

(January 24th, 1938)

## Rehabilitation of the Drought Areas

By HON. GEORGE SPENCE.

T. D'ARCY LEONARD, CHAIRMAN:—Gentlemen I am afraid that the weather today is hardly conducive to a proper appreciation of the drought. But possibly by contrast we may better appreciate the plight of the areas afflicted. Certainly there is none better qualified to give a true and accurate picture of what the drought means to the prairie provinces than is our guest-speaker, who is not only the Minister of Public Works for Saskatchewan, but whose own farm is in the dry area, and who himself is in charge of the great work of rehabilitation that is going on. I would like to pay a personal tribute to the character of the people of that area. From my personal knowledge, I can say that they have carried on in their adversity with a spirit that is worthy of their heritage, and I think you will appreciate that character all the more as you listen today to our guest-speaker, the Honorable George Spence.

MR. SPENCE:—Mr. President and gentlemen of the Canadian Club I assure you it gives me a great deal of pleasure to address the club on this occasion, and the object of my pleasure is twofold. I am very glad to have an opportunity to thank the people of Eastern Canada for the open-handed generosity that has sent hundreds of car loads of fruit and vegetables, and large sums of cash to be distributed in the drought areas. It has meant a very great deal to us, not only in the actual relief of distress, but also in that it has fortified the courage of a people who have suffered through no fault of their own the results of a long period of drought. Undoubtedly it has had a moral and spiritual value, out of all proportion to its material value, great though that is. Speaking for the government, I wish to thank the people of this province and all the residents of other provinces, who have given so liberally to people in the prairie provinces, who are in straitened circumstances

through no fault of their own. I would like also to thank the railways, for their free handling of those cars, and the reductions they are making in rates for the movement of livestock, and of feed and fodder for that stock. The other thing which gives me some pleasure is, to have the opportunity to dispell some of the doubt, which has perhaps arisen in the minds of some people, as to the problems we have to face in Saskatchewan, which have risen as the result of the drought. For a considerable period of years we have had this drought, and unfortunately it is not confined to the three western provinces. It includes a vast area extending south of the International Boundary, including eight complete states of the United States and part of eleven others, together with the affected areas in our three Canadian Provinces.

On the map of North America, this vast drought region resembles a huge pyramid, with a base line, extending from a point in California east into Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Oklahoma, an approximate distance of from ten to twelve hundred miles, and extending north fifteen to seventeen hundred miles, with its apex north of the Battle River in Saskatchewan, angling southwesterly to Calgary and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, clipping off the southwestern corner of Manitoba, on the east side of the triangle. See Plate IV.

Within the confines of this vast "dust-bowl", for eight or nine years in succession, with some variations as to districts, drought has continued and devastated this extensive region. Here and there one sees deserted buildings erected in more prosperous days, where farmers becoming discouraged, have abandoned their holdings to seek more security and homes elsewhere, but the great majority are still "sticking" and taking it on the chin, facing the future with indomitable courage and grim determination, confident that more favourable seasons will again give them crops, and bring back prosperity.

It is not very hard to define the boundaries of the area where the precipitation is 14 inches or less annually. In the three Western Provinces, the edge of the natural tree belt tells the story. It can be roughly traced along the valley of the Souris River in the southeast, along the Qu'Appelle

Valley, north to Quill Lake, then angling northwest across the Province to the North Saskatchewan and the Battle Rivers, and westerly into the Province of Alberta, south-westerly to the City of Calgary and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

South of this fringe of trees and shrubbery is what is commonly called the open prairie section. It is open because the rainfall is not sufficient to support tree growth except in small isolated and watered locations in creek and coulee bottoms. Trees do not grow in this region because there is insufficient rain and the subsoil is dry. If there was more rain, it would not be treeless. This is a fundamental fact. Hence, the futility of trying to make it rain by planting trees. Trees are the effect of moisture and humidity rather than the cause of it. The forces of nature have been operating with unalterable effect for untold ages. The puny efforts of man are very ineffective, when pitted against the forces of nature.

Just a short time ago, I had the privilege of discussing this matter with a man who has been for many years high in the public life of this country, a man of recognized ability and understanding. This man said to me, that in his opinion, the great drouth in Western Canada presented the greatest and gravest problem facing the Canadian people. He also said that he did not know what we could do about it, remarking that "it was so hard to get one's teeth into the problem, and work out a satisfactory solution."

