

Magna Charta of Childhood

Representatives of Great Britain, France, Belgium, Serbia, Italy, and Japan Are Joined With Americans in Evolving an International System of Child Welfare

By WILLIAM L. CHENERY

FOR the first time in history the children's magna charta is being drafted. At the request of the President of the United States, men and women from America and from many nations associated with us in war have been called together to pool their experience and their wisdom in this great undertaking. Throughout the breadth of this land a series of conferences is now in progress. Out of these deliberations the great charter of childhood is expected to emerge.

Under the leadership of Miss Julia Lathrop, Chief of the Children's Bureau of the Department of Labor, representatives of six foreign nations are consulting with leading American authorities in order that statesmen may deal rightly with all children. One after another many of the great cities of this country are being visited. From these peripatetic discussions are being wrested principles which may assure a sturdier citizenry among all free nations. The purpose of this venture was first of all to place at the service of the United States the lessons which the world had wrung from the bitterness of the war. Already, however, material has been accumulated which ought to lay the basis for a new international opinion in matters affecting children.

Before the war it seemed possible for statesmen to ignore the existence of children. What happened to the millions of young people of every great nation was, prior to August, 1914, of slight interest to Governments. Before the great war, it is perhaps safe to say that no Cabinet meeting of any great power had at any time devoted its full attention to the national problems raised by the very existence of children. Local and State authorities, it is true, planned more or less well for the education of the many, for the support of the pauper few, and for the segregation of those considered dangerous. But statesmen had small enthusiasm for such things. In that complacent epoch which ended less than five years ago, national responsibility for children, like so many other of the obligations of civilized Governments, was ignored.

Every Government knows now that such neglect is no longer compatible with national safety either in war or in peace. Military mobilization and the great test of industrial efficiency during the war revealed weaknesses appallingly vast. Neglect, it was perceived, was silently doing damage hardly less great than enemy invasion. Because of this realization, and not because of any new-found tenderness for children, Governments generally have begun to give serious thought to childhood. That is the mood which lies behind the effort now being made through the Children's Bureau to formulate those standards of health, of nurture, of education, and of protection against premature labor which possibly every Government ought to assure to every child.

In the United States there are probably 35,000,000 children. What public interest have we as a nation in this great section of the population? What public responsibility ought to be assumed? What principles should govern the rearing of all children if the United States is to attain a full measure of national success? These are some of the questions which are being considered by leaders of America aided by relevant advice from the experiences of other peoples. The replies, which have not yet been formally crystallized, are none the less already sufficiently clear.

First of all, the great consensus of testimony is to the effect that in the public interest the nation should increas-

ingly strive to assure every child the same degree of health, of wholesome upbringing, of education, and of protection against harmful employment which the most able parents now give their own offspring. The overwhelming burden of opinion seems to be that not until every one of the 35,000,000 children of America is reared as well as wise families care for their own can this nation be said to have done its duty.

The most striking articles of the creed now being evolved propose certain minimum standards which should be met by all the children before they begin life's work and during their first years in industry. The frank demand that child labor should be considered from the standpoint of what is good for the nation and not from the traditional position of the requirements of industry underlies all that is suggested. That comes down to saying that the welfare of children viewed as future citizens of this republic rather than the prosperity of any particular business or even industry is the true touchstone.

In detail it is proposed that no child under sixteen be permitted in any occupation. Exceptions are made only to allow the employment of children during vacation periods in agriculture and in domestic service. But equally important is the absolute prohibition of children in certain dangerous employments. Thus Dean D. L. Edsall of the Harvard Medical School reported that certain of his studies had shown that work increased sickness among children. Among a certain 100 children who entered employment at the



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Miss L. E. Carter, Belgian Delegate, Was in Charge of a Girls' School at Brussels Throughout the War.

