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The Editor's Corner

THE REPORT OF THE ONTARIO COMMISSION ON FORESTRY 1947

Reviewed by A. G. M. Bruyns

(Many Canadian publications have commented on and praised the Report of the Ontario Commission on Forestry. Not having the time at our disposal to read the report in detail, we have asked our good neighbour, Mr. A. G. M. Bruyns to give us his viewpoint, expecting he would approach the forestry situation from an entirely new angle of interest to readers. Here is his comment — judge for yourself.—Ed.)

We the people were thoroughly spanked by Major General Howard Kennedy, and we deserve it, if we read between the lines of the Report of the Royal Commission on Forestry. He tells us, in diplomatic language, that in Ontario, once famous for fabulous forests, at present forestry conditions are in a mess and a muddle — the waste is "tremendous and incredible" — we have been and are cutting more timber than nature grows — in a few years Ontario may be denuded of forest. It is not land or climate that caused this, but we the people seem to be greater enemies of the forests than all pests, diseases and fires together.

The Report does not make the common mistake of blaming the different governments for this state of affairs as we are so apt to do, forgetting that we ourselves are the culprits. We have elected the governments; we are responsible. We have tolerated the situation to develop as the Report describes it. What it does not mention is that we are still tolerating economic conditions that prevent us from planting enough trees to recoup our forest loss of past and present and to prevent that of the future.

In sickening self adulation we have been kidding ourselves that we are so smart, progressive and prosperous, that we have conquered nature and the forest, that we have such a high standard of living as compared with other more "backward" nations. We speak proudly of our Canadian way of life, but we seem utterly ignorant of the fact that actually our economic system is like that of the sea captain who sells the timbers of his ship in mid-ocean, regardless of storms to come. We could have known that we are in a dangerous position as concerns forests had we taken the trouble to read the 1937 Canada Year Book which mentioned that Canada had left only 27 per cent of her original forest after what we proudly call "a century of progress. At present we probably have about 20 per cent left. We rave about our great natural resources, but we squander them wantonly and the tragedy is that we don't seem to know the cause. We are actually boasting about our great production of lumber and pulp. Our forest statistics, showing more and more millions of dollars, have been chloroforming us so that we don't seem able to recognize the danger of the situation.

However it is not only Ontario that is being denuded of forest. Similar conditions are observed on the whole North American continent, in Australia, in many European countries and great parts of Asia and Africa. Most of our planet shows terrifying signs of desiccation and desertification as one of the secondary results of ruthless forest slaughter.

The technical part of the Report is a masterpiece. It is a book worth having. Beautifully printed and illustrated by the King's Printer, it costs only \$1. It is a standard work and should be in every library and every school. If it would wake us out of our supreme smugness, General Kennedy could be proud of his achievement.

A few remarks about the non-technical part may be in order, however. The report tries in its recommendations, many of which are wise and good, to adapt forestry methods to our prevailing economic system. This is called the realistic approach. But on the contrary our economy has to adapt itself willy-nilly to the forest — to nature. If we don't do this, all man-made economy cannot but fail. True the medicine recommended as a cure for the forest problems might alleviate the situation temporarily, but in the long run cough drops do not help a T.B. patient. We have to tackle the cause, which is an economic one, to make sure of permanent success. The forest problem cannot be cured by spending huge sums of money, even if all forestry were done in the most approved way and money was unlimited. The Report does not mention that forestry, despite what financial experts tell us, is an inflation indicator probably of greater sensibility and accuracy than gold; that forestry and a high cost of living are incompatible — in other words, that in the long run constructive forestry is impossible under a high and rising consumers' price level. Forests

will inevitably vanish when it does not pay to plant, replant, tend and maintain them as they should be during the forty to a hundred years of their growth to maturity. It is not generally recognized that adequate maintenance of young forests demands far more capital, care and labour than just the planting. It isn't enough to plant and forget about it. Maintenance cannot be but neglected under an economic system where the cost of living is constantly increasing. The consumer price level regulates the wage and salary level including that of the maintenance staff in the forest.

When the cost of living is not excessive, professional woodsmen can be paid a living wage. When the cost of living is too high, the forester has to be contented with a haphazard and unskilled labour supply for cutting, often doing considerable damage to the forest, as the Report affirms. The incredible waste mentioned in the Report is simply caused by our excessive cost of living; the amount of waste, excluding forest fires, being in inverse ratio to the purchasing power of the dollar. Waste was negligible in those countries where the cost of living was low because the people had the fifth freedom — to buy there where the buying was best.

Sweden, for instance exported lumber and other wood products in enormous quantities to many other countries, for many centuries. The population used about 30 per cent of the cut as fuel; much wood was also used for building, frame houses being in the majority. Wood products in 1939 were 38 per cent of the total export. But the acreage and yield of the forest did not decrease as it did in North America. For every acre cut, another one was planted and maintained. There was no slack, little fire hazard, no waste, it even paid to burn the smallest twigs into charcoal. All this was possible because the consumer's prices were low compared with ours, then the wage level could be low, the overhead was low, so was the transportation, and so were the taxes. Profits did not have to be excessive because investment in forestry was as safe as the Bank of England. It is a question whether Sweden will be able to keep it up. Her price level is also rising fast.

