

HOW FULL IS YOUR HOME?

THE decision of the Government to bring as many British children to New Zealand as the people of New Zealand are willing to receive has not so far aroused much comment. Most of us probably feel that it concerns others more than it concerns ourselves with our two sons sleeping in one room and our daughter on the back verandah. And some have not even the back verandah. But just as the poor have most to spare for the poor, mothers of families can sometimes find a bed when the childless have no accommodation at all. In any case "The Listener" thought it worthwhile making some enquiries—finding out who had noticed the announcement and how many had begun to think about it seriously. For a week two sympathetic and well-informed investigators brought the matter up as often as they met their friends, and this roughly is what they reported. It will be recalled of course that the basic features of the Government's plan are (1), free passages for children between five and 17 years whose parents or guardians will release them for permanent residence in New Zealand; (2), legal guardianship by the Welfare Department for the first six months then by foster-parents (who are not guaranteed an opportunity to adopt); (3), payment of children's allowance as for natural children, and the usual income-tax exemption.

For convenience we shall call our investigators L1 and L2.

Report by L1

(1) I first asked a couple who now have two grown-up boys, "How would you feel about taking charge of a British War Orphan?"

She: "I have thought about it a good deal and would think it quite practicable, although just at present we are in a flat and uprooted from our normal home. I always like to have a child in the home, and if it means giving a child a better chance in life than it would otherwise have, so much the better."

He: "And we would like a girl! Personally I would feel more inclined to take over the care of a child from Europe. After all, we can, I think, safely assume that a British child will be fed and clothed and given a chance in a freedom-loving community, but a half-starved European orphan has no chances. He needs a home and security and probably re-education. And there is no special reason for thinking that he will not ultimately grow up into as good a citizen as his New Zealand foster brothers. But I don't like the idea of importing population just for the sake of more population, any more than I like the idea of sending parcels to relieve the monotony of English diet in preference to feeding starving people on the Continent. Let us help where help is most needed." * * *

(2) "I'm afraid I would not think of taking over a British War Orphan," said another woman. "Housekeeping for my own family of three takes all my time and more and if I feel I can do more I always have friends who badly need holidays and who are very grateful if I can take charge of their children for a week or two. That gives me all the scope I need for child care."

(3) I spoke next to a childless married couple. "It's funny that you should ask us whether we would consider taking in a British War Orphan. We have

been discussing the question ourselves and certainly feel very drawn to the idea. Of course there are considerable practical difficulties. We live in a small flat—most unsuitable for a bounding primary school child. It would mean a tremendous amount of readjustment in our way of living—going out together at night for instance. Most couples come to curtail their activities gradually over the period of having a baby. It would be rather harder adjustment for us because it would be a big sudden jump.

"But apart from that I cannot help having a lively and vivid picture of the difficulties of building up new personal relationships. It just seems preposterous for me to walk down to the wharf one day and meet a child—a living complicated human being with likes and dislikes and problems and inhibitions—and say: 'Well, here I am, your foster mother from now on.' How can one build a whole important and complicated human relationship on the chance allotment of a Government office? It's staggering to think about, but of course it can be done. Seeing all these difficulties in personal relationships may in the long run make this adoption or guardianship business easier for us than for the unperceptive soul with preconceived standards and patterns for child behaviour. But that is of course one big difficulty in the way of taking charge of a child of five and upward rather than a baby." * * *

(4) It seemed useless, but I then approached a mother of four. "I wouldn't feel equal to committing myself to taking another child into the house unless I heard of a really necessitous case where the child needed a home very badly. I find four children fill our house to capacity, and with building restrictions and prices I can see no likelihood of our being able to enlarge it. Besides four children use up my time and energy. It's not just washing, mending, cleaning, shopping, and making ends meet, but all the inevitable and endless settling of minor problems and quarrels. A mother has to give an enormous amount of time and energy into coping with all sorts of little problems—lost school books, presents to

be bought and given, letters written, toys left on trams, minor grievances against school and other children, behaviour problems, eating problems. As the number of children multiplies the problems, one's ability to cope with them increases, but I do feel a War Orphan would be too much unless there were some special and urgent need. I would feel differently if we had more space and if we had any domestic help that would relieve me of some of the routine work; but as things are I am a camel that baulks at the sight of another straw."

(5) Another mother saw a different kind of difficulty. "I would be far more drawn to taking in a baby than a child from five up. The baby stage has the bigger appeal and a baby is easier to fit into a family. During the war I offered to have a little Briton but I felt then that the need was urgent. As things are I would feel that the introduction of a school-age orphan might be too big an interference with our normal way of living."

(6) Finally I bearded a father. But he refused to be serious. "Adopt a child? Certainly," he said, "provided she is: (a) a girl, (b) good-looking, (c) not too young, (d) not too old, (e) willing to help in the house and be a prop to my declining years, (f) doesn't throw too big a spanner into the harmony that exists at the moment between my adolescent boys."

Report by L2

(1) I began my investigations close to home by consulting my next-door neighbour, a woman with two grown-up children and herself an English war bride of the first war. She thought the scheme excellent and was herself considering taking one of the British children. "I think there must be many people like us in comfortable circumstances and whose families are grown-up who would not consider adopting a young child, but who would be prepared to provide a home for a boy or girl of perhaps 12,

partly for our own satisfaction, partly because we would like to feel we are doing something for the Old Country."

Her comments were echoed by several others in the same position whom I consulted, but they, while approving the scheme, were not able to take children themselves.

(2) Women with young families were more dubious both about the scheme in general and the part they would be expected to play in it. A very intelligent young woman with two pre-school children said: "I would certainly not feel confident to cope with a child even as young as five. Most of these children will have been through the war and the blitz, and have lost one, or perhaps both parents. They are then expected to make a complete break with all that is dear and familiar to them and come here to live among strangers. They will require and deserve an almost superhuman amount of sympathy and understanding, more than the ordinary woman with children of her own can be expected to give them."

(3) This was nonsense, according to another young woman, also the mother of two small children. "A considerable amount of research done in England seems to indicate that war experiences had surprisingly little permanent psychological effect on children. Children who had been born into the war took it for granted. And in the case of children who have suffered emotionally, what can be better for them than an entire break with the past, plus the excitement of the sea voyage and all the fuss that will be made of them on their arrival? And they are coming in New Zealand to people who are having them because they want them and who will do their best for them."

(4) "I think the point about the scheme being voluntary is an important one," said a young Englishwoman who has been in New Zealand a year. "When you first mentioned it to me I couldn't

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