

The Church and the Poor.

A SERIES OF HISTORICAL SKETCHES.

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VIII.

THE REIGNS OF THE TUDOR SOVEREIGNS: HENRY VIII. TO ELIZABETH.

IN this chapter I shall consider the means which were taken in England during the reigns of Henry VIII., Edward VI., Philip and Mary, and Elizabeth, to deal with the problem of the poor—a problem of exceptional difficulty during this period, partly owing to new economic conditions (to which I have already drawn attention¹), and partly through the suppression of the monasteries and other religious institutions.² It was a time when there was at least an unusual amount of distress, and during which sources of help to which the poor had long been accustomed to look for relief were suddenly cut off.

In A.D. 1515 an Act of Parliament³ was passed, “concerning pulling down of towns,” which states “that great inconveniences are occasioned by the pulling down and destruction of houses and towns, and laying to pasture lands which have been usually occupied in tillage.” It further states that owing to this many people have been thrown into idleness, and it orders that all “towns, villages, hamlets, and other habitations so decayed, shall be re-edified within one year,” and that “tillage lands turned to pasturage shall be restored again to tillage.” Nineteen years later (in A.D. 1534) another Act⁴ was passed, the preamble to which is extremely informing. In this we are told that divers of the

¹ See pp. 432 *et seq.*, and 499.

² “Cambridge Modern History,” pp. 467 *et seq.*

³ Actually there were two Acts: 6 Henry VIII., cap. 5, and 7 Henry VIII., cap. 1. See Nicholls’ “History of the Poor Law,” vol. i., p. 111.

⁴ 25 Henry VIII., cap. 13. Nicholls, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

King's subjects "to whom God of His goodness hath disposed great plenty of moveable substance"—a reference to the growth of capitalism—have "invented ways and means" to gather into a few hands "great multitude of farms," putting the same to pasturage; in consequence the prices of provisions have so risen that "a marvellous multitude of the people of this realm be not able to provide meat, drink, and clothes necessary for themselves, their wives, and children, but be so discouraged with misery and poverty that they fall daily to theft, robbery, and other inconvenience, or pitifully die for hunger and cold."

By an Act passed in 1531¹ it is enjoined that a search be made for "all aged poor and impotent persons which live by alms and charity"; these are to have a licence to beg within certain defined limits. By the same Act if any person, "being whole and mighty in body and able to labour," be found begging, he is to be severely punished, and then "to be repaired to where he was born, or last dwelt for three years, and there labour for his living without begging so long as he is able so to do"; also by this Act any person found relieving "beggars being strong and able to work" is to be heavily fined. This Act naturally failed to accomplish its purpose, because it made no provision for sustaining the weak, and it did not help the strong to find employment. Five years later, in the year of the suppression of the smaller monastic houses,² an amending Act³ was passed, by which the chief officers of cities, towns, and parishes are ordered to relieve poor people so that they need not "go openly in begging," and also to "set and keep to continual labour sturdy vagabonds and valiant beggars." For every month in which these regulations are not observed, a fine of twenty shillings is imposed upon the parish. The Act also states how the necessary funds are to be raised—*i.e.*, to help the impotent and to provide work for the able. The mayors and other chief officers in towns, and the churchwardens or two others of every parish, are

¹ 22 Henry VIII., cap. 10. Nicholls, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

² In A.D. 1536.

³ 27 Henry VIII., cap. 25. Nicholls, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

to procure "voluntary alms of the good Christian people within the same, with boxes, every Sunday and holiday, or otherwise among themselves." Also, "every parson, vicar, and curate is to exhort people to extend their charitable contributions . . . towards these objects." This same Act also makes another extremely interesting provision—viz., "that no person shall make any common or open dole, nor shall give any money in alms, otherwise than to the common boxes and common gatherings."¹ If anyone be found doing this, he is to be heavily fined. The Act even goes further, and enjoins "bodies politic and corporate that are bound to give or distribute any money, bread, victuals, or other sustentation to poor people," to give the same into the "common boxes." Two reasons for this suggest themselves—first, that otherwise the collections would prove to be insufficient for the poor; secondly, that the Government was determined, if possible, to cut off the supplies which encouraged mendicancy.² Yet another provision of this Act deserves notice; by its fourth section authority is given to take up all children between the ages of five and thirteen who are begging or in idleness, and appoint them to "masters in husbandry or other crafts to be taught."