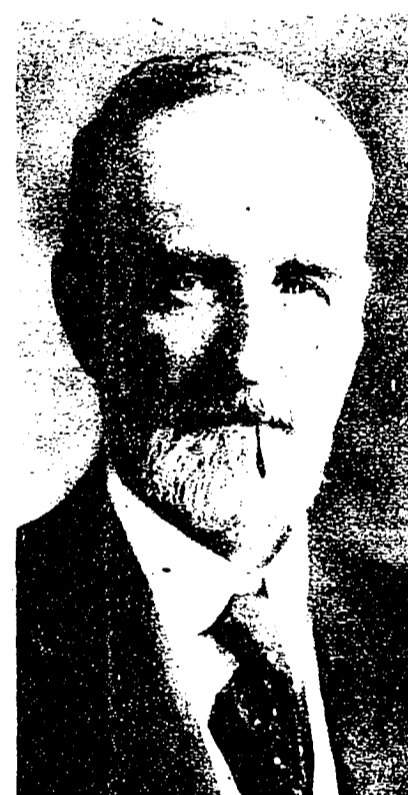
age of 14 years, twenty-two cases of illness were reported during their last school year, while during the first year of the work the same children reported forty-one cases of illness serious enough to keep them in bed.

Age alone is moreover a poor test of whether the future citizen is ripe for work. Following somewhat the suggestion of the great education act by means of which Herbert A. L. Fisher, the present Minister of Education, hopes to shove Great Britain a long step forward, it is proposed that all children between the ages of seven and eighteen be required to attend school for nine months a year either upon full or part time. Those children between sixteen and eighteen

who have completed the eighth grade and who are legally employed should be required to attend day continuation schools eight hours weekly. Those, however, who have not graduated from the so-called grammar schools should continue full time at school until they are 18 years old. Finally, it is urged that children be not permitted to go to work until they have been examined by public health physicians and found to be physically fit for work.

Other kindred standards, including one holding that the wages paid children beyond the stage of learners be at least equal to the minimum essential to the "necessary cost of proper living," are offered.

But the protection of children against the known evil of employment which will stunt their development as citizens of a self-governing republic is only a part of any program which plans for the well-being of the nation. After all, the greatest of all national losses is that of the infancy of the country. Poverty and disease, ignorance and neglect, silently



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Sir Arthur Newsholme, Late Chief Medical Officer of the Local Government Board, Leading Authority on Child Welfare.

accumulate losses beside which even the invasions of barbaric hordes seem less horrible. The first work of any people having a statesmanlike concern about child life consists, therefore, in assuring to all parents, not merely to the prosperous and to the well informed, that their children will be safely born. Accordingly a set of principles, designed to safeguard the lives and the health of women during childbirth and of their offspring, has been drawn up and is now being discussed throughout the country.

The point of view of the average woman confronted by this great crisis was set forth eloquently by Mrs. Eleanor Barton of England. Mrs. Barton was the spokeswoman of the Woman's Co-operative Guild. This organization of some 32,000 wives of British workmen has been largely influential in the passage of the acts of Parliament which provide maternity benefits for mothers and also public nursing for mothers and children. The standard of civilization attained by mothers is the standard of the race. In order to raise the standard of the race women must first be given a better opportunity, Mrs. Barton argued. A grant of family endowments, after the

fashion of the wartime separation allowances, the British leader has insisted, is necessary if those conditions are to be remedied which make the proper rearing of children in many a poverty-stricken home now impossible.

Out of the preliminary discussions at Washington a health code for mothers and children was thus formulated. In essence this would establish maternity centres and hospitals with public nursing. By such machinery, recommended to the States and to the nations, the wanton loss of the lives of women and of their infants might be vastly reduced. Further, an extensive code by the application of which lives of hundreds of thousands of children might be salvaged is being written. This is being founded upon the



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Mrs. Eleanor Barton, Representative of Women's Co-operative Guild of Great Britain.

best scientific data attainable. The road to health is being charted clearly.

Finally there is that great group of children, the poor, the physically or the mentally handicapped, and those who for one reason or another get into trouble. They, also, must be thought of, if America and if the world plans justice for its young and a safe prosperity for itself. A few years ago President Roosevelt called a national conference to deal with the needs of these abnormal children. Out of that so-called "White House Conference" came a report which has determined the lines along which social work in this country has developed. The international conferences now in progress continue the undertaking begun under the administration of Colonel Roosevelt. The heart of this new effort is the endeavor to create the kind of home life for abnormal children which is the birthright of the average youngster. All the science and all the wealth necessary should, it is urged, be used to prevent the wastage of this potential man and woman power. Poverty should never be allowed to destroy a home, because the welfare of this nation suffers when the least of its children is degraded.

A notable group of Americans and of representatives from other nations are taking part in the discussions by means of which this great charter of childhood is being built. Japan, Belgium, Serbia, France, Italy, Great Britain, and Canada have pooled their wisdom in this common cause.