poor Law School. The others, instead of being herded together in pauper barracks, or crowded in gigantic ophthalmic workhouse schools, as they are in all but a few exceptional institutions, need, if they cannot be boarded out, to be allotted in comparatively small parties in "cottage homes," to the care of "house-mothers." They should be kept free from any pauper taint; sent if possible to mix with other children in good public elementary schools; and carefully taught some trade or useful occupation, by which they can fulfil the duties of good citizenship, incumbent on them as on others. The apprenticeship of pauper children to unskilled trades, or the placing of them out as errand-boys or farm-laborers, ought to be definitely abandoned.

Their elementary education requires, too, considerable improvement. 16,216 children were in Metropolitan workhouse schools in 1886-7. Out of these only 359 were in Standard VI. (only 221 of these passed). The Poor Law inspectors are always deploring the inferiority of the Poor Law Schools.

It does not seem too much to ask that every child to which the State assumes the duties of parentage should be given, up to fourteen, the best elementary education possible, followed by apprenticeship to some highly skilled trade, so as to ensure that every workhouse child shall become a skilled instead of an, economically speaking, "unskilled" recruit in the labor market.

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\* P. 279 of C—5313.

## V.—COLLECTIVE PROVISION FOR THE SICK.

Few persons realise how rapidly we are "municipalising" our hospitals. The workhouse infirmary is coming to be more and more accepted as the proper home of the wage-earners who are seriously ill. In London, where our magnificent voluntary hospitals, 78 in number, provide about 6,415 occupied beds, the 27 Poor Law infirmaries and "sick asylums" have 9,639, and the eight hospitals of the Metropolitan Asylums Board 1820, a total of 11,459. Nearly two-thirds of our Metropolitan hospital accommodation is therefore now provided from public funds.

Nothing could be more advantageous from the public point of view than that every case of serious illness should be treated in hospital. It is to the public interest that the worker should as quickly as possible recover his health and strength, with the least possible privation to his family. The great advance in medical treatment during recent years has been in nursing and in antiseptic treatment, neither of which is possible in a crowded home. The isolation of infectious disease is an obvious public gain. But when 80 per cent. of our households are those of manual wage-earners—when in our great cities 30 to 40 per cent. herd in single rooms, and as many more in two or three room-tenements, neither isolation nor proper nursing are possible in the home. The treatment of the sick must necessarily become more and more a matter of collective provision; and it is fortunate that the subjective demoralisation which we have done our best to attach to it by making (in London) two-thirds of the inmates technically paupers, is dying away before the common sense of the doctors and the patients. It was stated to the House of Lords' Committee that, "in consequence of the excellence of the treatment in these infirmaries, and their separation from the workhouse, the poor are so ready to resort to them that there is a tendency to regard them as a kind of 'State hospital,' entrance to which does not imply that the patient is a pauper."\*

This excellent discrimination seems so horrible to the Birmingham Guardians that "they have determined to make all persons who come to their infirmary pass through the gate which leads to the workhouse grounds, so that they may not draw a distinction between the workhouse and the infirmary."\*

This sapient instance of the deliberate "pauperisation" of those free from this taint is characteristic of far too much of the existing Poor Law administration. We are often so intent on reducing the cost of the collective provision for our poorer brethren that we even prefer to make that provision as demoralising to them as we possibly can, on the chance that we may thereby exclude (to their detriment and occasional starvation) some of the more dignified among them.

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\* Report of House of Lords' Committee on Poor Law Relief, H.L. 363, 1888, p. viii.

As regards medical aid, however, public opinion is now running too strongly to be resisted. By sec. 7 of the Diseases Prevention (Metropolis) Act, 1883, treatment in the magnificent public Hospitals of the Metropolitan Asylums Board is not deemed "parochial relief." In 1884 Parliament provided that the receipt merely of medical relief should not disqualify a man for exercising the franchise. In the next Parliamentary Registration Bill, a clause will inevitably be carried, which few members of Parliament will dare even to resist, defining "medical relief" to include treatment in a Poor Law Infirmary or Sick Asylum. Why, moreover, should we deprive a man of the rights of citizenship because he has had the misfortune to have his wife or child compulsorily removed from his care as dangerously insane, and remitted to a public lunatic asylum?\*

The existing distinction between the voluntary and the rate-supported hospital cannot possibly be maintained; and it may be hoped that some order will soon be introduced into the barbaric chaos of London hospital administration. What appears to be wanted is the complete separation of medical and hospital relief from the Poor Law system. In large cities the provision for the sick needs classification according to the kind of disease, rather than according to the haphazard distinction of how each particular institution is maintained or administered. We require in London an elected Hospitals Board, managing all public provision for the sick and the insane, and auditing, supervising and controlling all "voluntary" hospitals. Such a Board would relieve the London County Council of its burdensome care of lunatic asylums, and take over the hospitals of the Metropolitan Asylums Board. In other counties it would probably be found sufficient to give similar powers of hospital management and control to the existing "Asylums Committee" of the County Council, thus removing all provision for the sick from any contact with Poor Law Administration.

