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State Ownership and Direct Control of the Liquor Traffic.

THE THIRD REPORT OF THE CENTRAL BOARD OF CONTROL, 1917.

IN one of *Punch's* clever vignettes two schoolboys agree to stay on at a scientific lecture, in the hope that the professor will burn his fingers soon in his experiments. But a successful experiment means a firm footing for the grip of the next upward rung of the ladder. What has been done, well done on a small scale, is likely to succeed on a larger. Nothing succeeds like success. When Bacon's *Novum Organum* had once for all routed the guessings of a priori arguments, the inductive method, the learning by experience, leads the way.

The Third Report of the Central Control Board of the Liquor Traffic in this island is the record of a successful experiment. It tells, how "direct control" has been developed, not only by being tightened within areas already subject to it, but by taking in fresh areas. It shows not merely how drunkenness has decreased in these districts—that by itself might be fallacious, for other causes have to be counted in—but how new vigour, new life is infused into the industries of our nation, a healthier tone into the moral fibre, grievously handicapped, as we all knew only too well, in the earlier phases of the war. This "immense improvement" (p. 7) rings through the Report from end to end, and is amply justified by tabular statistics.

And, what is really a very important item, this marvellous transformation seems to have been accomplished as if by the waving of an enchanter's wand, with a remarkable "absence of friction."

A good deal of this may fairly be ascribed to the tactfulness of those who administered the policy of the Board. They moved gradually, like the London doctor who allowed his patients to go on with their laudanum on *condition, that they would always replenish the bottle after a dose with fresh water*, seem to have made sure of their ground before advancing, and to have enlisted the cooperation of those, who knew the locality. Suave pertinacity does wonders. Anyhow, this absence of deterrent friction is encouraging to those, who are afraid of interfering with vested interests.

Of course there have been "modifications" from time to time of the Board's original plans of operation. A wise man changes his mind sometimes; a fool never. The Board seems never to have swerved from the two guiding principles of their policy: first to check, not only downright drunkenness, but "soaking," "boozing" and the wastefulness which, like gangrene, eats away our national resources; and next, to provide substantial refreshment all round. Just as individuals differ one from another and require in detail a different treatment, so it is with localities and districts. Each has a character, each a different environment of circumstance. But in every case, by limiting the hours during which alcohol can be had, by timing these hours so as to coincide with meal-times, by curtailing the redundance of public-houses, above all by getting rid of any pecuniary profit to owner or tenant in pushing the sale of intoxicants, the steady pressure of State Control has done what nothing else could have done so effectually.

It is the emancipation of Britain from a bondage which has been a reproach to her among the great nations of the world.

Much remains still to be done. The habit of "treating," the "wetting" habit of finishing a bargain with whisky, such things, like our Teutonic adversaries, die hard. But this deeply interesting Report proves, how the snake in the grass may be scotched and killed.

But restriction by itself would be less than half the battle. The only real remedy for evil is to substitute something better in place of it. No trainer of colts for the Derby or of candidates for the Civil Service would be content to eradicate faults only. A farmer knows that weeds will soon cover his field again unless the ground is preoccupied by something better. Canteens, sometimes attached to a factory, have been provided generally, and have proved invaluable for the supply of good wholesome nutriment and for recreation. The influence radiating from the canteen makes, the Report assures us—and one can well believe it—a "profound change" in our industrial outlook and conditions, just as a bad sort of public-house is a focus for the bad characters in the neighbourhood.

But, it is objected, State ownership is a step towards Socialism, or, to use a more significant term, Collectivism. This is true not of our National Drink Bill only, but in many other ways. A war unprecedented alike in extent and intensity has done it. There

seems no end to the multiplication of Governmental Departments ; they almost defy counting : no end to the absorption of private resources into one huge, central reservoir. In other respects, when the storm shall have rolled away, we shall probably revert to our British habit of encouraging the unshackled enterprise of individuals, unless there is something wrong to be set right by the interference of the community. But the Drink Traffic is a thing distinctly by itself, as experience has proved again and again ; it is a running sore. Under a wisely regulated State ownership, as experience has proved now, the Drink Traffic may be, has been, controlled for good.

Again, it is objected that restrictions on places of public entertainment lead to excessive drinking at home. But this, as experience shows, is only, when the restrictions are not backed up by public opinion. The war has awakened our nation to appreciate the absolute necessity of restrictions.

“Allegations of increased home-drinking have frequently been made since the outbreak of the war, both before and after the operation of the Board’s restrictive Orders. Such allegations seldom admit of positive proof or disproof. The Board has carefully investigated the most specific of these allegations, and they are satisfied that in the great majority of cases they are unsupported by substantial evidence. The bulk of the best attainable evidence, derived from the majority of Medical Officers of Health, from trained health visitors, and from detailed inquiries made on behalf of the Board as well as from the police is in the opposite direction.”

“The same general conclusion holds good with regard to the allegations made respecting the increase of drinking among women.”¹

If any of [those who have given] close and unbiased attention to this [vital] question still hesitate whether or not to support a fairly balanced scheme of State Ownership and State Direct Control of our Liquor Traffic, pages 13, 14 of this Third Report ought to be conclusive as showing what has been successfully done at Carlisle, especially [in the] organization of [the] Gretna Tavern.

The annual reports of the *People’s Refreshment Houses Association* tell [the] same story of good done by the manager’s profits coming only and entirely from the sale of non-alcoholic drinks.

I. GREGORY SMITH.

¹ See Table II, etc., etc. in Appendix.

