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The Extension Needs Of The Farmer

A. G. WOOD, Karaka.

ALL farmers will agree with me that a great tribute is due to those men in our State Departments of Agriculture, Scientific and Industrial Research, and other scientific institutions such as Massey and Lincoln Colleges, and the Cawthron Institute who have given, and are giving, such devoted service to a great cause—that of increasing primary production, so vital to the economy and well being of our country and people. These men frequently serve for salaries representing only a fraction of their worth in terms of intelligence and years of training. Not only farmers, but all sections of the community owe a debt of gratitude to these men. This is a perfectly sincere tribute and I have no intention of criticising or condemning the excellent work that has already been done.

A proper analysis of the present extension services would not necessarily indicate dissatisfaction. It would be timely indication or pointer that the modern generation of farmers is aware that science must play an increasingly important part in the production of food if we are to do our share in meeting the demands of a hungry world. As farmers, we realise that we have this responsibility on our shoulders and year by year as the population of the world increases our job becomes more onerous and difficult. The balance of population is rapidly building up against us. Fewer farmers to-day have to produce more food to feed the ever-increasing number of people. We are slowly but surely losing this battle. Statistics show us that the population is increasing at the rate of 1.3% but the production of food is increasing by only 0.3%. The ultimate result is inevitable unless we can find ways and means to at least balance these two important figures.

We place great value on modern civilisation, on our standard of living with our motor cars, radios, television, and atomic power—to name only a few of the things that modern civilization has given us. But only two or three days of starvation would strip the importance from these artificial standards and place them in their proper relationship to the value of food. We do not realize what starvation can mean, in this rather wonderful country of ours. Such a suggestion may seem absurd, yet we know what our own people in the United Kingdom who put up such a magnificent performance during World War II had one great fear—that they could not get enough to eat. Not because they did not have the money to buy food, the food was not there to buy. That acute crisis has now passed into history which will surely record the important part that was played by producers of food in ensuring ultimate victory against aggression. We New Zealand farmers take some pride in the unassailable position we have gained as the world's greatest exporters of food. It is to our advantage and economically sound from a national viewpoint for us to maintain and increase if possible our ascendancy in this respect. What a bright future this country has before it and what an opportunity exists for us to exploit our unique climatic advantages by increasing within a short period our exportable wealth, from land already in production, provided that the remainder of people in this country realize the fundamental importance of agriculture to this and indeed all countries. May I give you a very apt quotation from a French philosopher of the 18th Century who summed up the relationship between the rural and urban population. He said: "The State is like a tree. The roots are its agriculture, the trunk is the population, the branches are industry, the leaves are commerce and the arts. It is from the roots that the tree draws its nourishing sap

and it is to the roots that a remedy must be applied if the tree is not to perish." I contend that a prerequisite to a substantial increase in production is a realization by the public generally of the principles so well defined in that philosophy.

Another problem that is exercising our minds at the moment is how to bridge the gap, that all important gap, between our agricultural research institution and our farms. The majority of farmers are willing to profit by this research. As a farmer, I know perfectly well that the demand by farmers for technical information on the multitude of problems and difficulties with which we are ever confronted has never been greater. This demand is not being met in spite of the efforts of the Department of Agriculture and industry organizations. Why is this? Surely it is because farming in this country has grown up. Thousands of young, keen men are now on the land. The whole industry is, as I have said, more acutely aware of the necessity for more scientific development in agriculture.

We know that a lot of excellent research work is being carried out at the various centres in the Dominion, but farmers are not getting that valuable information back to them. Farm journals give us first class service and so does the Press and Radio in the Auckland Province, but what we lack is the personal visit by trained extension workers, able to discuss and show us how to apply these new ideas, besides correcting the possible faults in our farming technique. Take as an instance the case of one extension officer of the Department of Agriculture. This man is able, popular and energetic. He is attempting to give service to 2,500 farmers in his district. His time is not just spent on extension work. He has to carry out a fairly full experimental programme . . . act as District Secretary for Young Farmers' Clubs, carry out a certain amount of seed certification duties, write articles for the Journal, attend conferences, conduct visitors through his district, and quite possibly fill in a few forms at the end of each month! So when all is said and done, he is only a human being and can therefore meet the needs of the most insistent and generally the best farmers in his district, leaving those who would benefit most in the outer darkness. This is one reason why so much of the information from the research worker does not reach the farmer in time to be fully effective and give maximum results. This lack of personal contact between the trained extension worker and the farmer is the very thing which appears to be evading those responsible for the important task of carrying back and disseminating this essential information to the farmer.