In 1939 the U.S.A. import of newsprint from Sweden had already mounted to 54,487 tons. If things go on as they do, we in Canada to our eternal shame, will have to import newsprint instead of exporting it.

Nature has to do maybe 95 per cent of the work in the forest and constructive forestry can no more be industrialized than the maternity ward of a hospital. The wages of the highly skilled or experienced woodsmen, required for preparing, planting and maintenance have a ceiling and a floor. The man cannot earn less than the amount necessary to keep him, his wife and family in decency; he cannot earn more than the equivalent of the service he renders to nature in growing the forest.

Nature herself decrees that forests have a maximum yield. Minimum wages are therefore incompatible with constructive forestry. However, we in our ignorance, have been trying to adapt forestry to our wage scale. It can't be done. Nature is more powerful than dollars. To prevent our forests from disappearing we should adapt our wage scale to the forest. If we don't, we'll lose them.

If consumer's prices rise by any reason whatsoever, the forester cannot do anything else but lay off woodsmen, but he has to keep his wood cutters working. Forestry becomes forest slaughter.

To increase the price of wood products will not help the forest, nor will government subsidies, tariff protection, export premiums, grants and bonuses, because all this carries the virulent and deadly germs of rising consumers' prices.

Re- and afforestation are not unprofitable because the price of lumber is too low, but because the cost of living is too high. Woodsmen will not be poor because wages are too low, but because the cost of living is too high. The price of lumber does not have to be increased by artificial means. It rises faster, automatically, than any other commodity, if the demand is heavy. When industrial products are in such a condition the manufacturers can catch up with the demand in a couple of months. They can increase their production. It takes agriculture from one to three years to do this, but where forestry is concerned, mother Nature laughs at man's production, time studies, industrialism and modern business methods. She needs at least 40 years to grow ripe timber, demand or no demand. The inevitable result of excessive timber prices is that forests are cut before they have reached full maturity. The cut will be greater than the increment. Thus the forests will disappear, the land will dry out, flood, erosion and dust storms make their appearance, not as acts of God, but as man made calamities.

Incidentally, the poor quality lumber used for housing, will in its turn increase the cost of living as repair costs will be considerably higher than they would be otherwise.

High prices of lumber and wood products destroy forests, just as high fur prices destroy wild life.

When forest planting and maintenance do not pay, a country must be in a state of inflation, regardless of how many tons of gold are hoarded down collar. If a government be the only body able to indulge in re- and afforestation, it is an indication that consumers' prices are too high for private capital to attempt it. It shows clearly that forestry is a losing game. If it were not everybody could and would naturally invest savings, or reserves by planting trees on a big or small scale.

When a government has to take over forestry because private capital cannot afford it the nation as a whole bears the loss. Taxes will be far higher than they would have been otherwise. Huge and growing amounts are involved. The forestry budget will increase with every rise in the price level. If the cost of living doubles every 40 years, the cost of planting forest will increase geometrically with it.

The same acreage of forest costing one million to plant say in 1860 will cost 2 million in 1900, but 4 million in 1940 and 8 million in 1980, and so on. The cost of maintenance will go up in addition to

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this.
Can we keep on blithely to raise our consumer's price level with impunity?
The writer knows of at least one Life Insurance Company at the turn of the century investing part of its reserves in reforestation. The cost of living was still low enough to allow a compound interest of about 3 per cent on the invested capital, ample to meet the obligations of the insured people.
This was the net profit of the forest and it happened under the much maligned profit system in a capitalist society. Not even a red hot left winger could kick at it. Had the forest been nationalized, the results could not have been better for the people in general.
This forest venture was a byword of efficiency. Hundreds of men and boys had steady work, winter and summer for a low money wage. They lived in permanent forest villages. Nature took care that unemployment was unknown. These "forest communities" (as the Report calls them) were not built artificially with the tax money of all consumers in the country. On the contrary, they had taken root and had grown naturally, like the trees in the forest, as it were. Although the woodsmen earned less than \$1.00 a day, their standard of living (what ever this misused word may mean) was certainly not below that of present day workers making 4 or 5 times as much. Security, happiness and prosperity reigned.
But oh brother, when the new breed of economic planners took hold and the cost of living began to rise! The company in question had to quit — the woodsmen trekked to the cities to swell the armies of unemployed.
Poor Mother Nature could not grow one foot of lumber more than she used to.
If we want to have our forests, we'll have to make them pay. To accomplish this, the only thing we have to do is to change over from a producer's to a consumer's economic system. There does not seem to be any other way to save Canada as a forest country.
If we do, everybody can and will plant trees and forest without any subsidy, new deals or protective tariffs. Nobody would log because the forest would pay for itself.
Incidentally, the labor potential of constructive forestry is so unbelievably great that it would probably prevent unemployment altogether in a country like Canada. Besides the consumers would not have to spend millions for non-essential public works as an unemployment deterrent.
Consumer organization is still in its infancy. There are signs that it is growing steadily. Even Union labour is showing signs of an incipient consumer complex. The ladies who have started this movement have a much bigger bear by the tail than they know. If they succeed in lowering the consumers' price level permanently they will have the honour of saving the forest of the world, more so than any other agency.