

Introductory Speech by Philip Noel-Baker (London, 3 April 1946)

Caption: On 3 April 1946, Philip Noel-Baker, Chairman of the Emergency Conference held in London on European Cereals Supplies, lists the issues to be dealt with during the conference.

Source: Emergency Conference on European Cereals Supplies held in London from 3rd to 6th April 1946. London: 1946.

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"To the welcome you have just had from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs on behalf of His Majesty's Government, it is my privilege to add the welcome of the government members of the Emergency Economic Committee for Europe who have called this Conference. I am glad that so many governments have been able to accept the invitation to attend the Conference. I regret that other governments have felt unable to come; nevertheless, this is, I think, the most comprehensive European gathering which has met since 1939. It is fitting that this should be the case since we are to deal with the human problem of hunger, the effects of which are spreading without consideration of race, politics or creeds.

Indeed, the first assumption on which this Conference rests is that all of us are here because we recognize that the hunger of any man in Europe is the concern of every man in Europe. There is no need for me to elaborate this truth or to stress its purely humanitarian aspects. We know that the immediate effect of low rations in the Ruhr is the reduction of coal production and that economic recovery in every country in Europe will be seriously impeded by any such reduction. We know that disease, spreading through a hunger-weakened population in any country could become an epidemic that could bring illness and death in many other countries. We know that a generation of children in any country, stunted in body and mind by prolonged underfeeding, would threaten the healthy economic and social and political development of Europe for many years to come. We know also that these dangers are very real and present in Europe today.

We are here specifically to consider what can be done within Europe to help secure for the people of Europe the bread that they will need from now until the next harvest. Overseas countries, which have already done much to help, are making extraordinary efforts to send as much grain as possible to Europe in the next few months. Encouraging as their efforts are, we must nevertheless face squarely the fact that the amount which can be exported to Europe over the next few months when it is so urgently needed is limited by supply, by movement problems and, most important, by the tragic necessities of the Far East where many tens of millions of people face the awful prospect of famine. I might here say, in parentheses, that this season's export programme will seriously deplete carry-over stocks and the position next year, even if crops are good, will be precarious. If crops are bad, it may well be disastrous.

In these circumstances, despite the utmost efforts of the exporting countries, a serious gap will still remain between the supply of bread grain available and the minimum needs of the people of Europe during the months before the next harvest. This gap will be filled either by people going hungry or by other means.

The second main assumption on which this Conference is based is that means do exist whereby the gap can be reduced by drastic action within Europe itself. This, therefore, is a working conference to find, and to agree to carry out, practical measures to lessen, if we can, the immediate threat of severe privation which faces the peoples of Europe.

Let us be under no illusions as to the difficulty of the task we are undertaking. We are engaged in the hard and unrewarding labour of gleaning and that in a field which has already been gone over by the most intensive efforts of each individual government. Thus we may be sure before we start that there are no easy solutions open to us; that every measure we consider will call for painful sacrifice by some for the benefit of others more painfully situated; and I am not thinking only of national sacrifices but also of sacrifices we shall have to ask from certain sections of the communities for the benefit of other sections of the same communities. But faced on the one hand with regionally unpopular measures and on the other with the supreme distress of actual starvation anywhere in Europe, we are left with no choice. We must decide that men cannot be left to starve.

The object of this Conference is to determine which of the various measures are likely to prove most effective and then to determine the best means for carrying out those measures. We shall also endeavour in this Conference to reduce as far as possible the difficulties of these measures, first by securing a clear picture of the specific extent and nature of the problem before us, and secondly by an exchange of experience so that each of us may have knowledge of measures which have been successfully used in other countries. Also we shall try to find the most equitable basis for sharing the remaining burdens and agree on

that basis.

Any country or community can undertake more drastic measures if the people know that their neighbours in other countries or communities are bearing a fair share of the common load. All of us appreciate that full public understanding of the problems with which we are faced and the full co-operation and support of the people of all our countries in any measure we may undertake are absolutely essential to success.

The plan of the agenda before us follows logically the approach I have described. We propose first to define as specifically as the available information permits the extent of the gap in supplies of cereals for human consumption in Europe over the next several months. This we hope to do on the basis of statements by representatives of the Cereals Committee of the Combined Food Board on the development of the present world situation; followed by statements by the Ministers of each European country represented here on the principal problems in their countries.

Then we shall go on to examine various measures which might be taken in Europe to assist in closing the gap. We propose to consider these measures in ascending order of administrative difficulty starting with changes which can be accomplished by relatively straightforward administrative action, such as changes in extraction rates and adjustment of stock levels; and passing on to those which involve extensive administrative action, such as measures to increase collections of cereals from farms, and the difficult question of reducing consumption of grain by livestock to divert it to direct human consumption. We shall also consider suggestions for further measures which might be taken by exporting countries, still within our original assumption that we cannot expect the total volume of cereals now planned to come to Europe to be significantly increased.

Even when we have considered all these possibilities, I fear we shall not have covered the gap and that we shall have to go on to consider what further cuts in human consumption can be made in some directions to meet greater privations elsewhere.

Finally, we shall endeavour to formulate our conclusions covering the period before the next harvest in specific and practical resolutions on the action to be taken by the participating countries.

We shall also in the course of the Conference consider briefly the consumption year following the next harvest. We will consider problems of this period only to the extent necessary to point up any action on such matters as farm labour or agricultural requirements which needs to be taken immediately to help us to get the maximum effective harvest out of the crop now in the ground and to enable us to sow the largest possible crop next autumn. The problems of the next crop year will be considered much more fully at the Conference which the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has called to be held in Washington beginning about 20 May.

On Saturday morning we will consider the resolutions and report of the present Conference.

This is a very full programme, but with good luck and more perseverance we may be able to adhere to it. Let us now proceed to the business of the Conference in full consciousness of the fact that the wellbeing of many millions of people in Europe will be affected by its outcome."