

Evacuation

By Margaret Lowenfeld



Any action which arises as a total response to a pressing emergency must produce problems. When the action is new in kind, a reaction to a form of emergency hitherto unknown, those problems are apt to kitten like guinea pigs. Something of the sort confronts us in the problem of 'Evacuation' today.

As a nation we dislike planning and distrust thinking in the abstract, we prefer to act 'ad hoc', to see a problem concretely before we take action and then tackle it piecemeal. When the chaos arises that in modern conditions inevitable follows this approach to practical problems, we tend to feel overwhelmed and to call helplessly for pre-emptory Government action.

We have seen enough in other countries of two forms of powerful centralised government, Fascism and Communism, and have, for the most part, shrunk from both. I believe it lies in the genius of this people to evolve a third way, which will be a contribution to the corporate happiness of the world, as our steadfastness under strain has been and is being to its security. The problems brought by the evacuation of masses of people from one part of the country to another offers as good a ground as any other for the hard spade work and keen thought that is necessary.

The first point to be made clear is whether the results of this as of any disaster are going to be regarded as an obstacle to normal living or a great opportunity. We tend to regard evacuation as an obstinate piece of suffering in which we all have to share, instead of allowing that it might be a colossal opportunity. Until we decide which way we are going to regard it, it is impossible to proceed, as upon that decision will depend the nature of the steps we will take, and so the level of mental and creative energy that will be put into the solution.

Apart from questions of pure organisation, the evacuation problem resolves itself into four elements. It is, first, a problem in the real sense that the real nature of the atom or of Cretan civilisation is a problem, demanding fresh thinking, which shall be based upon the fundamentals of the situation, and not merely the ingenious and persistent adaptation of already existing means to ends; not the moving of animate objects from one place to another but, if we wish it, the beginning of a new social order. One could state this part of the problem as 'Do we regard this movement of people as a flood which, when the disturbance which gave rise to it, has subsided, will retreat once more to the places from which it came, and all be as it was once more, or are we prepared to see it as the foundation of a new order of society? If to that question we answer 'yes', how much thought and effort are we prepared to put into it to bring it about?

An affirmative answer brings another challenge immediately in its train. As an old country of slow growth Great Britain has retained a very local type of development. In organisation England resembles more than anything a giant blackberry in which each administrative unit forms a distinct bead adhering to the other beads on a central core, but never blended with them. Socially the same is true, so the even two neighbouring streets in certain parts of London have customs which are essentially different.

Habits as strong as this, are now being rudely broken up, and by force of disaster inhabitants of all sorts are forced to mix with one another and to come in contact with people of whose like they had before hardly heard. The significance of these contacts is seen when it is remembered that England is a country of castes, which are as mutually exclusive if not as conscious as the Indian. Nor are these castes, as is so often glibly stated, those of the 'exploiter' and 'exploited'. In any 'exploited' class in quite limited sections of a great town, will be found as many groups of mutually suspicious people as there are major classes in society. Whether we like it or not this is a real situation and many of the best billeting schemes have broken on it. So dear is this group life to those who live it that a city mother would often rather go back into direct and imminent danger than be forced to share the home and conform to the habits of people to whose form of living she is unaccustomed. Are we prepared to accept this as a fact basic to our society and to reckon with it?

As a fact it does not stand alone. There is one cognate to it. In England there is almost every grade of cultural development, from those whose habits and homes have the polished sheen of a Dutch 'old Master' interior to those who see no reason why the natural functions of the body should not occur in bed. These are all British citizens and the startling event that has upset all our preconceived ideas with the last ten months, is that these people to many of whom perhaps in the years gone by we should have hesitated to offer the right hand of fellowship, have shown qualities that glow like beacons of the purest heroism and steadiness. In fact they have shown themselves in no mean way to be the direct inheritors of all that is best in the tradition of British character.

We need therefore to revise our standards. What is it that we prize in our people? Upon what are we going to build the Britain of the future? What is it that has held the German advance? British organization and military arms? or the British character? and where has this been most conspicuously found? In Mayfair or in Limehouse? And what are the implications of that?

This is the new factor with which this war has confronted us and at closer quarters than we like. Who and what are representative to us of the qualities of 'England'? This used to be an easy question to answer; almost any quotation from Kipling would do it. But now the Commonwealth has been saved and continues to be saved nightly by young men scarcely out of their teens, and the wage earners of big cities, hardly any of the earning £10 a week. It will be interesting, for example to note, after the war, how many of the George Cross holders have been to a Public School.

So far in dealing with this task of evacuation the Authorities have shown no awareness that they are dealing with human beings and not inanimate objects or disciplined troops. There has also been no attempt to realise that these are people who live normally in social groups and are no more able than are any human beings to live without a background of their particular 'Society', nor an attempt to study the effect of these groups on each other. Neither reception area hosts, nor the people evacuated, have been seen for what they are, highly conscious members of sharply differentiated social groups; and no attempt has been made to sort either the one or the other into corresponding categories, so that between host and guest community of interest and fellowship can grow up which will make a new basis of community sentiment for the whole country, out of which community a real social consciousness might develop. As a result many city mothers now refuse evacuation altogether. On the other hand large mansions stand unoccupied or housing only an owner

and domestic staff, because of the timidity of the local billeting authorities. Every big house in the country which has not its full quota of inhabitants should be commandeered for the use of those who are property loving and socially disciplined.

To be successful and to encourage a new social consciousness evacuation can only be carried out on a caste basis, care being taken to see that those who move go into surroundings which will allow them to carry on the traditions of their normal living whatever these may be. If it be argued that this is a task beyond the powers of emergency organisation, the answer is 'so would the building of aeroplanes be if chartered accountants or dressmakers were entrusted with it'. So far no single specialist on the grouping of human beings has been allowed to have any hand in planning evacuation, and all proposals offered to the authorities from people whose normal task it is to cope with difficulties of this kind, have been turned down. How long is this to last and the temper of the best of our people both hosts and guests, be spoiled by amateur bungling?

Refusal to consider the problem at all or make any provision for it, apart from the purely mechanical one of trains and transport, is seen at its worst in the case of children. What are we to say to the parents of children who all over the country are herded into 'sick bays' or children's hospitals for unbilletee children with both sexes and all ages cooped up together in the same building without provision for treatment, of recreation, and under the care, in many cases of village women or that most unsuitable person for any child the ex-hospital trained sister now retired and out of work? As far as the writer of this article has been able to find out, at no point has the design and execution of the children's billeting campaign been in the hands of any people skilled in this particular task, and apart from certain few enlightened special local Councils, at no point has either time-planning or the education of these children been the subject of big scale coherent design, thought out and put through by those trained to solve this type of problem. This then is how we are treating crucial years in the lives of those who are to be post war England, as we of the last war were then post war England. If we do not treat them better than this, is it likely that they will do better with their world than we have done with ours?

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