When a business man has an article to sell he takes it to the customer and has enough faith in his product to expect his sales to reflect its value. I see no reason why this sound business principle should not be applied to the extension service. Let us take the extension service to the farmer and not wait for the farmer to go to the extension service.

How could this be done?

Basically I consider that scientific investigations and research from the national viewpoint should be the responsibility of the Government. But it is from this point onwards that the farmers themselves should sit up and take notice. We, the farmers of the country, should be able to decide quickly whether or not the information and findings of research that can be passed on, is of value in raising farm output and income.

We know that this can be done because we have irrefutable evidence to prove that where a system of intensified technical assistance has been made available dramatic increases in production have resulted. I do not need to give particulars; you all know that they exist.

With this wealth of information available, it is obvious then that to get the full benefits the individual farmer must be prepared to accept a portion at least of the cost of getting it. In this age with its almost universal philosophy of regarding the State as a financial godfather, a curious state of affairs has been reached. We complain about the high cost of Government and the high incidence of taxation, yet knowing quite well that the more appeals we make must add to the already tremendous cost. In my view, here is one way that we can help ourselves. I am quite aware that the suggestion that farmers should at least bear some portion of the cost of obtaining the information and advice they want will not have universal support. But it is important to keep in mind that where some financial responsibility is undertaken by the farmer, a commensurate degree of control is gained. It is this responsibility that has made great progress possible and merited international recognition in some of our farming services. Herd Improvement and Veterinary Services are two outstanding examples.

The dairy industry in particular with its most efficient Herd Recording Council and its Consulting Officers is already financing extension work to some extent. The Herd Recording Council provides a first-class service in such matters as Sire Survey work, A.I. and Pasture Surveys. Its consulting officers have given excellent practical assistance to hundreds of dairy farmers, but even with its considerable financial reserves the Dairy Board could not as a general measure provide that intimate personal service which has proved so successful on their survey farms.

I believe that the old principle "that what one pays for, one values" still holds good although some might consider it outdated. In this respect it is interesting to note that a certain section of farmers is so keen to get an intimate personal extension service that they have formed themselves into an incorporated society, paid up to £40 per member (not much more than the present charges for herd testing) engaged the services of a qualified Extension Officer, and this entirely new form of Extension work is running most satisfactorily at the present time. I would again point out that this Improvement Club was not formed because the farmers were dissatisfied with the Extension officers of the Department of Agriculture or the Dairy Board. It was an earnest and perfectly honest contribution by the farmers themselves to increased production and better farming. I would venture to predict that these farmers who have invested up to £40 in this production scheme over which they have complete control, will make it their business to offset perhaps many times, the basic charges for this service. It is of interest to know that this Improvement Club already has a waiting list of members.

I hope that I have made my personal views on the Extension services quite clear. It is this—that the farmers themselves should undertake the forging of that link between the research organizations and themselves. This does not imply the abolition of the existing services. The Department Extension Officers could intensify their field experimental work as is done by the field staff of the Animal Industry Division. They could act in the same relationships as specialists to general practitioners. The Dairy Board's consulting officers would of course carry on their splendid work of herd improvement which is of such value to the industry.

I consider that an Extension Scheme should be organized in a small way as was the case with the Veterinary Clubs. If the venture were a success then it could be more widely expanded from the solid foundation of experience.

The system that has proved so successful with herd improvement and veterinary services could be used. A National Council consisting

of farmers and Government representatives could be set up. One function of the Council would be to pay a moderate subsidy to the local field organizations so that charges could be kept at a moderate level.

Might I perhaps anticipate a question at this stage. "How would the national farming community react to such a proposal?" Quite frankly I am not able to answer such a question with any degree of accuracy. There would be some of course who would say that we should get what we can for nothing, while we can. I think I have already indicated my opinion of this outlook. I would say, however, that in farming as in every other calling there are individuals who are prepared to blaze the trail even at considerable personal sacrifice. We would indeed find no difficulty in laying at least the foundation, and a good one.

As always, there will be a surfeit of architects for the superstructure of any scheme such as I have outlined. This is inevitable for it must be recognized that radical changes have taken place over the past fifteen years in farming, and indeed in farmers themselves. As I mentioned before our industry has "grown up". We have now a generation of farmers who do not "follow the plough" as their fathers understood the term. We are now much more highly mechanised, something that has changed the farming picture. We have thousands of young ex-servicemen on the land, men who have seen the agriculture of other lands and witnessed perhaps the misery and degradation which exists in some countries not as well endowed as our own. These ex-servicemen appreciate the value of food as the first line of defence against Communism. These men are young and virile. They will seek for and demand the introduction of new and better methods. I do want to emphasise this point because it is of such importance—that the farmers themselves perhaps more than any other section of the community are most receptive of the changes in agriculture which will serve to increase farming output per unit of labour.

