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## Public Welfare in Great Britain

By ERIC H. BIDDLE

*As told to Kathryn Close*

“THE last impression I want to give is that Britain has found all the answers to all her problems.” Eric Biddle spoke earnestly without any suggestion of pessimism. “Just as the lives of men, women and children are being shaken, their homes battered in the conflict, so the British social services—their organization, their job and methods—are being put to the day-to-day test of operating under circumstances that defy description.”

He was speaking, of course, of the Britain from which he had returned two weeks before. Six months he had spent on that “tight little Island,” sent there by the American Public Welfare Association to learn what is happening to the British social services under the stress of war. In those six months he lived and worked with people of every walk of life and in every nook and corner of Britain. During the stress and strain of the conflict, he shared with them the experiences under which their institutions and their ideas are being tempered.

Public social services in Great Britain, he explained, certainly have not reached the millennium but they have expanded with the war effort to include a multitude of new responsibilities. He recalled that a well known British organization, Political and Economic Planning, (P.E.P.) which long has been concerned with the confusion and lack of guiding principle in the British public social services, drew up a statement of needs as long ago as February, 1933. In this it was pointed out that: “Unless a ground plan is made now, the confusion will become impossible to handle. For thirty years there has been haphazard piling up of measures, the form and precise objectives of which have been indicated by temporary circumstances, financial and political considerations, and by passing fashions of administrative method.”

Between the time of P.E.P.’s statement and the beginning of the war in September, 1939, there had been no basic change in conditions, but events since that tragic first of September, 1939, have certainly brought changes that have modified the social climate of Britain.

“Can you imagine what has happened under the shattering blows of the *Blitzkrieg*? Very little time has been spent in the debate between the haves and the have-nots.

The people of Britain are sharing a common lot, and survival depends on national unity and pooling of all the strength there is. The uses to which their institutions are put are eliminating weaknesses, revealing new strength, and demonstrating hitherto unsuspected capacities for cooperation. Civil defense and social services are nearly synonymous. Political, social, and economic functions are as much weapons of the conflict as are tanks and planes.

Mr. Biddle sketched briefly the development of British public welfare in the past thirty years. Back in the early part of this century, the services for relieving economic distress were, for the most part, local in character and generally limited to outdoor relief, the workhouse, children’s institutions, and institutions for the aged, all operated in accordance with Poor Law practice and workhouse principles. But the period from 1908 to 1912 saw three steps that brought the national government into the picture financially and administratively. These were the enactment by Parliament of the Old-Age Noncontributory Insurance Act, the Health Insurance Act, and the Unemployment Insurance Act. Since the beginning of this period, the responsibility of local Poor Law authorities has been continuously decreasing and changing in character. In the decade before 1939, these Authorities, now known as the public assistance committees of the county boroughs or county councils, had improved the administration of their institutions. As national insurance and assistance measures have broadened in scope, population of the local public assistance institutions has decreased. Many of them have been transferred by public assistance committees to local health departments and have been converted into hospitals.

THE National Unemployment Insurance program was set up to work on an actuarially sound commercial insurance principle. At the outset coverage was limited to a few industries where trade unions had previously developed limited private unemployment plans for their members. Expansion of the insurance program was negligible until the end of the last war when the demobilization of the army created a new and large unemployment problem. The ups and downs of industrial activity in the Twenties was

accompanied by continuing mass unemployment. The practice began of continuing unemployment insurance benefits beyond the twenty-six-week period to which they had been originally limited and was succeeded by various other measures which soon ran the unemployment insurance funds deep into the red. In the early Thirties the situation, accentuated by depression and widespread unemployment, became acute and the conservative national government appointed a commission to study "abuses" under the Unemployment Insurance Act. As a result of the recommendations of the Commission, steps were taken to restore the Unemployment Insurance Fund to solvency—to terminate the benefit period in all cases after the worker had received payments for twenty-six weeks and to provide for national appropriations to local unemployment assistance committees for unemployment relief on the basis of a strict means test. There was strong Labour opposition to these moves.

Gradual modifications in the program brought about the establishment of the Unemployment Assistance Board, a national agency to administer unemployment assistance through a decentralized system but still under the restriction of a strict household means test. "And from that day," said Mr. Biddle, "one of the chief issues of the Labour party has been the abolition of the means test."

