

OCTOBER 21, 1949

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## Guinea Pig Islanders

THE opinions of Professor E. Laurence Palmer, amiably expressed in the text of a broadcast printed on page 6, are interesting for a number of reasons. An American scholar could not spend three months in New Zealand without gaining some definite impressions of the country and the people. He could not put those opinions into words, no matter how carefully the words were selected without revealing differences of outlook which may be both personal and national. But how wide and deep are the differences? Are the misunderstandings which come from them—as Professor Palmer suggests himself—merely "matters of definition"? Thinkers in all the disciplines spend much of their time defining ideas, but the specialist who is meticulous in the use of terms in his own field may slide into carelessness when he looks about him at the wider scene outside his laboratory or classroom. It is obvious, for instance, that Professor Palmer was astray in his definitions when he found it "very difficult to understand the readiness with which one of your brilliant scientists is willing to let the Government take care of him when he is sick or old, and does not feel any necessity for exerting himself to maximum capacity to provide for his own future." The scientist does not look upon Social Security benefits as gifts of the Government: he pays for them himself in taxation, and in doing so he may help to pay for someone else whose circumstances are less fortunate. Moreover, if people accept the view that sickness and unemployment are collective responsibilities, they are not necessarily committing themselves to the view that there is no longer any need for "initiative or sustained drive by individuals." The scientist who knows that State assistance is available in sickness and old age can find ample scope for initiative and enterprise in his chosen work. Similarly, Professor Palmer did

not seem to understand that high school girls who "are not continuing their period of training to a point of maximum usefulness" are in many cases the victims of a competitive phase in the labour market—a phase which, in the nature of things, cannot become a permanent condition of life in this country. The love of leisure may be felt strongly and widely, but a "life of leisure" is another matter; and it certainly cannot be expected by girls who will become wives and mothers in New Zealand. The visitor to these islands may gain the impression that we have become a "guinea pig" nation willing to move experimentally in search of the good society. In sober truth, we are like people everywhere else in our desire to obtain and hold a basic security; and because we are a small and homogeneous nation with ample productive resources we have the power—social and political—to attain the sort of equality which removes, or substantially reduces the fear of poverty, illness and the helplessness of the aged. Our way of life cannot be understood by looking at superficial implications of Social Security or State enterprise. Indeed, it cannot be understood at all unless we see where we have come since our colonial beginnings. Our experiments, which at best have been attempts to find solutions for practical problems, have taken place in an environment which has felt the strains of economic depressions and world wars. And while we have been trying to improve our social system we have also been advancing in education and the arts. The creative energies of this nation have not been dammed: they have been liberated for activity in new directions. If in one sense we are in a laboratory, it may be said that the work has scarcely begun. It is therefore still necessary for observers, at home and abroad, to make sure that they have discovered the nature of the experiment.

N.Z. LISTENER, OCTOBER 21, 1949.

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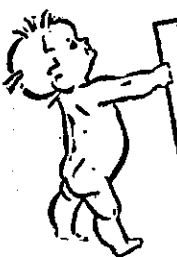
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