May I give you a current practical example of this? Prominent English visitors have expressed surprise at the rapidity with which our farmers have adapted their silage harvesting methods to the buckrake, thereby saving thousands of man-hours annually. A change in the short period of less than two seasons.

The thinking farmer is not at all easy about this period of excessively high prices through which we are passing. He feels most strongly that these times will not last. Such farmers are anxious to equip themselves with the latest and best knowledge possible so that in the event of a fall in the values of our exportable produce, farm production can be stepped-up to meet the changed circumstances—a matter which would materially affect and vitally concern everyone in this Dominion.

Now having given you some ideas of the Extension Services from a farmer's viewpoint, I am aware that I have not mentioned the question of trained field personnel to carry out the work as outlined. In the event of a reorganization of extension services, it would be natural to ask if sufficient trained men would be available. I would not attempt to answer this—there are others qualified to do so. But I do know that any National Scheme that offers sufficient inducement in the way of stability of employment and worthwhile salaries according to merit and initiative would always attract the right type of man. It would also stimulate the recruiting of students with a background of practical farming to go in for agriculture as a profession. To-day, many of these young men are taking up commercial and other careers and are lost to our great primary industry. We can ill afford to lose these men and I feel that if sufficient incentive were offered to them they would be willing and eager to serve in this important field.

I cannot imagine anything more beneficial or important to the economy of this country as well as to the Empire than a population of farmers in New Zealand who are really good husbandmen, prosperous and secure as the result of their own efforts. I do not look on this as a dream, but something that can be accomplished—the raising of the 90% up to the level of the top 10%. We should be able to do this by good, clean, team work. We can be stimulated and encouraged by the knowledge that our standard of farming is showing consistent improvement, but we still have a long road to travel before every farmer in the country reaches those production standards achieved by the top 10%.

I have little sympathy with those who complain about the scarcity of land in this country to meet all demands. They are generally those who are not farming to capacity the land that they own.

I do not agree with the proposal that has been made by some prominent farmers and others that committees of local farmers should be set up to give guidance and advice to their more complacent brethren. In my opinion such a scheme would get scant consideration from farmers generally, for no local farmer is regarded by his fellows as being an expert. The system of local committees introduced into the United Kingdom farming during the war period with all their powers, I feel would not work here. I would approach the problem exactly as I have suggested for I feel that it is the kind of solution that most farmers would not only want, but welcome.

According to Dr. K. B. Cumberland only three out of every 10 New Zealanders work in rural areas to-day compared with six out of 10 fifty years ago. Perhaps by a new approach we may be able to alter this swing in favour of the rural areas.

I think that the whole matter could be summed up as described by Louis Bromfield who in his outstanding book "Out of the Earth" mentions the case of a 65-year-old farmer in the poorest county of Tennessee who had seen the light when he agreed to work with the county agent in setting up a pilot farm. There is no doubt says Bromfield that his remaining years would be richer and more exciting than the rest of his life put together. Some agricultural teacher had set a spark to the dormant tinder. This I think strikes deeply into the problem we are endeavouring to solve. I believe that we want more evangelists of the gospel of the Good Earth with its capacity to yield so faithfully and constantly for the benefit of mankind.

Discussion

Dr. McMEEKAN: Extension officers should undertake research especially in farm management. Is this possible under the present circumstances? The force of extension officers is too inadequate to visit its 1600 farms in one third of the officer's time. The Extension Division has no responsibility for animal husbandry advice. That falls into the work of another division. Would it not be better to have men trained to handle all problems on the farm? There is not enough co-operation between extension and University Agricultural Education.

Mr. SMALLFIELD: To give instructors greater scope in their instruction, it would take too long to train them.

Mr. WARD: A great difficulty is the supply of extension officers. Teaching services tend to get the mediocre graduate. Nationally we should have a change of heart towards agriculture. The agricultural master should be more closely linked with the extension worker.

Mr. BEVIN: In 1937 Lincoln College started a Rural Field Cadet scheme which led into the extension field. The boys selected were above average in ability and they did 3 years on farms, 2 years at Agricultural College and were then seconded to field officers.

Mr. W. S. ALLAN: Proprietary firms can fill some of the gaps especially in animal husbandry.

Dr. MITCHELL: In all extension services there is a rapid turnover of men due, no doubt, to the low salaries.

Mr. GERRING: I am amazed at the number of people without previous training who have made a success of farming. This might be linked with the lack of suitable training in agriculture in schools. One big handicap is that there is no policy for increased production and this should come from the farmers.

Mr. WOOD: I disagree. The State should bring down a policy of increased production.