When speaking in the House of Commons on February 11th of this year, the Honourable Mr. Gardiner, Dominion Minister of Agriculture, referred to the drouth area, as comprising approximately 60,000,000 acres, 20,000,000 of which "has been improved" and "used for the production of crops,"—an area which, he said, "comprises more than one quarter of the occupied, and more than one fifth of the improved, area of farm land in the whole Dominion of Canada" and which "contains a population of approximately 900,000 people".

Over a period of more than thirty years, this open prairie section has grown tremendous crops of No. 1 hard wheat. The long-time record previous to 1930 was good, particularly in the "heavy land" districts of Saskatchewan.

Yields of from 30 to 40 bushels to the acre were not uncommon. For proof you only have to look at the branch lines of railroad that lie like a web all over the countryside, and the grain handling facilities, elevators at country points, and the great terminal elevators at the head of the lakes and interior points. From Western Canada, between 7 and 8 billion bushels of wheat was shipped through these elevators from 1910 to 1936 inclusive, valued at a sum in excess of 10 billion dollars. In the crop seasons of 1926, 1927 and 1928, on one branch line of railway in the southwest, at shipping points scattered only seven or eight miles apart, an average of one million bushels of grain was handled at each shipping point. Think of the tremendous sums of new money the sale of that grain brought to the farmers, resident in the districts and also to the business men in the towns and villages served. Yet I doubt, whether there will be a single bushel of wheat or other grain shipped out on that line of railroad this year.

This sad state of affairs is due entirely to drouth, the lack of subsoil moisture last fall and insufficient rain during the growing season this year. In short, not a climatic, but a local weather condition.

Here we must distinguish between climate and weather. Climate is the sum total, over long periods, in any given region, of the temperature, precipitation and the like. Weather is the daily ups and downs of temperature, wind and rain, or comparatively local disturbances. It is the variations in weather, with periods of drouth or untimely distribution of rainfall, with excessive temperature and drying winds, that give us poor crops. In other words, the climate may be good for growing No. 1 hard wheat, but the weather may give us a complete crop failure, in any one or more years.

Just here, it is well to point out that dry climates have some compensating advantages. The drier climate of the prairie, combined with rich fertile soil, produces, even in years of light rainfall, good yields of wheat recognized as a standard of quality in the principal markets of the world. The soil is rich and productive, because the essential chemical elements, necessary for the wheat plant, have not been leached out of the soil by excessive rainfall.

I have not the time at my disposal this afternoon, neither have I the inclination, to discuss what might be considered the speculative theory of weather cycles. I content myself with the statement that if we leave out of account the great geological and astronomical periods, going back hundreds of thousands of years, scientists are fairly well agreed that the climate does not change, has not changed perceptibly, for thousands of years. Let me put it in a sentence. The weather, with the variations cited,—dry cycles, wet cycles, etc.,—will, therefore, be approximately the same, in the next fifty years, as it has been in the last fifty years.

In other words, the law of averages will operate and, from our experience in the past, we can look with confidence to the future. A change from very dry to wet weather is bound to come again. An abundance of scientific data can be found to support this belief. To any one who wishes to make an intensive study of the climate, and weather cycles, I recommend the work of that great and eminent authority, Dr. Charles G. Abbott, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute, who has made it his life's work.

#### SOIL AND POPULATION.

Briefly summarized, the experience of many years farming on the "good lands" of the plains section of the Prairie West does not provide justification for any government, Provincial or Dominion, to institute or encourage, a policy of wholesale abandonment. There are approximately one million people, presently living within the area. Large cities—Calgary, Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Moose Jaw, Regina—and many other populous centres, have grown up and are giving service, and are dependent upon the rural sections for their day-to-day existence. I venture to affirm that no one who has given serious thought to the problem would suggest, for one moment that such a large number of people can be successfully transplanted elsewhere in Canada, that the whole structure of their present existence should be torn up by the roots, and the existing social and business organizations, in such a large part of the Dominion scrapped. Even if it were practical, which it is not, Canada could not afford to make such a gap in her food production as the abandonment of such a large area—a 25,000,000 acre wheat field—

would necessitate, for deeply entrenched in and allied with that production is the whole internal economy of this country—our finance, our great transportation systems, lake, road and rail, and our manifold industries.

Neither could we afford to sacrifice the export position, which our wheat and flour occupies, in the markets of the world, both in volume and quality. It is well to remember, that it is the wheat grown on the dry plains of the Western Provinces, that puts Canada in this premier position. Our wheat is hard and strong in protein, mainly because it came to maturity in a dry climate. Any talk of large scale evacuation is just sheer nonsense. It cannot even be considered. When wet years return the "good lands" will again produce abundantly, wealth for the West, and new wealth for the Dominion.