**M**R. BIDDLE'S description of the setting at the outbreak of war showed a national government with several programs of social insurance and assistance: health insurance, unemployment insurance, widows, orphans and old age contributory pension scheme, non-contributory old age pensions, workmen's compensation, and several forms of public assistance and non-contributory pensions. Theoretically all of these constituted a great departure from the Poor Law. Some of them, however, continued to employ Poor Law procedures and to provide benefits so inadequate as to require supplementation by local public assistance committees. Along with the programs were those of the local public assistance committees of the towns and counties for residual relief, child welfare, and institutional care. These varied with the progressiveness of the local authorities. Some had modern and increasingly effective social programs operated by trained social workers—the London County Council, for example—others had only sketchy programs of assistance for persons in dire need.

The Unemployment Assistance Board was the national agency responsible for providing assistance for employables. The board appointed by the Crown (in effect, the government in power) actually operated as an autonomous body but was loosely attached to the Ministry of Labor, the Minister of which answered questions in Parliament concerning its operations. The board had thirty-odd district offices, each with a number of area offices to which the applicants applied for assistance. Except for emergency payments, the local Labor Exchange (the Public Employment Office) of the Ministry of Labor was the place at which were paid both unemployment insurance benefits and unemployment assistance benefits granted by the Assistance Board.

All persons who were covered by unemployment insurance were eligible for unemployment assistance at the termination of the twenty-six weeks' benefit period. At the same time, practically all classes of labor except domestic servants and a few groups covered by other forms of insurance, were under the Unemployment Insurance Act.

This widespread coverage was characteristic also of the

national government's other social insurances, operated under completely separate administrative systems.

"The war came." Mr. Biddle paused and then went on, "I was in England in September of 1940. The war had then been going on for a year and things were pretty much as I have already described them, but while I was there the blitz began. The ordinary way of life was rudely shaken. That way of life was then and is now being preserved in every fundamental sense. On my second trip to England in March of 1941, it was apparent that sweeping changes were taking place under the stress of conflict. An especially significant indication of the nature of the change is the broadening of central authority, accompanied paradoxically enough by decentralization of the operations of the national government agencies."

**O**NE of the first indications after the outbreak of war of an increased degree of nationalization of welfare services, was the passage in 1940 of the supplementary Old Age Benefit Act under which the Unemployment Assistance Board took over from local authorities the administration and payment of supplementary aid to beneficiaries under the Contributory Old Age, Widows, and Orphans Pension Act. It was at that time that the board's name was changed to its present one, the Assistance Board. Since that time, the responsibilities of the Assistance Board have been increased. One of its new responsibilities is the administration of the "Prevention and Relief of Distress Grants." The latter responsibility enables the board to aid any individual or family whose income loss has been directly related to war conditions. Thus, for example, a worker or professional person or a small business man who has been displaced from his occupation because of the blitz or because of economic changes arising from the war can receive maintenance grants from the board. These so-called "PRD grants" are on a somewhat higher level than the unemployment or old age grants and are contingent upon a less restrictive means test.

"Oh yes, the assistance services are still applying a means test," said Mr. Biddle in response to a questioning look, "but as far as national assistance services go—those of the Assistance Board—they have abandoned the household means test, the thing that we call over here 'relatives' responsibility.' Under the Assistance Board policy, if an unmarried working child of the applicant, living in the applicant's household, has an income of less than twenty shillings a week, the child's income is not taken into account at all—above that sum, an increasing rate of deduction is made from the grant, but only to the maximum extent of what the child would be expected to pay for board. If the wife and dependents of the child are also living in the household, the uncounted income increases at set rates with the number of dependents. The Assistance Board has fixed five shillings a week as a maximum rate of board payment to be taken into account for a single unmarried child. The same principle is followed in the case of individuals or families who apply for relief when they are boarders or living with parents or relatives. This significant step away from the traditional Poor Law theory was the result of the stipulation made by the Labour party at the time it entered the government after Dunkirk."

Mr. Biddle named one type of grant administered by the Assistance Board which has no means test whatever. It is the civilian injury grant awarded to a civilian injured as a result of enemy action. The rate also is higher than the

older dependency grants of the board. If the injury results in continued disability, a temporary or permanent pension is granted according to the circumstances of the case.

All real property in the United Kingdom is covered by compulsory war damage insurance administered by the Board of Trade. Individuals may also insure household effects and chattels. Settlement of claims is to take place at the end of the war, but the Assistance Board may make grants which are in the nature of advances covering goods and chattels lost because of war conditions. These are generally made only for articles needed immediately, such as clothing, furniture, kitchen ware, and workmen's tools.

THE Assistance Board operates through district and area offices as it did when it was the Unemployment Assistance Board, but the number of these offices has greatly increased and the personnel has expanded from about 7,000 in September, 1939, to 17,000 in August, 1941.