It will be seen that in this Act we have at least the foundations laid of many of the provisions of our present Poor Law; and from it we can conclude that the condition of the poor was a source of care both to the King and Parliament. Before leaving this Act two points should be carefully noticed: First, that as yet there was no *compulsory* assessment for the poor; practically all the funds needed for administration of the law were to be contributed voluntarily, "but parsons, vicars, and curates, when preaching, hearing confessions, or making wills, were to exhort people to be liberal." Secondly (as I have already noticed), that since the Act must have at least been drawn up, if not actually passed, before even the small monasteries were suppressed, we are driven to the conclusion that these and other religious

¹ Nicholls, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

² Those who, in the interests of both the nation and the poor, wished to suppress mendicancy had, as the Italian Government has to-day, to fight against a national habit which had become a tradition.

institutions were already to a great extent failing to provide for the needs of the poor.

Having now shown what the central Government, with the help of the clergy, attempted to do for the whole kingdom during the reign of Henry VIII., I would indicate very briefly what was being done by the municipal authorities, also by the help of the clergy, during the same period. In the early part of the sixteenth century municipal rulers were much more independent than they are to-day. For instance, "they could impose taxes without the authority of Parliament";¹ they could also make their own regulations as to the manner of dealing with their own poor. "Each town was a law unto itself." If we study side by side municipal regulations and Acts of Parliament, we can see that frequently the Acts embodied and made general for the whole country regulations which in certain municipal areas were evidently deemed to have been proved useful. In London, between 1514 and 1524, we have a series of regulations forbidding vagrants to beg, and forbidding the citizens to give to unlicensed beggars.² This last injunction may well have been the source of the similar injunction in the Act of 1535-36. In 1533 it was found that the alms of the charitable in London were insufficient to provide for those having a licence to beg; consequently persons were chosen to gather "the devotions of parishioners for the poor folk weekly" (we presume in church), "and to distribute them to the poor folk at the church doors."³ Naturally the dissolution of the monasteries largely increased the difficulty of poor relief in London; consequently the citizens petitioned the King that certain of the old hospitals might be retained for the purposes for which they had originally been founded, or that they might be devoted to purposes connected with the amelioration of the lot of the needy. Four of these were saved, and to a certain extent re-endowed—namely, St. Thomas's, St. Bartholomew's, Christ's Hospital, and Bethlehem Hospital; to these must be

¹ Leonard, "English Poor Relief," p. 23.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

added Bridewell,¹ though that was devoted to a different purpose—a workhouse and a house of correction for the able-bodied. The history of the methods adopted in London during this period to solve the problem of poverty is full of interest. We witness the first beginnings of a serious attempt to discriminate between various classes whose needs were due to different causes—*i.e.*, the sick were treated at St. Thomas's and St. Bartholomew's, the children at Christ's Hospital, the lunatics at Bethlehem, and the able-bodied at Bridewell. We see the increasing difficulty of providing sufficient funds now that the self-regarding factor in giving charity was being undermined; we notice the first traces of a compulsory assessment;² we also see the danger—of which there have been several examples in our own time—of people being attracted to the Metropolis because of funds being there available for relief.

Ridley became Bishop of London in 1550, and for three years he worked hard on behalf of the poor of his diocese. It was largely owing to his efforts and to those of the contemporary Lord Mayors that St. Thomas's, St. Bartholomew's, and Christ's Hospitals were re-established and their endowments increased. But Ridley was not content to help the sick and the children: he wished, if possible, to clear the streets of beggars. With this object he desired to obtain a place where they might be taught and compelled to work. In pursuance of this purpose he addressed a letter to Cecil, in which he writes: "I must be a suitor to you in our good Master Christ's cause; I beseech you be good to Him. The matter is, Sir, alas! He hath lain too long abroad (as you do know) without lodging in the streets of London, both hungry, naked and cold. . . . Sir, there is a wide, large, empty house of the King's Majesty's called Bridewell, that would wonderfully well serve to lodge Christ in, if

¹ Originally a royal palace.

