

It might, I think, form the subject of very serious consideration, if only as the result of this inquiry, whether our present system of dealing with this class of children is not wholly at fault : whether, in fact, some comprehensive scheme of a national order should not be devised and carried out, even if at some considerable cost to the State, to take the place of the somewhat haphazard and unsatisfactory method of dealing, as at present practised by the various Charitable Aid Boards throughout the colony.

To deal satisfactorily with a problem so all-important as the bringing-up of a very large number of dependent children, with a view (1) To give them the very best possible substitute for the normal family life ; and (2) to train them to become good and valuable citizens, is almost the work of experts. Very few indeed of the members of the various Boards would probably claim to be this ; and, fully alive as so many of them are to the important issues involved, I believe they would cordially welcome any change that would relieve them of what at present is the source of so much anxiety.

There is a passage in Dr. Devine's work, "The Principles of Relief," which seems to me to emphasize the point I wish to make. It is this : "To care for dependent children is a more difficult task than to care for the normal children of an average family, difficult as this also is. Oftentimes essential qualities are lacking in the child, and it is a matter requiring extraordinary experience and skill to develop them. A trained expert is needed to detect the traces of abnormality and degeneracy. Even for the child who is entirely normal there must be found some substitute for the painstaking attention which fathers and mothers may naturally be expected to give to the development of their offspring."

It seems to me that no Board could be more theoretically alive to its responsibilities in this matter than the Ashburton and North Canterbury Charitable Aid Board. It has the special advantage of a Chairman of wide sympathies, great experience, and varied knowledge, and the presence amongst its members of three ladies of a progressive type, all of whom have made a special study of this particular subject. And yet we have almost an admission of failure ; and, if not that, then certainly a falling far short of what might be reasonably expected. Could any stronger argument than this be adduced to show the necessity for a change ? It seems to me that the policy pursued at present is very liable to attach to the child the pauper stamp, as a sort of mark and origin of its start in life. And the danger of this is that the child, after going out into the world, sooner or later, and more often sooner, falls back, as a natural consequence, into a pauperised condition.

Whether, however, the care of the dependent children shall be assumed entirely by the State, as a matter of special duty and on a comprehensive basis, or whether matters shall continue to be left as at present, the interesting and all-important question will still remain as to the very best method to be adopted to secure a maximum of good results. I may perhaps be allowed, as the result of this inquiry, to discuss the matter at some little length. I speak with a considerable amount of diffidence, but I can plead as my excuse that the subject is one in which I take very great interest, and its importance can scarcely be overestimated.

There are three well-known and recognised methods of providing for dependent children, and these are : (1) Institutions ; (2) boarding-out ; (3) cottage homes.

1. INSTITUTIONS.

This system has been almost universally condemned of late years, and finds no place amongst modern proposals. Institutionalism has been aptly described as "a combination of rote, routine, and dead-levelism." It has been said by one writer that there is obviously a wide and deep gulf between such a system and the sense of responsibility felt by a conscientious father for the development of the personality of his sons and daughters, or the love of a mother for her individual children. Numberless instances could be cited to prove how utterly out of touch with modern methods institutionalism is.

2. BOARDING-OUT.

This system has many advantages and, with proper safeguards, may be made most valuable ; but, without these, is liable to become mischievous in the extreme. It ought to prove the most natural substitute for real home-life ; but the dangers and drawbacks are so great that one may well hesitate to regard it as the ideal solution of a most difficult question. The great aim, as I have already stated, is to free the children entirely from the fetters of pauperism, and cause them to be absorbed into the general population ; and this can only be done by giving them the full benefits of family life. The first practical difficulty is, of course, to find suitable homes, with foster-parents ready and willing to receive children for what must necessarily be, in the interests of the ratepayers, a somewhat limited remuneration. The majority of available homes would undoubtedly be those of somewhat needy persons, or, in other words, of persons who looked to make some sort of profit out of the children's presence. The second practical difficulty would be the obtaining of the requisite number of candidates, with reasonable security that the true interests of the children would be safe in their hands ; and the third great difficulty is supplying the necessary supervision, without which abuses would inevitably creep in.