#### VI.—PUBLIC BURIAL OF THE DEAD.

It is part of the imperfection of the existing Poor Law statistics that none exist as to the number of pauper funerals. The proportion of these to the total deaths must, however, be very large. Many persons are buried by the parish who were not in receipt of relief when alive. If 13 per cent. of the deaths in London are those of persons actually in the workhouse or Poor Law infirmary; if over 22 per cent. die in some public institution or another; if in the rural districts 30 to 40 per cent. of the deaths of persons over sixty are those of paupers; if 10 per cent. of the population obtain relief during any one year, and 20 per cent. of those over sixty-five are permanent paupers; it is probable that at least one-third of our funerals are already paid for from Poor Law funds.

To be "buried by the parish" is felt by the poor to be a disgrace and a dishonor to a greater extent that can easily be realised. The aged laborer, who will rely without shame on the parish doctor, use

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Nor is there any valid ground for depriving any other pauper of the rights of citizenship. (See Fabian Tract No. 14, "The New Reform Bill," clause 3.)

without disgrace the Poor Law dispensary or infirmary, and accept without dishonor the bitter bread of out-door relief, revolts against the pauper funeral, and starves himself to hoard the sum necessary to avoid this last humiliation. Yet so hard and so demoralising are the conditions of life of the great mass of the population, that it seems probable that at least one-third of them fail to maintain even this "final rally on the narrow ledge" of dignity and self-respect, and are eventually carried down to a pauper's grave.

There is, of course, nothing necessarily degrading in a public funeral. In the case of a soldier, a sailor, or a member of a religious order, the collective provision for burial is accepted as a matter of course. It is merely that we have deliberately chosen to make this particular form of public funeral—the lot of one-third of our brethren—an additional anxiety during their lives, a source of bitterness during their last moments, and a stain of disgrace to their relations. We have failed in our effort to abolish the public funeral, and have succeeded merely in making it one more pang to the dying, and one more engine of demoralisation to the living. Has not the time come for depauperising our parish funerals? We do not even take the trouble to make the burden easy to the poor. We charge unnecessary and irksome fees for the mere privilege of burial; we permit, in some cases, an absentee rector to levy a toll on all burials from his district, wherever and by whomsoever performed; we allow the provision of cemeteries to become, in many places, a matter of private speculation, and a source of unnecessary individual gain; and we leave the sorrowing household to bargain with a tradesman for the means of performing what is essentially a public duty. There seems no reason why the collective organisation of the people should not be utilised to minimise the trouble and expense of the burial of the dead.

In Paris the whole of the cemeteries are public property, and the funerals are conducted by what is virtually a public organisation. The one "undertaker" is the Company of "Pompes funèbres," chartered and subsidised by the municipality, and under its supervision and control. Funerals are provided according to a definite scale of charges, varying from nothing to the highest amount demanded by Parisian taste. It does not seem an impossible dream that we might one day "municipalise" our undertakers, expanding the existing "Burial Boards" into a complete municipal department for interments, the minimum charge being fixed low enough to enable even the very poorest to enjoy the luxury of paying something for the last offices to the loved dead.

But we shall one day go a step further. The expenses of burial must necessarily be shared among the living; and Death knocks at the door of every household, on an average, once in ten years. Why should we add to the trouble and economic disturbance necessarily incident to death by levying a toll on burial? The disposal of the dead is a matter of common concern; the fulfilment of this public duty presses crushing-ly on the poor in their hour of greatest need; "communism in funerals" is not likely to lead to reckless increase in the demand for graves; and any simplification of the expenses now incurred would be a great boon.

## VII.—ABOLITION OF THE CASUAL WARD.

For the first 200 years of its history—indeed, during the whole era of the middle ages—Poor Law legislation aimed almost exclusively at repression, not relief; and we must, to-day, not forget the necessity of undertaking the reformation of sturdy rogues and vagabonds.