² "This is probably the first time a compulsory tax was levied for the relief of the poor. The assessment is ordered by the London Common Council a quarter of a century before Parliament had given authority for the making of assessments for this object" (Leonard, *op. cit.*, p. 29). [This is a clear instance of a municipal regulation being afterwards adopted in an Act of Parliament.]

He might find such good friends in the Court to procure in His cause."¹ Ridley was one of those who believe that the work of social amelioration should go hand in hand with definitely spiritual work—indeed, that the two cannot properly be severed. Ridley's earnestness was rewarded, and so long as he remained Bishop of London the hospitals in which he took so warm an interest seem to have been supplied with sufficient funds;² but when his influence passed away they failed to receive adequate support, and the numbers of those maintained in them had to be reduced.³

Possibly the most interesting and instructive lesson to be learnt from the various efforts to help the poor in London during this period is that there was evidently a serious attempt towards a definite and comprehensive organization. The various institutions re-established worked—at least to some extent—in connection with each other.⁴ Each supplied an essential part of a comprehensive scheme. Without each of these parts the scheme as a whole must have failed. Men like Bishop Ridley had risen above the idea that alms were to be merely palliative: he and his co-workers were making at least some attempt to prevent mendicancy by the removal of its causes. They tried to educate the children, to heal the sick, and to train the idle to work.

Efforts to help the poor, to train the children, to find work for the idle and so prevent mendicancy, were made in many other towns besides London. In Lincoln no one was to give to beggars who had not a badge, the idle were to be set to work, and those who refused work were expelled; also "young people who lived idly" were apprenticed. In Ipswich compulsory assessments were made for the poor, and those who refused to pay

¹ Leonard, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

² It is interesting to note that in 1553, besides the 280 children maintained within Christ's Hospital, another 100 were boarded out in the country.

³ Leonard, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁴ "Vagrants who were taken to Bridewell, and found to be ill, were sent on to St. Bartholomew's or St. Thomas's, while, on the other hand, a whipping was administered to the idlers after cure at St. Thomas's, and the beadle of St. Bartholomew's had special orders to prevent discharged inmates from begging" (Leonard, *op. cit.*, p. 39).

were to be punished. At Cambridge the churchwardens^r made a careful list of all the poor people in their respective parishes; they were also to inquire into the cases of those who had come into their parishes within three years; and collectors were chosen to obtain alms in the churches. These are sufficient instances to show that during this period the relief of the poor was regarded more as a municipal and parochial than as a national responsibility.

During the short reign of Edward VI. several Acts of Parliament were passed which cannot be neglected by those who would study the development of opinion in regard to the treatment of the poor. An Act of the first year of this reign¹ states that "idleness and vagabondage is the mother and root of all thefts, robberies, and other evil acts and mischiefs," which the King and Parliament had long tried to repress; "but owing to the foolish pity of them which should have seen the laws executed, the said goodlie statutes have hitherto had small effect." In the same Act we have an official recognition of what can only be described as one of the worst abuses of actual slavery. By a provision of this Act any young beggar, or child of any beggar, between five and fourteen years of age might be taken from such beggar by any person who would promise to bring the child up in some honest occupation. This child, if a male, was bound to this person to the age of twenty-four; if a female, to the age of twenty; and "may be used in all points as a slave for the time above specified." The master or mistress is even empowered "to let, set forth, sell, bequeath, or give the service and labour of such slave-child (*sic*) to any person or persons whomsoever he will."² The Act goes even further than this: it enjoins that "slaves or children so adjudged, wounding their master or mistress in resisting their corrections or otherwise," are "to suffer the pains of death as in case of felony." It is somewhat difficult for us to understand what the conception of "My duty towards my neighbour" must have been among the men who

¹ 1 Edward VI., cap. 3. Nicholls, *op. cit.*, vol. i., pp. 129 *et seq.*

² Nicholls, *op. cit.*, pp. 131 *et seq.*

framed this Act, or among those who voted for it ; yet both must have been—whether at heart they held Reformation principles or not—at least conforming members of the Church of England. At the same time we must remember that far into the eighteenth century Guardians of the poor, and manufacturers who obtained children from the Guardians, if they did not actually condemn to death “ slave-children conspiring to do their master or mistress mischief of any kind,” did so treat such children or permitted them to be so treated that thousands of them came to a premature death, and still more thousands were condemned to a life of constant ill-health. Whether because even in that age the Act (upon reflection) was regarded as too savage in its punishments, or whether it was proved by experience that “ force was no remedy ” (the examples of which are numerous), I know not, but this repulsive Act was repealed within two years of its promulgation, and an Act of Henry VIII. was revived in its place.¹

