

CORRESPONDENCE

THE MEANS TEST.

To the Editor of BLACKFRIARS.

SIR,—In your December number I read with regret the following in *Notes on the Month*:

‘Christian observation—A slum-parson wrote: The Minister of Labour told the House the other day that some eight million pounds had been saved by the administration of The Means Test. I can well believe it. I see the price paid for it in pinched faces, and I am glad the responsibility of saving that money is not mine.’

It is a warped sense of duty that divorces national difficulties from reasoned understanding, and, in effect, fights more for the interests of the unworthy and the indolent than for those of the patient, ever-inarticulate masses of the people.

Shortly the facts are these:—

Millions of the poor at the last election, many already facing straightened circumstances, voted for review of the dole, and trusted their fortunes to those who in their announcements of policy rejected all appeal to cupidity, discarded any unsettling compassion, and spurned all impulse to class-hatred. The people, resolving that party shibboleths should follow undeserved privileges to the rubbish heap, responded by declaring that they wished their affairs to be decided by representatives more fortunate than themselves in the lottery of life, and placed implicit faith in their justice and impartiality.

Their trust has not proved to be misplaced.

The Means Test, in effect, though it fully recognises the duty on the civilised conscience of saving from destitution those who are powerless to save themselves, nevertheless states that a man’s resources should be disclosed and employed before he has a call on those of his neighbour: that an undue burden of self-subsistence must be demonstrated before a family has the right to ask those to share it who find difficulty in carrying their own.

It has been disclosed beyond contention that the dole has been abused, and drawn by thousands for whom it was never intended, and who had no claim on public funds—

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funds contributed by many with no savings of their own, and representative of sacrifices and hardships faced in a cheerful, courageous and 'christian' spirit—and it became the obvious duty of authority to stop and prevent the dispersal of public funds to those who might be better off than many of the original contributors.

The meaning of the Means Test is that a man shall first exhaust any hoard or available resources he possesses before seeking relief; were this abandoned, the State would be quickly infested with parasitism, the will to work widely undermined, and public finance placed on the steep slope of bankruptcy. The Means Test is therefore essential to preserve solvency for the State, to protect the just interests of hard-pressed citizens from possibility of exploitation, and to save many from their weaker selves.

Practice will quickly reveal whether the system, or individual administration of it, is attended with genuine hardship that the community should be called upon to remedy.

It is—it *must* be—almost impossible for clerics to see, still less to weigh, the various aspects and interconnection of such immense and distressing questions as Thrift—Destitution—Taxes—Solvency, and the average citizen is correspondingly thankful that the nation's affairs should be controlled by those who have a more detached and sane realisation that 'the centre' cannot be weakened without destroying all those dependent upon that centre.

The fortitude of the nation in its difficulties, and the courage of its present rulers, should be matched by the forbearance of their critics, for a false mass-mind, once created, must influence events for generations to come.

CUTHBERT BAILEY.