On the heavy clay soils and chocolate loam, the situation will take care of itself, with the return of rainfall. All it needs is moisture, so there is nothing serious to worry about, but proper methods of cultivation and cropping must be followed, to retain the wonderful native fertility of the soil. Where the high wind velocities may cause such damage on the exposed and open face of cultivated fields, the surface must be protected from erosion.

I say without hesitation, that with proper farming methods, the West will come back. Fortunately, the "good land" sections of the Prairie West constitute by far the greater percentage of the cultivated acreage. The light sandy lands, the rough, stony lands, swamp and alkaline lands, or what is referred to as marginal or submarginal lands, assume an importance out of proportion to their extent, because of the number of people presently living on these inferior or marginal lands.

After the turn of the century, we opened wide our doors to immigration and land settlement. People began flocking into the "Last Great West", from every country under the sun. They came by the hundreds of thousands annually from Great Britain, from Continental Europe and from the U.S.A.

Some areas of our western lands, settled and broken up, are only suitable for pasturage; these should have been classified as ranch lands only, and never opened for homesteading.

Long and painful experience has since proven that the entrants could not make a living by attempting to grow sufficient grain on this kind of land, or to establish permanent homes in such inhospitable surroundings. They were beaten even before they started and, what was still worse, many of these settlers did not understand soils, neither were they familiar with farming. They were lured by, and saw only, the virgin prairie, and 160 acres of "free land".

To add further to our present day difficulties, when these sub-marginal lands were first settled, municipalities were set up and school districts formed. These organizations have now become a problem because the population in these localities has thinned out, and those who are left can no longer financially support them.

Perhaps governments were somewhat to blame for the haphazard settlement, and the opening up of lands without regard to soil classification, but, it is well to remember that the people were so eager to acquire land, that it was very difficult, if not impossible, to stop them. Out they went, 100 and 200 miles, beyond the steel! Many of them "squatted" until the land was opened up. Why not? The new land was yielding abundant crops. It was a veritable poor man's paradise. Railroads and towns were building; everybody had money, and things were booming. The practice was common, in some parts of the west, to break up from 100 to 200 acres in the spring, seed it to flax, from which yields of 10 to 12 bushels an acre were not unusual, bringing a return of from \$15 to \$20 per acre, for the first year. Why wouldn't they rush to get land?

Looking back upon it all now, I am reminded of the lines by that great philosopher poet, Robert Burns:

"Though fickle fortune has deceived me,  
She promised fair, and performed but ill."

#### MEANS TAKEN TO COPE WITH THE PROBLEM

This brings me to the second part of my subject, namely, the practical question we are faced with now,—today! What are we doing about it? Is it possible, in the light of all our experience, to correct some of the mistakes that were made in land settlement thirty or more years ago? The answer to that question is emphatically, yes! Indeed, a good start

has been made and some real progress recorded already, nothing very spectacular, it is true, but substantial and solid progress, nevertheless. We must not be too impatient. Rome was not built in a day. It will take years. We have to prepare ourselves, for a long-time pull, and it will take money.

If any authority was responsible for making mistakes in land settlement of the prairies in the first place, it must have been the National Government of that day. The National Government instituted the policy of land settlement, and was in complete control in working it out. It is the responsibility of the National Government now to do everything possible to remedy the conditions, which have arisen because of these mistakes. The Hon. Mr. Gardiner, Dominion Minister of Agriculture, speaking for, and on behalf of the Federal Government, has recognized this responsibility. It is, therefore, up to us, individually, to do our part, to pull our weight in a task that will require patience, perseverance, and united effort, over a long period of years. We must be mindful of the fact that governments, no matter how well intentioned, cannot do everything, and of the further fact, that no manna is going to rain down upon us from heaven. There has never yet been a substitute found for work.

The Provincial Government of Saskatchewan is co-operating with the Dominion by placing such Provincial powers as are necessary, in the circumstances, behind the Dominion authorities. At the last session of the Saskatchewan Legislature, extensive powers were taken to acquire privately owned lands and to do other things, necessary for the proper carrying out of the Ottawa program. These powers will be exercised, when and where necessary, and upon request of the Dominion Government.

The principle upon which this legislation is based is the well-established democratic principle, that the interests of any single individual or group of individuals must not be allowed to block or impede any plan or program, necessary for the general good of the community as a whole.

To carry out the policy enunciated by the Hon. Mr. Gardiner will involve spending millions of dollars from Dominion Government funds, together with administration

costs and additional outlays necessary from Provincial funds. The program in its entirety is designed to alleviate distress, rehabilitate families whose resources are depleted and who have been forced on relief, thus giving a greater degree of stability and permanency, to the farming and ranching industry. Another objective is to carry out the program as rapidly, as possible.