The board works in close conjunction with the Labor Exchange (local public employment offices of the Ministry of Labor). These exchanges have become the country's clearing house for manpower, both for production and for the armed forces. The activities of the Labor Exchanges are manifold. In addition to their original functions as local employment offices and for the payment of unemployment insurance benefits, they act as paying agents for the unemployment assistance grants made by the Assistance Board. The Committees of the Labor Exchange which formerly constituted the appeal machinery for unemployment insurance benefits now act as England's "local draft boards" and in addition hear appeals of individuals from orders issued under the Essential Work Order, appeals under the Compulsory Fire Watching Order, and so on. These committees, made up of an employer's representative and a worker's representative, are drawn from voluntary panels, and are presided over by an impartial chairman, employed by the Ministry of Labor on a fee basis. The operation of these and other services based on the local Labor Exchange, have been among the most conspicuously successful adaptations of pre-war machinery for war demands for manpower.

The Labor Exchange, Mr. Biddle said, has become increasingly the meeting place of employers and employees, a significant development of democratic government. The Labor Exchanges also act as the referral and receiving agencies for migratory workers.

"Migratory workers do not exist in England in the same sense that they do here," he pointed out. "There they are usually 'transferred workers' going from their homes to places where they can be assigned to essential war work. But they are not left to shift for themselves." Workers transferred to a new area, he explained, receive lodging and traveling allowances, plus payment for time spent en route. On arrival at their destination, they are met by a welfare representative of the Labor Exchange who directs them to a hostel or billet and who later, if they desire, will put them in touch with a community organization of one kind or another, perhaps one recently formed for the purpose, or one of long standing.

Under the so-called Essential Work Order, Britain's industrial workers are subject to their country's beck and call nearly to the same extent as are her military men. No one can leave or be dismissed from a job in an essential war industry without the government's consent. This law, however, provides appeal procedures which correspond with those of the Labor Exchange and which bring in represen-

tatives of government, industry, and labor.

"You may wonder," observed Mr. Biddle, "why there is any need for unemployment benefits with the present premium on labor. The truth is that in Britain today there are about 220,000 persons eligible for benefits. These are the temporarily unemployed or persons becoming unemployable through loss of skill due to age or some other reason. The temporarily unemployed probably have been 'blitzed' out of work or are waiting for retraining for some essential industry."

Recommendations and referrals for training courses under the Government Training Program of the Ministry of Labor are made by the Labor Exchange. Many workers are trained in factories but are paid by the government during the training period after which they are sent to other factories for employment. If the worker is trained in his home town he receives wages while in training at rates fixed by the government in consultation with the representatives of employers and organized labor. If he is trained away from home in a government training unit, he will receive from six to eight shillings a week plus board and lodging. If he is married he receives additional allowances for his wife and each child.

Because of the wartime rise in employment, the Unemployment Insurance Fund—in sorry straits a few years ago with a debt of £150,000,000—is now entirely solvent and is rapidly building up a comfortable surplus. Benefits have been slightly increased to offset increased living costs and contribution rates have been slightly raised.

IN addition to public assistances and employment services, the national government shows concern for the people's welfare in its health and nutrition programs. Under the Ministry of Health the compulsory health insurance program continues with increased benefits to take care of rising costs. An Emergency Medical Service, established at first for civilian casualties and later extended to cover evacuated mothers and children and certain other groups such as transferred war workers, has had to expand its scope because of the loss of many medical facilities under the *Blitzkrieg*. These services are rendered to evacuated children without cost, and to others according to their ability to pay. Because of the scarcity of physicians—in demand by the military services, the civilian defense, and hospitals of every kind—and because of dislocation from evacuation and other causes, the Emergency Medical Services are in some cases employing full time physicians. A plan for rehabilitation of men rejected for military duties or industrial employment has been devised whereby local communities are reimbursed by the central government for medical services rendered.

The nutrition program, under the Ministry of Food, includes rationing, communal feeding, a milk distribution plan, and an educational program aimed at popularizing the nourishing foods.

The communal feeding stations, or British Restaurants as they are called, are actually operated by local authorities, but they are being pushed by the Ministry of Food which requests all localities to set them up and requires "target areas" to do so. In August, 1941, about 1,100 British restaurants were in operation throughout the country, more than 200 in London alone, where anyone can get a nourishing meal for a shilling. Those who cannot pay are given meal tickets by the public assistance committees of the local authorities.



One of the most sweeping powers assumed by the central government is that vested in the Ministry of Health to requisition housing or billets. This responsibility is actually carried out by the local authorities.

And what of the local authorities in the present welfare scene?