Many otherwise sensible people have a most immoral belief that all paupers belong to this class. They forget that one-third of the paupers are children, one-tenth insane, and one-half infirm, aged, or disabled adults. Less than one-tenth are classed as able-bodied adults; and of these three-fourths are women, mostly deserted or widowed mothers, with families demanding all their strength. Only 3 per cent. are classed as usually adult able-bodied males; and even as to these the Local Government Board explains (p. 278 of C. 5813) that they include “those relieved (1) on account of sudden and urgent necessity; (2) on account of their own sickness, accident, or infirmity; (3) on account of the sickness, accident, or infirmity of some member of the family, or through a funeral; and (4) on account of want of work.” The number of vagrants relieved is only about 6000; and the total number of “sturdy beggars” profiting by the Poor Law must be but a trifling proportion of the population. Nevertheless vagabonds exist in demoralising numbers, moving gaily from one “Queen’s Mansion” to another, until their faces become perfectly well-known to the superintendent.

The existing casual wards appear, indeed, to be permanent foci of moral infection. Filled almost exclusively by habitual tramps, they serve at present merely to deprave their inmates. The few innocent persons who drift into them from sheer lack of shelter are almost inevitably drawn into the eddy of the evil current, and become permanent casuals. The only reform that can be suggested is total refusal to recognise or provide for the “poor traveller,” now become obsolete; the admission to a “Reception Ward” of any destitute person, and his searching individual examination there; the stern and rigorous commitment to a penal “labor colony” of every recognised habitual casual; and the prompt discharge, after humane succor and performance of a reasonable task of useful labor, of the merely destitute laborer, who should be in every possible way assisted to obtain employment. We might certainly take as much trouble to save human lives from the shipwreck of permanent pauperism as we do to prevent the loss of ships and cargoes on our coasts.

For the chronic cases of sturdy vagrancy, idle mendicity and incorrigible laziness, we must have recourse to organised pauper labor, strictly disciplined and severely supervised. These classes, like the criminals, are the “failures” of our civilisation; and whilst they must be treated with all just kindness, and offered opportunities of earning their subsistence, they must nevertheless be sternly denied all relief until they are willing to repay it by useful labor. The present Poor Law system fails to deal with them; and all reformers demand further public action. Mr. Charles Booth urges\* that we must “open a little the portals of the Poor Law, or its administra-

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\* “Life and Labor in East London,” p. 168.



tion, making within its courts a working guild under suitable discipline," and eliminate the idle loafers from society by making their existence in the ordinary community more and more impossible, whilst we, on the other hand, offer them constantly the alternative of the reforming "labor colony" to which all incorrigible vagrants and beggars could be committed by the magistrate for specified terms on the indictment of the police or Poor Law officer.

#### VIII.—REFORM OF POOR LAW MACHINERY.

No Poor Law administration will, however, be stable until its members enjoy the confidence of the public, now effectually destroyed by the defective manner of their election. The reform of the administrative machinery of the Poor Law is therefore a matter of vital importance, especially in the metropolis. Indeed, it is probable that this side of the problem will force itself upon the notice of Ministers long before they can be induced to deal with the equally urgent reforms already referred to.

The administration of the Poor Law is, in England and Wales, committed to 647 boards of guardians, acting for 647 aggregations of 14,827 parishes. In London there are 30 boards of guardians acting either for separate parishes (14) or for "unions" (16) of smaller parishes. The "overseers of the poor," appointed by two J.P.'s, have become practically obsolete as to function.

The boards of guardians are mainly elected by the ratepayers (either annually or triennially in the month of April, according to the particular arrangement in force for each parish) upon a system of plural voting, each elector having from one to six votes, according to the rateable value of his house. Owners are entitled to vote as well as occupiers, and may even vote by proxy; and an occupying owner can give double votes. If, moreover, he is rated for more than one house, whether as a "house-farmer" or not, his voting power is further multiplied in proportion to the number of his houses. Under this system it occasionally happens (as in Bethnal Green in April, 1889) that a minority of the large householders prevails over the poorer majority.

The elections are conducted carelessly, voting papers being left at each house by a policeman, and collected next day, without any safeguards against personation or fraud. Very little public interest is aroused; and only a small proportion of the papers are filled up.

Justices of the Peace in any parish are *ex-officio* members of its board of guardians; but they seldom attend. The Local Government Board may nominate additional members of any board. The bulk of the work is left in the hands of the paid officials; and the "clerk to the guardians"—frequently a local solicitor—is often an official pluralist (as in Chelsea) receiving huge emoluments, and practically beyond control.

We need in our Poor Law representative government, "one man one vote" on the County Council register, uniform triennial elections, exclusion of all J.P.'s and other nominated members, abolition of rating qualification, payment of members for each day's attendance, election arrangements under the Corrupt Practices Act

on the lines of those for the School Boards (but allowing, as now for Parliamentary elections, though not for municipal elections, meetings, &c., in working men's clubs), and removal of the alleged disability of married women to be guardians or electors of guardians.

