

# THE WELFARE OF THE FARMER

EDITORIAL BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT

**T**HE purpose of the Progressives in this campaign is to restore and secure to the plain people that position of control in the government of their own country which, in the working of our institutions, is being insidiously wrested from them.

It is one of the chief duties—and it is the highest privilege—of a President of the United States to be the active leader and exponent of policies which will help the people to obtain such legislative and administrative reforms as are required to meet any reasonable popular demand which makes for the common good. While I was President I had found that with regard to the conservation of the Nation's resources the National conscience had been moved, and that with regard to the condition and outlook of rural population there was a widespread feeling that things were wrong. Consequently I took definite action, in the hope and belief that adequate remedies would be provided; and I now stand for the revival and development of the policies thus initiated.

What first called attention to the gravity of the question of Conservation was the

destruction of the National forests. It opened, fortunately, that this important of the National wealth came during Administration under the charge of Gifford Pinchot, to whom, more than to any man, is due the credit for having averted a National peril brought prominently to notice.

The Conservation idea caught the popular imagination, and the Conservation movement rapidly took shape. In the spring of 1905 I called the Governors of all the States and Territories to meet at a conference at the National Capital. There it was unanimously resolved that "Conservation of our natural resources is a subject of transcendent importance, which should engage unremittingly the attention of the Nation, the States and the people in earnest co-operation; and this co-operation should find expression in suitable action by Congress and by the Legislatures of the several States."

I followed this up by the appointment of the National Conservation Commission, which made the first inventory of natural resources ever prepared for any country. It had been the first step in the necessary first steps

enable Congress and the Legislatures of the several States to make intelligent and effective application of the unanimous pronouncement by the chief executives of the States and Territories. With this unanimous pronouncement by the chief executives of the States and Territories in support of the Conservation idea it was clearly a case where the President of the United States should formulate and lead a Conservation policy. This was done. Unfortunately, the policy thus begun was completely reversed by the appointment of Mr. Ballinger and the dismissal of Gifford Pinchot.

The long fight to protect the forests of the United States has not been to keep them out of use, but, on the contrary, to encourage the utilization of them to the fullest extent consistent with preserving their power of service to the people for all time. Conservation is not keeping out of use, but is putting things to the best use without waste, and, where possible, preserving their perennial usefulness unimpaired. Where public rights exist, Conservation is to insure to the public the full enjoyment and benefit of these rights, and at the same time to protect and encourage private enterprise engaged in development work.

The way to defend private property is to obey what is now the settled National resolve as to the proper use and conservation of public property. We Progressives declare that this generation shall not pass away without having wiped out of its record the charge of unconcern for the country's future, the failure to follow the instinct which is implanted even in the lower animals—that of the preservation of the race. It behooves us to preserve the means essential to the perpetual welfare of the Nation. To accomplish the task effectively two things are of prime importance. In the first place, there must be a sound moral standard on public matters; our public men must represent and respond to the aroused conscience of the people. In the next place, all the great natural resources which are vital to the welfare of the whole people should be kept either in the hands or under the full control of the whole people. This applies to coal, oil, timber, water power, natural gas. Either natural resources of the land should be kept in the hands of the people and their development and use allowed under leasing arrangements (or otherwise); or, where this is not possible, there should be strict Govern-

mental control over their use. All the remaining water power in our country should be retained in full by the people, and should be developed and used so as to pay a good, fair profit to the developers, but with the prime aim of keeping the ultimate ownership in the people and making its beneficial use by the people the first consideration.

The equally important, but far less understood, policy of country life may in a sense be regarded as one part of Conservation. Of all possible husbanding of physical National resources none is comparable in its value to the Nation with the conservation of the natural fertility of the soil; and even more important is it to keep the right type of men and women on the soil. Moreover, the public opinion to which we must look to make Conservation an effective National policy will not come from the cities where big business is in power. It will come from the farmers who, alive to their duty in regard to the resources at their command, will see that they get their due share of those other resources which belong to the people at large, and to no privileged class.

