

MacDonald Regime Prepares to spend £1,400,000,000 for 2,500,000 “Homes for Heroes”

by Walter G. Fuller, London —(*Special Correspondent of The Eagle*)

London, June 21 — There are many things that are puzzling the mind of the man in the street in England these days besides the main business of holding down his job, and perhaps the chief of all these problems is to understand the paradox that there is a great housing shortage all over the country — in town and village alike — and at the same time more than a million men and women are unemployed. Idle hands and plenty of work to do! A great need and nobody to supply it! People everywhere asking for houses and paying high prices for them, and yet builders are out of work and leaving the country for the colonies as fast as they can get away.

“What on earth is the reason?” says the Englishman in bewilderment. Well, of course, there’s a complex of reasons, and last week Mr Wheatley, the Glasgow Socialist M.P. and the reddest man in the Labour Cabinet, where he sits as Minister of Health, made a brave effort to unravel the puzzle and set the machinery of housebuilding to work again.

Opinions differ considerably as to whether or not Mr Wheatley has made a success of his attempt to solve a problem that since the war has defeated everybody who has tried to tackle it. Briefly, the background of the trouble is this: during the war, housebuilding practically stopped throughout the length and breadth of the land. During those terrible years men were too busy destroying to think about building. But no sooner were the guns silenced than the demand for “homes for heroes to lives in” began to be heard, and it is still the cry, though the emphasis is more on homes than heroes nowadays.

The coalition Government of Liberals and Tories, and the Tory Government which followed both, signally failed to provide the houses that were needed. “You give us a chance, we’ll do the job for you,” said Labour, and now they’ve got their chance everybody wants to know whether they can deliver the goods.

Mr Wheatley is the man to pull it off if anybody can. Hard-working, sincere and devoted,

he has flung himself into the task with characteristic vigor and after innumerable conferences with every branch of the trade he has at last developed a scheme.

This scheme he unfolded a few days ago to the House of Commons, and though opinions differ widely as to its merits, nobody denies that Mr Wheatley at any rate achieved a great success. Whatever the outcome of the proposals may be, there is no doubt that Mr Wheatley’s stock, which was high before, has gone up considerably, and he is certainly now one of the big men on the Labour Cabinet.

What, in brief, is Mr Wheatley’s scheme? In a few words, it is that the State should build 20,000 houses in 1925, and an increasing number in each successive year until a maximum of 225,000 is reached. During the fifteen years from 1925 to 1940 the State will thus build no less than 2,500,000 houses of this type.

And the cost? It is a staggering one. Mr Wheatley proposes that the State should pay towards the cost of each house a subsidy of £160 (approximately \$800), and in addition the local authority of the area in which the house is built should pay a further subsidy of £80 (approximately \$400). The total cost of all this would be borne by the taxpayer to the tune of an annual charge rising to £34,000,000 (nominally \$170,000,000) in 1940, and remaining at that figure till 1965, and not coming to an end till 1980.

This means that the maximum total charge of these houses spread over fifty-five years will be £1,400,000,000. “An appalling commitment,” say Mr Wheatley’s critics; “the country will never stand it.”

“But,” says Mr Wheatley, “we spend £300,000,000 every year in interest on the National debt. We spend £110,000,000 on armaments. And on the other hand, the annual income of our 85,000 supertax-payers, with incomes of over £2,000 a year, is £500,000,000.” So, like most everything else, it all comes down to a question of money, and it looks as though Mr Wheatley is going to ask

Englishmen and Englishwomen to make their choice: "Houses or armaments: which will you have?"

Thus the issue is divided and the battle is joined. Parliament has risen for a whort holiday. it will reassemble next week and these housing proposals of Mr Wheatley's will be in the forefront of the discussion in weeks to come.

The signs are that the Labour Government means to stick to its guns on this issue, and if it is defeated on any critical point by a combination of Liberals and Tories, it will resign and appeal to the country. It is common talk now that a general election will take place during the fall.

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