In 1551-52 another Act² was passed which, because we are specially considering the connection between the Church and the poor, demands more than a passing reference. This Act shows that although the State was now busy in laying down laws with regard to the treatment of the poor, it was still to the Church that help was mainly looked for. In this Act it is directed that in every city, town, and parish, a book shall be kept by the clergyman and churchwardens, containing a list, first of the householders, and secondly of the impotent poor ; also that in towns the mayor and head officers, and in every parish the parson and churchwardens, shall yearly in Whitsun-week “ openly in the church and quietly after Divine service ” call the people together and there elect two or more persons to be collectors of the charitable alms for the relief of the poor. Then, on one of the two next Sundays, when the people are at church, “ the said collectors shall gently ask and demand of every man and woman

¹ It is interesting to notice that in this same Act “ the curate of every parish, ‘ according to such talent as God has given him,’ is enjoined to exhort his parishioners to remember the poor according to their means, and the need there be for their help ” (Nicholls, *op. cit.*, p. 132).

² 5 and 6 Edward VI., cap. 2.

what they of their charity will give weekly towards the relief of the poor, and the same is to be written in the same book. And the collectors shall justly gather and truly distribute the same charitable alms weekly to the said poor and impotent persons, without fraud or covine, favour or affection, and after such sort that the more impotent may have the more help, and such as can get part of their living have the less, and by the discretion of the collector to be put to such labour as they are able to do ; but none are to go or sit openly begging." Then the Act goes on to state that if anyone refuses to give help towards the poor, or discourages others from so doing, the "parson and churchwardens are gently to exhort him"; and suppose he still remains obstinate, then the Bishop is to send for him, "to induce and persuade him by charitable ways and means."¹

This Act proves—and there is much other evidence to the same effect—that it was becoming more and more difficult to obtain, by voluntary methods, sufficient money to support even the impotent poor. It also shows that it was still to people in their Christian capacity—that is, as members of the Church—that the appeal to provide for the poor was made. For we must presume that the exhorting by the parson, and the inducing and persuading by the Bishop, would be based upon Christian teaching, and would appeal to that teaching as the chief reason for making this provision. It should also be noticed that, apparently, begging of any kind by any person is forbidden by this particular Act. Two or three other Acts were passed in this reign which are of considerable importance in tracing the changes in method in dealing with the poor, but as they make no direct reference to the Church or any religious or ecclesiastical agency, they lie outside our present treatment of the subject.

Two years after Mary came to the throne—that is, in A.D. 1555—an Act² was passed for "putting down valiant beggars," and for relieving those "who are poor in very deed." This Act confirms certain previous legislation, but makes various amend-

¹ Nicholls, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

² 2 and 3 Philip and Mary, cap. 5.

ments to this. The first of these is that instead of in "Whitsun-week," it enacts that now "on some one holy-day in Christmas" the people shall "openly in church, after divine service," be exhorted to give in aid of the poor. The reason for this change of date is not evident. Was there a diversity of opinion between those of the old and those of the new ways of thinking as to the relative importance of Christmas and Whitsuntide? Another amendment is to the effect that "if any parish has more poor than it is able to relieve, upon certifying the number and names of the persons with which it is overburthened to two justices of the peace, they may grant to as many of such poor folk as they think good "a licence to go abroad to beg and to receive charitable alms out of the said parish, in which licence the places to which such poor folk may resort shall be named." "Such licensed beggars are to wear openly, on the breast and back of their outermost garment, some notable badge to be assigned by the parish authorities." Here we seem to have very clear evidence of the recrudescence of the permission to go begging which was so widely recognized in pre-Reformation times.

