

SECTION II.—INDUSTRIAL PRIORITIES AND POLICY

(i) Variability of Priorities

167. In the direction of labour to essential industries it was necessary to have regard to priorities and to regulate the flow of labour in accordance with such priorities. There was, for example, the distinction in priority between jobs declared essential and those not so declared. Within the essential jobs, however, there were some of greater urgency than others—practically the whole of the engineering industry was doing essential work: nevertheless, if ship-repair work had a higher priority than general engineering, and if it required labour, other essential engineering jobs had to lose at least a proportion of their men to the shipyards. These priorities within the essential field were continuously varying according to war demands and other circumstances. Priorities had to be continually redetermined in the light of the events and circumstances of the moment. The direction of labour necessarily followed priorities, and changes took place as the priorities themselves changed. The following subsections set out briefly the main features of man-power policy in relation to the more important war-time industries.

(ii) Farming

168. In the early months of the war no special importance attached to the farming industry. World food sources had not been disturbed, and the effects of submarine warfare seemed likely to throw strong emphasis on conservation of shipping by shortening of supply lines. Under such circumstances the farming industry neither expected nor received any special protection. Consequently considerable numbers of farm workers entered the Armed Forces. The loss of Denmark and the Low Countries in May, 1940, greatly (and unexpectedly) altered the picture. The loss of these sources of food and the certainty of a long and difficult struggle raised food-producing throughout the Empire to a priority level, although there was still some uncertainty as to whether shipping difficulties would enable supplies to be cleared from such distant sources as New Zealand. During the 1940–41 season, therefore, farming remained on the priority border-line, with the brake being increasingly applied to the recruitment of farm workers.

169. Before the opening of the 1941–42 season the position of the New Zealand farming industry had crystalized to a clear first priority. For that season the United Kingdom asked for a diversion of a portion of the country's dairying industry from butter-making to cheesemaking, and, with the assistance of the Government, nearly four thousand milk-suppliers were changed over and New Zealand increased her cheese-production in one year by 29·7 per cent. In the following year Britain's needs required a change back to butter-production, and the switch over was made accordingly. These changes inevitably involved considerable man-power adjustments both within the industry and in ancillary industries supplying containers and plant.

170. The Japanese attack in December, 1941, followed by the swift progress of Japanese Forces in a southward thrust towards Australia and New Zealand, necessitated the speedy mobilization of considerable Forces for home defence in the early months of 1942. The protection of the Dominion's own shores had to come first, and the farming industry, in common with all others, had to make a further contribution of man-power to the Armed Forces. As in all other industries, 1942 was the farming industry's most difficult year. By the end of 1942 the Japanese drive in the South Pacific had been stopped, and it became possible to reduce the home-defence Forces. The farming industry and its ancillaries then received the first and largest measure of help. Up to 31st March, 1943, some 8,200 farm workers who had entered the Forces were released to build up the 1942–43 production. This number comprised more than half of a total of 16,000 odd men released from home-defence Forces during the same period.