"Oh, they're still very much in the picture," Mr. Biddle explained. "Much of the financial burden has been lifted from them by the central government but their administrative responsibilities have increased, for on them has fallen the task of organizing blitz and post-blitz services. This placing of responsibility for civil defense operations in the localities is probably the chief strength of the British system—though all too frequently when a personality or a vested interest jams the gears this is a little hard to see."

The forms of public assistance left to localities are mainly institutional care and residual relief of the unemployed, both of which seem to be carrying on "business as usual." Many institutions, however, have suffered severely from bombings and from loss of staff through demands of other services. They are generally overcrowded as most of them, even the institutions for the feeble-minded, have a large number of beds reserved for casualty services. Casualties usually are segregated in a separate wing of the building. In "target areas," long time care patients are moved to outlying districts. Since the central government took over supplementary old age benefits, the outdoor relief loads of the local authorities have dropped considerably. What remains are very largely unemployables in need of relief. In some cases this is administered in old Poor Law style with small benefit of modern case work practice. In other places, in London for example, methods and practices are constantly improving.

LOCAL authorities have important responsibilities in connection with blitz and post-blitz services. Comprehensive plans are prepared by each county and county borough council within the framework of criteria laid down by the national government. These plans are submitted for approval to the appropriate national ministries, and the national government bears from 70 to 90 percent of the cost, depending on the relative resources of the local authority. England, Scotland, and Wales are divided into twelve Civil Defense Regions, each headed by regional commissioners appointed by the Crown and responsible to the Ministry of Home Security. To each regional commissioner is attached a regional representative of the various national ministries concerned with internal affairs. The regional commissioner has executive powers for supervising air raid precaution services: namely, wardens, police and fire services, rescue parties, casualty services, demolition and debris clearance, and so on. Beyond that he is responsible for the coordination of other national and local services. The word "coordination" has not been defined and will vary from region to region and with circumstances.

Of course the execution of the enormous new responsibilities imposed on the local authorities varies as to efficiency of performance according to varying energy, skill, and imagination. In England the strength and weakness of this plan is a highly controversial question and much too complicated for discussion here.

During the first winter of the war, Mr. Biddle said, plans for services following air raids tended to be concerned chiefly with property, police, demolition, anti-gas measures.

"But when the raids began in earnest, it became apparent

that the most important post-blitz services were personal. When people are bombed out of their homes, the things that are important to them are information and the service of their needs—a temporary place to stay, emergency clothing and cash, re-housing, evacuation of their children, burial of their dead. Most of these services are the primary responsibility of local authorities. Some are carried out by local officials; some delegated to community agencies, such as a settlement house or the Council of Social Service; some to the volunteer agencies such as the Women's Voluntary Services or the Friend's Ambulance Unit. The importance and number of volunteer activities in respect to the social services are so numerous that justice can't be done to them without a more comprehensive description than I can give here. Many of the measures adopted to meet the most critical needs, unforeseen before the war, have been pioneered by volunteer groups, and subsequently taken over as official responsibilities in line with the historic place of voluntary organizations in the field of social services."

THE rest centers, designed to receive and care for bombed-out but uninjured persons during and for the day following an air raid, are generally the responsibility of the local public assistance committee. More often than not they are located in public school buildings. There bomb refugees are given hot food and a place to lie down and collect their faculties. In the morning they are interviewed by a social worker who sends them on to the Citizen's Advice Bureau if they need aid in immediate planning.

The organization of the Citizen's Advice Bureaus, of which there are more than 1,000 in Britain, was first sponsored by the National Council of Social Service. At these important informational centers the bombed-out person can learn where to go for all the various emergency services he is apt to need. In the better organized communities these services, emergency clothing, billeting and re-housing, evacuation and the like, will be located in a single administrative center. Unfortunately, at the outset, few localities were so organized and often a person had to walk long distances from one place to another in order to make all the arrangements he must make on the day after a bomb has shattered his home.

"In the early days of the blitz, I once followed the itinerary of a typical bombed-out person," said Mr. Biddle. "I found that I had walked ten miles!"

"One of the greatest sins of all large scale organization," he went on, "is compartmentalism, that is to say the tendency of officials to see only their own responsibilities without relation to others. In many instances, this has almost resulted in catastrophe. People generally are demanding leadership of the kind and caliber that can be given only on a national basis. Moreover, improvisation, unless related to a comprehensive long range plan, is proving not good enough."

Mr. Biddle also spoke of the difficulties there have been in breaking down the intangible barriers between public and private social services. "You know what I mean. They exist here, too. However, the private services, whose financial contributions have remained fairly stable in spite of heavy taxation, have courageously met the challenge of adjustment and expansion demanded by war conditions. The local and national governments are turning to them for many essential services."

