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SOLDIERS ASK QUESTIONS

Politics More Popular Than Poetry At Army Education "Brains Trust"



ECONOMICS, the soldier's political rights, the value of the State housing scheme, "the drift from the land," the deferred payment of the wool cheque, and the appointment of Field-Marshal Wavell as Viceroy of India were among the subjects discussed by about 200 soldiers when the Army Education and Welfare Service held an "Any Questions?" meeting at Trentham. There was one question involving religion, and one involving art.

O. N. Gillespie, journalist, was the chairman, and the other members of the "Brains Trust" for the night were H. M. Christie, chairman of the Wool Council and a former Labour M.P.; the Rev. H. W. Newall, of Wellington, who took part in the "Information Please" session conducted on the ZB stations in the Campaign for Christian Order; Charles Wheeler, a member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery; and J. Nash,

a scientist in the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research.

There was no Question-master, and the Trust exposed itself to direct questions from the floor after Mr. Gillespie had insisted on a complete open forum: "We don't want to dodge questions, but we don't want any silly ones."

Bats, Cats and the Upper House

The first questioner asked: *Which can see best in total darkness—a cat, an owl or a bat?* and Mr. Nash was called on as a scientist to answer. After he had pointed out that a bat cannot see at all in the dark, and expressed the opinion that a cat could probably see better than an owl, the questioner explained that he had stipulated "total darkness," meaning absence of any light whatever, which would make any vision totally impossible.

When the laughter had died away, the second question was put: *If I advocated immediate abolition of the Upper House, how would you support its retention?*

The microphone of the amplifying system swung to Mr. Wheeler. "Well, first of all, there are 36 very amiable old gentlemen up there who get £350 a year and a free railway pass, and they wouldn't want to see it abolished," said Mr. Wheeler, but then he went on to explain the function of the Upper House in giving further consideration to bills that may have been "put through the House of Representatives in a great hurry."

British Justice—New Meanings

The first call on the views of Mr. Christie came from a soldier who asked: *Is the retention by the Government of the proceeds of the sale of wool consistent with British justice?*

"We are finding nowadays that the term 'British justice' requires new interpretations," said Mr. Christie. "To have paid the cheque out straight away might have had economic repercussions, but still it might have been wiser for the Government to have found out how much of that payment to sheepfarmers would have come straight back in taxes."

By this time there was an air of earnest realism about the discussion.

A Question About India

Mr. Newall's entry followed a question on India: *In view of the wide powers of the Viceroy of India, does 'not the appointment of General Wavell to that position at the present time savour of military dictatorship?*

Mr. Newall (who lived in India for some years), said that though the appointment might have its good points for immediate purposes, he thought it was "unfortunate," because it would

probably extend into post-war years. "I feel that General Wavell has no close knowledge of the problems involved. The job needs real understanding of the issues, and of the Indian point of view, and I wonder if he has these."

Another topic of the day was raised by a soldier, who read out a question that had been framed by a small group: *We know that the manufacture of war supplies would continue whether the public buys war bonds or not. How does the purchase of bonds assist the war effort?*

Mr. Wheeler: That's like the man who asked "Have you given up beating your wife? Answer yes or no!" War bonds assist very materially. . . surely we on the home front can do our bit . . . it would be a pretty mess if we shoved you chaps into the Pacific without cartridges, but of course we're not going to do that. . ."

Mr. Nash: Saving money doesn't necessarily make munitions, but it helps

by reducing consumption (and therefore production), of luxury goods.

Mr. Gillespie rounded off these answers by saying that the Liberty Loans were schemes to move spending power out of the reach of the individual, and to remove financial power from business entrepreneurs. "Nothing much can go wrong when the bonds mature; no pot-bellied company directors will be able to argue with the investors about the rate of interest."

A soldier then asked: *If I proposed to Mr. Nash a direct capital levy in line with the conscription of men's bodies, what would he say?*

Starting to his feet, Mr. Nash answered at once: "I would agree. I'd like a system where all the resources of the country are within the Government's power during wartime. It would eliminate disparities, and cause for individual complaints. And I think that once they had tried it, the people wouldn't want to return to the other way."

"I am a member of the Excess Profits Appeal Committee, and I say it's almost impossible to administer that sort of thing," said Mr. Christie. "In theory it's all right, but in practice it doesn't work out."

Groans for Poetry

An attempt to steer the Brains Trust away from political questions came from a young sergeant (a good many questioners were sergeants), who said: *It seems that New Zealand's chief contribution to world literature is its poetry. If that is so, why?*

This question produced muffled groans from round about, and one or two

(Continued on next page)

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