The reign of Elizabeth is from almost every point of view one of exceptional interest and importance. It certainly is so in regard to measures taken for dealing with poverty. On the surface these changes appear to be due to national and civic authorities, and to be only very indirectly due to religious or ecclesiastical influences. Actually, I believe, they were very largely owing to these; for if we look for the causes of the immense changes which took place in various directions during this reign, we cannot fail to see that these were largely due to an improvement in the national character; and this was surely, among other causes, due to a more true teaching of Christianity. The effects of the Reformation were now beginning to be felt; there was an altogether healthier tone both in the rulers of the nation and in public opinion generally.

There can, I think, be little doubt that during the latter part of the reign of Henry VIII. and during the reigns of Edward VI. and Mary the condition of the mass of the people had been

growing steadily worse. This period has been compared to that between 1760 and 1830, one to which later we shall have to pay special attention. "In each case great economic transitions are in progress, and in each case they are complicated by avoidable and irrational evils. In each, also, the misery of the mass of the people advances rapidly."¹ I would venture to add that in each period what little influence religion exerted was not directed towards the real or permanent welfare of the people.

"The general aims of Elizabeth's government were to maintain the naval and military power of the population, and to provide a decent and secure subsistence for all Englishmen . . . a well-nourished, regularly employed, and prosperous population seemed one main condition of national power."² We are to-day very apt to complain of interference with the liberty of the subject. Probably such complaints have been made in many periods. But the interferences which we suffer are small indeed compared with those, not only attempted, but put into force in the sixteenth century. Government was then very really "paternal," both locally and nationally, and the minute regulations in force in regard to the conduct of the individual (and it was assumed that all these regulations were for his benefit) were extraordinary both in their extent and variety.³ This "paternal" conception of governmental function is one of the many proofs that at this time there was undoubtedly an increasing sense of social responsibility, which is further proved by the many attempts to prevent further sheep-farming in place of tillage,⁴ and also in the efforts to regulate prices in favour of the poor.⁵ I would also notice the integrity of the great Elizabethan statesmen. They took their work seriously; they were not self-seeking; on the

¹ Meredith, "Economic History of England," p. 99.

² *Ibid.*, p. 99.

³ On the "minute domestic character" of the Elizabethan legislation see Loch, "Charity and Social Life," chap. xxix.

⁴ *E.g.*, by 5 Elizabeth, cap. 2.

⁵ There was undoubtedly a considerable rise in the price of provisions during the latter half of the sixteenth century; but, on the whole, the rise in wages seems to have been proportionate with this. That this should be so was the object of 5 Elizabeth, cap. 4, which admits that "wages and allowances limited and rated" in former statutes "are too small."

contrary, they seemed to have had a real and honest desire to promote the public welfare.

In 1562-63 an Act¹ was passed which, because it marked a new departure, demands special attention.² This Act perpetuates most of the provisions of the Act passed in Mary's reign—*e.g.*, it provides for the appointment of collectors of alms; it licenses the poor to beg where a parish is overburdened, and requires such beggars to wear badges. It likewise enacts that those who refuse to give to the poor are to be gently exhorted and persuaded thereto by the clergy and churchwardens. But in the case of those who after this refuse to give, it provides a means whereby they may be *compelled* to give. It orders that if after exhortation, first by the parson and churchwardens of the parish, and then by the Bishop of the diocese, "any person of his froward or wilful mind shall obstinately refuse to give weekly to the relief of the poor according to his ability," the Bishop shall have authority to bind him under a penalty of £10 to appear at the next sessions. Here the justices are again "charitably and gently to persuade the said obstinate person to extend his charity towards the relief of the poor." If this persuasion fails, the justices "may sesse, tax, and limit upon every such obstinate person so refusing, according to their good discretion, what sum the said obstinate person shall pay." If he then refuses to pay, the justices may, "upon the complaint of the collectors and churchwardens of the parish," commit him to prison until he pay the same, "together with the arrearages thereof." Thus this Act marks the first instance of a national compulsory assessment for the relief of the poor—one which has continued down to the present time. In the same year another Act³ was passed—first compelling certain classes of people to work, and all classes in time of harvest, and then regulating the rate of wages⁴ and the price of certain kinds of provisions.

¹ 5 Elizabeth, cap. 3.

² See Nicholls, *op. cit.*, pp. 151, 152.