Each board of guardians now administers relief, and collects its rates independently of the others; but in London the cost of the maintenance of the poor inside the workhouses, infirmaries and schools, the salaries of Poor Law officials, and the expenses of vaccination, are defrayed from a "Common Poor Fund," and divided amongst the parishes in proportion to the rateable value of their property. This principle needs to be further extended. But any complete equalisation of the London poor-rate requires an efficient central authority; and the metropolis sadly needs a central "Board of Guardians" to ensure the extinction of the demoralising inequality of treatment which thirty separate administrative boards in one city can never fail to produce. Unity of administration would make possible, not only much stricter classification and educational discrimination, but also a relaxation in the treatment of the aged and the worthy, along with the needful discipline in separate establishments for the wilfully idle. The financial economy of amalgamation, in space, in time, and in money, need only be mentioned.

No reformer would, however, for a moment propose to add any functions or powers to London's only central Poor Law organisation, the Metropolitan Asylums Board. London needs a single Poor Law Council, which, like its County Council and School Board, must spring exclusively from the direct election of the people. The Poor Law Council should retain for itself all power of deciding the principles of administration and of poor relief, delegating nothing to local boards of "district almoners" but the duty of administering and granting relief upon those principles. It would naturally take over all the powers, duties, and property of the Metropolitan Asylums Board, and the administration of all workhouses, casual wards, and Poor Law schools. The London Poor Law Council should be placed as nearly as may be practicable in the same position as regards independence of the Local Government Board as the London County Council and School Board.

Outside the Metropolis it appears unnecessary to make any immediate alteration of Poor Law machinery or change in Poor Law areas. The existing 647 Poor Law Unions cannot be disturbed without the most serious readjustments of property, debts, officers, rates, and official machinery. No one would propose to transfer them to the County Councils, which are quite unfitted for the detailed examination of individual cases which should form the leading feature in Poor Law administration. It will probably be found that "district" as distinct from "parish" councils are needed only in London, where they will replace the existing vestries and district boards of works. In a few of the larger counties an authority intermediate between the parish and the shire may be called for; but this can best be supplied by local committees of the county council, empowered to administer local affairs on the lines laid down by the whole council. Even in

these cases the Poor Law Union could not be adopted as the area, because it is desirable that the areas of the local committees should be, as far as possible, homogeneous in character, with special separation of urban from purely rural districts. Now most of the Poor Law Unions were deliberately formed so as to unite urban with rural districts, in order somewhat to equalise the rates, and distribute any special pressure. They often cut across municipal boundaries and unite the most diverse districts. Thus, the Barton Regis Union includes Clifton and other suburbs of Bristol, with a large slice of purely agricultural country. Leeds is in three Poor Law Unions, each containing a huge cantle of the neighbouring rural area. The omission of the Poor Law administration from the Local Government Act was an inevitable necessity of the incongruity of the union areas with those of any possible arrangement of district councils.

Nor can Poor Law administration be made wholly parochial. The 14,827 parishes in England and Wales cannot possibly each have its workhouse, its infirmary, its lunatic asylum, its casual ward, and its labor yard. The parish council may well be empowered to remit cases to the appropriate union institution, and possibly act as a local consultative committee to the board of guardians of the union, and to the public authority administering the aged pensions; but further than this no experienced Poor Law worker would desire to go. To allow the parish council to grant out-door relief would promptly land us in all the demoralising horrors of the Old Poor Law; and to make each parish maintain its own poor would bring back all the absurdities of the old Law of Settlement, with the inevitable results of "closed parishes," demolition of cottages, compulsory removals, litigation, inter-parochial envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. We must therefore retain, outside London, the Poor Law union with its board of guardians, reformed as to election, the members paid for each day's attendance as well as reimbursed their reasonable travelling expenses. They should be relieved of their present medley of sanitary and educational functions, and thus set free to devote themselves entirely to their task of worthily administering the collective provision for the poorer citizens.

#### IX.—CONCLUSION.

The foregoing tentative proposals for Poor Law reform all proceed, it will be seen, on the lines of "depauperising" the present collective provision of the community for its weaker members, and of "democratising" the machinery of its administration. They do not form a complete scheme; for they deal neither with the "unemployed" nor with the constant Poor Law problem of the widow with young children. To those far-sighted reformers who see that we shall not always have the poor with us, they are offered as provisional measures kept carefully upon progressive lines. No attempt is made to do more than to suggest immediately practicable reform, of which nothing but popular apathy delays the execution.

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