Thought upon the betterment of country life, as we know it to-day, had not reached a point where action could be taken until very near the end of my term of office. Obviously, the first thing to do was to ascertain the facts, and especially to find out whether a real demand for action and effective support for action were likely to come from the rural communities directly concerned. I therefore appointed an unpaid commission of experts, who held public inquiries all over the United States, and also circulated through the mails a large number of printed questions. I believe in drawing upon volunteers for great public service as much in civil as in military matters, and I did it in other connections. The only expense that the public was put to in this case was the free return through the mail of these forms which brought invaluable information and opinions from tens of thousands of representative people in rural communities. All the other expenditure—even the traveling expenses of the commissioners and the publication of their report—was provided for out of private funds. The commissioners say in their report, from which I would like to quote a great deal more: "We have found by the testimony not only of the farmers themselves, but of all persons in touch with farm life, more or less serious unrest in every part of

the United States, even in the most prosperous regions."

Commenting on this passage, a foreign observer has written: "The truth is that, when judged by the standard of living in European peasantries, the farmers of the United States are prosperous, but in comparison with the other citizens of the most progressive country in the world they are not well off. Their accumulation of material wealth is unnaturally and unnecessarily restricted; their social life is relatively barren; their political influence is relatively small. American farmers have been used by politicians, but have still to learn how to use them."

Here, both in the general conclusion of the Country Life Commission and in the foreign writer's pregnant criticism of it, we are brought face to face with the fact that the farmers of the United States have not enjoyed their due share of the progress and prosperity of this God-prospered country. The cities are just as much concerned as is the country population for the well-being of the farmer.

In this country there are not the same rural depopulation and agricultural depression which widely prevail in the Old World. Our happier condition in this regard is, however, due to the circumstance that we are blessed by Providence with an abundance of fertile land upon whose resources our population does not yet press. But even now we have in one sense a serious rural exodus. There is a growing tendency for all the brightest and most enterprising youth of the country to prefer the chances of a town career; and also a tendency for the owners of agricultural land to move into cities and leave their farms to be worked by tenants. Both these tendencies are to be deplored, and should engage careful thought where they are most marked. Our city populations have been physically and morally sustained by the constant inflow of the best country blood. This cannot go on indefinitely. If this human reservoir from which the cities have drawn, and must continue to draw, so much of their best citizenship becomes depleted and deteriorated, the cities themselves will be the greatest sufferers from the evils which always threaten a nation which as a whole abandons the country for the town. National degeneracy will then proceed apace.

One aspect of this rural life problem concerns every worker for his living in the

United States. Beyond question the growing cost of the necessities of life is in no small measure due to two economic facts. First, the farm lands of the United States do not produce nearly ~~as~~ much food as they might produce under conditions more favorable to the farmer. Secondly, owing to the lack of organization among farmers, the marketing of their products is controlled by middle interests which lower the price to the producer and at the same time increase the cost to the consumer.

Now this is a serious state of facts. It arises out of a wrong attitude of public opinion towards the most important body of wealth-producers in the country, and a general tendency to subordinate the interests of the rural to those of the urban populations. This tendency was first manifested in England. It has since prevailed throughout the English-speaking world. It has to be corrected; and it is worth while to pause for a moment to note how this fatal mistake arose.

It all began with the industrial revolution which commenced in the latter part of the eighteenth century. This arose out of a succession of inventions, mostly connected with the great development of machinery and the utilization of steam, and subsequently of electricity, in manufacture. The chief social result was the concentration of industries and of their workers in great cities. Those who continued to live upon the land were thus deprived of all profitable occupation except agriculture. The farmers were regarded as feeders of the cities, and the markets which were thus made for them were considered to give them all they required at the hands of the nation. But when rapid and cheap transportation, together with processes for preserving produce in transit, brought the farmers of the Old World into competition with those who were developing the newly opened farm lands of this continent, agricultural depression set in not only in England, but throughout Europe. In those countries which were forced to remain under a military régime the importance of the agricultural population to the nation was recognized, but in the English-speaking countries there was a general tendency to concentrate all national thought and power upon industrial development and commercial expansion, and to regard the farmers as an inferior order of citizens. That is not consciously our attitude to the farmers of this country, but in many respects we have acted as if it were. It behooves us therefore to

consider how the farmers in the most progressive European countries have dealt with this modern problem of rural life, and see how far foreign experience will show us how best to help the farmers of the United States.