³ 5 Elizabeth, cap. 4. Upon this Act see Loch, "Charity and Social Life," pp. 310 *et seq.*

⁴ These were fixed by the justices, "after calling to them such discreet and grave persons as they shall think meet, and after conferring together

Ten years later—that is, in 1572-73—another important and extremely comprehensive Act¹ was passed, which not only dealt with almost every conceivable kind of poverty, but stated what particular means should be taken for the prevention or suppression of each. Though this Act does not mention the ecclesiastical authorities, and so lies to some extent outside our present purpose, yet it must be noticed, because it marks another step in the development of the national conscience with regard both to the evils of poverty and of the duty of doing everything possible to combat these. By its provisions “beggars are to be severely punished; persons harbouring or relieving them are to be fined;² aged and infirm poor are to have appointed for them by the justices meet and convenient places . . . for their habitations and abidings.” It also provided that “if any of the said poor people refuse to be bestowed in these abiding-places . . . but covet still to hold on to their trade of begging, or after they be once bestowed in the said abiding-places do depart and beg,” they are to be severely punished.

Of many other Acts passed during Elizabeth’s reign, one at least must be mentioned,³ if for no other reason, because it “is still the foundation and textbook of English Poor Law.”⁴ By this Act “four, three, or two substantial householders” are to be yearly nominated in Easter week, and these, with the churchwardens, are to be the overseers of the poor. These are “to raise weekly or otherwise in every parish by taxation of every inhabitant . . . and every occupier of lands, houses, etc.,” such sums of money as “they shall think fit”—(1) for setting to work the children of parents not able to maintain them; (2) for setting to work poor people “who use no ordinary trade of life to get their living by”; (3) for providing various materials

respecting the plenty or scarcity of the time, and other circumstances necessary to be considered.” Justices, in theory, fixed wages until 1814.

¹ 14 Elizabeth, cap. 5.

² Sir George Nicholls points out that the encouragement given to beggars by the statute of Philip and Mary, and unfortunately continued by 1 Elizabeth, cap. 18, had evidently produced very evil results.

³ 43 Elizabeth, cap 2.

⁴ Nicholls, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

for these to work upon; (4) "for the necessary relief of impotent persons not able to work.¹ To carry out these objects the churchwardens and overseers are to meet together at least once in every month in the parish church, after Divine service on the Sunday, to consider of some good course to be taken." By this Act it is also enjoined that if any parish cannot provide for its own poor, then any parishes within the hundred or county "may be taxed, rated, and assessed . . . for the said purpose."

As we look back over the efforts, whether legislative or otherwise, made to deal with the problem of the poor from the time of the dissolution of the monasteries to the death of Queen Elizabeth, we can see, I think, a gradual acceptance in practice of this undoubted truth—that, while mendicancy and vagabondage must at all costs be as far as possible abolished, merely coercive or repressive measures will not suffice to effect this. There must be remedies as well as punishments. The sources of the evil must be attacked: children must be trained to work, and work must be found for those who apparently cannot find it. There must also be adequate relief for the impotent poor. But side by side with this development in public opinion, we see another development—namely, in the methods adopted for finding the means to deal with and to relieve the poor. We see the method of compulsory assessment being gradually adopted; and though private charity did not cease, though we constantly come across earnest exhortations towards a greater liberality in bestowing it, we find a growing conviction that by itself it was wholly inadequate to provide the money necessary for the poor, if these were to be raised out of a state of destitution.² Undoubtedly during the reign of Elizabeth, and during the succeeding reigns, a very considerable amount of

¹ Upon the effects of this Act see Loch, "Charity and Social Life," pp. 314 *et seq.*

² "The aim of the two Acts of 1601, taken together, was to utilize charitable gifts and to encourage donors to bequeath them. What was not available from voluntary sources was to be raised by taxation" (Loch, "Charity and Social Life," p. 319).

private charity was given for specific purposes, but there was a growing tendency to place this charity more and more in the charge of the municipalities or other lay trustees. The dispensing of it was not as a rule confided to so-called spiritual persons—*i.e.*, to the clergy.

There is, it appears to me, a very remarkable analogy between the development of compulsory assessment for the poor in the period we have been considering and that of the compulsory payment for elementary, and even other, education during recent years. Both were at first instituted as merely supplementary to voluntary or charitable effort, but both in process of time gradually superseded such effort. As to how far it was inevitable that they should do so, opinions will probably continue to differ.