Social workers, he said, are taking ever-increasing part in the British public welfare scene. There is considerable

variation as to educational requirements as between various local and national agencies. The investigating staff of the Assistance Board and of many of the local public assistance committees generally have completed a secondary school education. No educational qualifications have been set up for the industrial welfare workers required by the Ministry of Labor in every "essential war industry plant." They usually turn out to be persons with personnel experience. The social workers at the rest centers, shelters, and administrative centers, have a variety of backgrounds, a few of them professional. Most of the professionally trained social workers in public work are employed by the localities as child care workers or as hospital almoners (medical social workers). Now, however, the Ministry of Health also has begun to employ child care workers, placing them in the offices of the regional officers of the Ministry, their function to persuade local authorities to develop improved programs of health, welfare, and education for evacuated children in the reception areas.

To discuss the British social services under war conditions without referring to public education would be indefensible, Mr. Biddle asserted. So much is happening in that respect that he undertook only to underline the fact that the developments in this field are of the first order of importance. Evacuation of children from the "target areas," the blitz, and other factors arising from war conditions have introduced enormous complications in the educational system. To him these seem to have been dealt with vigorously and imaginatively. A number of novel and challenging experiments in the field of adult education are being

undertaken, and there is much ferment that points to major adjustments in the British post war educational program.

"There's a lot more to the British picture than I have given you," Mr. Biddle concluded, "and I certainly can't point a moral for *Survey* readers. Perhaps the most significant thing in England today is the realization on the part of working people that they are needed and wanted—that they belong. On all sides they see concern for their well-being; recreation programs, welfare workers in the industrial plants, special food rations for miners and others engaged in heavy work. For the first time in his life, many a worker is getting recognition of the importance of his effort. Significantly there are fewer man-days lost in Britain today through strikes and lockouts than at any time in the history of the Ministry of Labor.

"Everything hasn't gone smoothly. England has seen how vested interests and jealousies can hold back a program. But for the most part the program has gone ahead anyway. There is still plenty of complaining, mostly directed at specific undertakings. Much of this is just a way of letting off steam, but there is a lot of good, live, constructive criticism, too.

"It may sound paradoxical because of some of the things I've pointed out, but there isn't a doubt in my mind about the British unity of purpose. There are lots of eddies and currents in the stream of effort, but the stream is flowing in one direction only. And that, I think, is why in the midst of all the terror and destruction, you find social progress in Britain today. When a community is unified in its effort, creative forces are bound to be at work."

## Case Work in the Public Agency

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IN CONSIDERING the case work function of the public agency, several factors seem to be present in professional thinking which need to be evaluated carefully rather than accepted tacitly. The job of the public agency is so large and its case work possibilities generally have been so little thought through, that the worker is left with a challenge that is inescapable. While there are many sources of challenge in the public assistance agency today, one of the most impressive to case workers is the great numbers of people who come to it for aid. It must be remembered constantly that 99 percent of the people in need of assistance in this country are being handled by public agencies, with the private agencies handling only the remaining one percent. If the public agency is the place where people are found, then it is the place where trained workers also must be found.

One of the factors that seems to underlie some current thinking is an implied assumption that the public agency's case work job differs from that of the private agency. If this point of view is accepted and if we attempt to build on it, we shall in the end establish a double standard in case work services for which clients and the profession will have to pay the consequence. While at present there are differences between the services given by the two agencies, they are differences of setting rather than of basic practice; differences in amount and intensity rather than in quality and kind. Public workers have discovered that con-

fusion in their thinking in respect to these differences is apt to lead to discouragement and to a lowering of their performance level.

A second assumption that seems fairly prevalent is that if the public agency will explain what information and guidance it needs to improve its job the social work profession will then go to work to supply it. If this idea were accepted it would put a new and heavy responsibility on the already overburdened public workers. Their job is so varied and the pressures under which they operate are so great that it seems only fair for the rest of the profession to help them define some of the tasks which are theirs, and being theirs are also ours, since we are all part of one professional whole. A definition of the agency's case work function might well come from the schools of social work which are far enough outside and yet near enough to the agency situation to be free to help in evaluation and in planning. However, if the schools are to be of practical assistance in this area, they will have to be careful to equip themselves with a realistic understanding of the public agency's task. Guidance to the field of practice in the form of analysis, re-evaluation, and new ideas has been the role of the school in all older professions and it is one which schools of social work cannot deny.

Another prevalent assumption is that pressures now existing in the public agency tend to be inherent and permanent. When this point of view is accepted we gear our definition