It is strange, but true, that we can at the moment best learn our lesson in this matter of rural progress from the farmers of Ireland and of certain countries on the European mainland. For instance, Ireland depends, as Denmark does, upon agriculture. During recent years the Government has been fundamentally changing the whole agricultural economy of the island by helping the tenants to become owners. A body of Irish reformers, who have done fine work in the rural problem, saw over twenty years ago that this boon to the Irish farmers would not help them to survive the world-wide competition in the British markets unless they revolutionized their husbandry and their business, and also recognized their social life. They found, as many a depressed European peasantry has found, that the co-operative system was the surest way to the all-round improvement in rural conditions which they were seeking to effect. The problem of rural life is engaging the serious thought of the British nation and Parliament. Much is being done by legislation with the aim of settling a larger number of people upon the land. Recently a Development Commission has been created and liberally provided with funds for the purpose of aiding and developing agriculture in the United Kingdom. Among the means to this end is specified the organization of co-operation.

As I have often stated, I believe that it is essential to the welfare of the American farmers that they should adopt generally the co-operative system, which already has proved highly advantageous in a few instances. In many of the States of the Union there are gratifying examples of associated effort by communities of farmers to improve their economic conditions and to increase the opportunities and means for social satisfaction. I heartily welcome the fact that several of the large railway companies are directly associating themselves with the rural communities in their movements towards making farming more profitable to the pockets and country life more satisfying to the social instincts of the people. The good points of the systems and methods as revealed by experience in different localities could become helpfully known to all by systematic assistance in the

initial stages of organization. An immense impulse to the movement would result from the extension of recognized leadership and sympathy from the Chief Executive of the Government.

I see no reason why the Department of Agriculture should not stand at the head of and foster the movement for these great and far-reaching agricultural reforms. In that Department we have one of the largest civil administrative branches of government in the world, if not the largest. The Progressives demand that its utilities should be far more widely extended, and one of their first objects, when they come into power, will be to see that the Department sets itself to work out a broader scheme than has yet been attempted for the uplifting, technically, commercially, socially, and politically, of the American farmer.

A word must be added on the social and political aspects of the country life question. I have always insisted that the social life of the country folk must be brightened. This is largely to be done by education and social organization. Far too often in the past the education of the rural youth has failed to interest them either in the science of agriculture or the beauty of nature—in the country. It has rather prepared their minds for the attractions and opportunities of the cities. These are matters in which the rural church, whose helpful influence upon the business organization and social life—especially in helping to introduce co-operation for business and social reasons—could be an invaluable service to the Nation, as well as to the religious bodies themselves. The Young Men's Christian Association has already begun such work. The churches can supply a great need by giving to the country a counterpart of the social service which enriches the urban life of our civilization. It is their function to teach us not only our duty towards our God, but our duty towards our neighbors. The Federal Council of Churches, through its Commission on the Church and Social Service, is taking up this question.

Lastly, in advocating the co-operative system—and still more the co-operative spirit—among farmers, I have in view the strengthening of their political influence. It is as true as it is forgotten that the influence of any interest upon legislation and administration is strictly proportional to the extent to which the interest is organized—not, mark you, for political, but for business, purposes.

It is to the failure of the farmers to act together in the business of their lives that I attribute their lack of political influence. No country can realize its mission in which the opinion of those who live and work upon the land does not find adequate expression through political action.

We Progressives stand for the two policies of Conservation and the betterment of country life. We regard them both as urgent and clamant for action. For the last three years there has been, as regards both of

them, first reaction, and second, when under a storm of public disapproval the policy of open reaction was abandoned, weak and halting action without the forceful central leadership which can come only from deep and abiding conviction. We demand such leadership, and we demand in the leaders the deep conviction which alone can give such leadership; for thus only will there be response to the appeal which comes direct from the heart and conscience of the people to the mind and will of the statesman.