

MINISTRY OF HEALTH.

Building Trades Deputation.

Mr. Walter Elliot, the Minister of Health, Mr. John Colville, the Secretary of State for Scotland, and Mr. Ralph Assheton, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Labour, today (Wednesday) received a deputation from the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives, who were accompanied by representatives of the Federation of Building Trades Employers.

The deputation urged that the Government should do everything practicable to keep the building industry occupied during the war to the maximum possible extent. They realised that the Government had undertaken a very extensive building programme of its own, but this was concentrated in a relatively small number of areas (other areas such as the Eastern Counties being left with very little at all). Moreover it would be carried out by methods which would not utilise the services of all crafts, e.g. plasterers and provided employment mainly for the younger operatives who were willing and able to travel. It was in their view necessary, therefore, that local authorities and private enterprise should continue or resume as circumstances made it possible their normal activities so far as war conditions would permit.

Unless plans were made to keep the industry in active operation, at perhaps a lower tempo than normally, unemployment, with consequent loss of productive power, and the extinction of sources of supplies which had been gradually built up, not without difficulty, would result. Moreover, the necessary pools of labour would not be available for the emergency repair of houses and other essential buildings which might be damaged as the result of air raids.

On these grounds the industry felt that the Minister of Health had been a little too drastic in the circular he had

issued early in September asking local authorities in England and Wales to postpone for the time being their work on slum clearance, and to proceed only with the completion of houses already in an advanced stage of construction.

In reply to the deputation, Mr. Elliot said that no industry had helped or co-operated more willingly with the Government than the building industry. He had not issued his circular from choice - no one was more anxious than he to carry on with the demolition of the slums, the abatement of overcrowding, and the provision of the necessary rehousing. But the housing activities of local authorities threw a great burden on officials, both local and central, and these were, in present circumstances, almost overwhelmed by work directly connected with the war. Secondly, the effective prosecution of the war made it necessary to conserve the capital resources of the country, and to restrict the borrowings of local authorities within the narrowest limits. Lastly, direct war work made an immediate demand on available supplies of labour and materials, and the position as regards materials was still difficult.

The whole position was, however, under close and continuous review and, if he could be supplied with concrete examples of areas where both labour and materials were available, and there was building to be done which could be shown to be in the national interest, he would willingly consider whether it could be authorised to proceed. He had, however, to keep in mind the necessity for having reserves of supplies available for emergency repairs to essential buildings damaged as the result of air attacks.

Mr. Colville explained that conditions in Scotland were not quite the same as in England, and he had in consequence been able to authorise local authorities to proceed to complete all houses already begun. But in Scotland as in England the

amount of building which could be undertaken would be conditioned by the materials available. The present was a period of transition which the Government and the industry would have to try and adjust together.

Mr. Assheton spoke of the machinery set up to determine the priorities of the building programmes of the different Government Departments, and said that the building programmes for which the Government were responsible (in so far as they were able to make prediction) directly or indirectly, during the next six months did not fall far short of the industry's normal productive capacity.

Mr. George Hicks, M.P. in thanking the Ministers for receiving the deputation, expressed the desire of the industry to continue in close co-operation with the Government, and promised to supply further information in support of the industry's representations.

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