To better expedite and co-ordinate the various activities necessary to carry out the various schemes in the Dominion Government's program, it has been found necessary, in Saskatchewan, to appoint one Provincial Minister to act in the capacity of *liaison* officer between the Provincial and Federal Governments. The broad scope of the work extends into six different departments of the Provincial Government and this Minister's work will be to "iron out" difficulties where they arise in the different departments and otherwise act on all matters with respect to rehabilitation, irrespective of the particular Provincial Department concerned. In these matters he will have a clear right-of-way through all the Departments of the Provincial Government, when and where they come into the picture.

Having dealt with the size and nature of the problem, together with the legislative and executive powers set up by the Legislature to deal with it, I now come to the program itself.

In any program or scheme of rehabilitation, obviously the very first and most important work to be undertaken is, that of a soil survey, as this survey will be the foundation on which the whole structure rests. This very important work has been entirely completed in Saskatchewan, and a soil map complete in every detail has been printed, together with a report on same.

Another important matter is an economic and agricultural survey. This work is well under way now and many districts have been entirely completed. Others are well on the way to completion. In this work it was thought wise to tackle the worst districts first, and a number of these have already been classified and submitted to the Dominion Minister of Agriculture, have been approved by him and are now in process of being fenced under the direction of the P.F.R.A.

These areas are all submarginal, on which, after an experience of years, it is plainly evident that the settlers have not been able, to make a living. The policy now is to turn over these areas, as quickly as possible, to the Dominion Government, under an agreement between the two governments. These areas will be made available later to the surrounding districts, as "community pastures", after they have been fenced, reseeded to grass, in some cases, developed with stock-watering dams and dugouts, and equipped with corrals and other conveniences, necessary in modern and up-to-date pastures. It is also planned to bring all these pastures under government management, and have a breeding policy in connection with them. It needs no stretch of the imagination to see what this will mean, the advantages of such a set-up in a farming community.

Along with and complementary to "community pastures" and "reserve areas", is the work of irrigation. Here also a good start has been made on the Frenchman River at East End and Val Marie. These two things tie into each other and together form what are called "special areas" where the community pastures, on which stock are bred and grazed, create a profitable means of utilizing the feed grown on the irrigated lands.

In addition to the work already completed on the larger projects, an enormous amount of data has been collected and compiled by the Provincial Water Rights Branch of the Department of Natural Resources. The expense of this work is born by the Dominion Government, under the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act, a Dominion act, administered under the chairmanship of Mr. John Vallance, Senior Rehabilitation Officer.

In Saskatchewan the Water Rights Branch has charge of all the engineering work in connection with the small projects, all the small dams and dugouts and private irrigation system. This service is supplied, free of charge, to the farmers and ranchers resident in the area. It includes all the work for which the Government gives financial assistance on a cubic yard basis, for earth excavation and rock rip-rap, plus cost of materials. Let me make it clear that this service is not limited to this classification. Any individual, or

organization, may get the engineering service free, whether they apply for financial assistance or not.

In any very acute situation, the human factor is of first and paramount importance. This fact was fully realized by the Government of the Province of Saskatchewan, after a siege of drouth, dust storms and grasshoppers. Farmers were beginning to get discouraged and it was felt by the government that something should be done in a big way to encourage and fortify the morale of farmers who had not had a crop, for seven or eight years in succession, and whose debts had accumulated to machine companies, and to mortgage companies, together with taxes long in arrears. The Provincial Government evolved a plan of debt reduction and debt cancellation. Under this plan tens of millions of private and public debt has been, and is still, being written off completely. Protective debt legislation has been placed on the statute books to give the struggling farmer more time, until the return of crops, when he can see daylight again. In this unforeseen extremity, the state treasury is supplying him with feed and seed and the means to carry on, merely as temporary or emergency features or until his more dire necessity passes, and the more permanent policies get into operation, namely:

1. Water conservation and land utilization,
2. Range control under government management and supervision,
3. A recast of agricultural policy from exploitation to a policy of soil conservation.

Now, I want to close on a human note. Through it all, the spirit of our people has been magnificent. Let me repeat again, this magnificent country of wide expanse and almost unlimited soil fertility, has suffered no serious permanent deterioration and neither have the people. I look around and see the young people, those splendid young people who are growing up, most of them stronger physically than their parents. It will be these young people who will establish an enduring agriculture and build permanent homes, founded deep in the grass roots of these wonderful prairies which are their inheritance, together with the unconquerable spirit and sterling worth, of their early pioneer forefathers.