

THE NEW AGE

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NOTES OF THE WEEK.

BOTH Mr. Asquith's pledge and the support given him by the Labour Members of the Ministry appear to have been based upon a most absurd, if plausible, hypothesis: the former upon the hypothesis that, unless the single men were sent first, the married would on no account enlist; and the latter upon the speculation that, in that event, instead of a small we should have to adopt a general measure of conscription. To the statesman who coined the phrase "Wait and See" the precipitancy of committing himself to a pledge in the dark is not only unusual, but it cannot be explained on any ordinary reasoning. Something more, we feel sure, than the threatened but highly problematical failure of the Derby scheme was in question; and we can guess that the conscriptionists could read the riddle for us. As for the Labour Party and their fears of a general measure of conscription their conduct can only be compared with the practice of inoculation against imaginary diseases; for to save themselves from the improbable they plunged into the certainty. But what had either party in reality to fear? There is no evidence whatever that if the unmilitary distinction between married and single men had not been invented by conscript journalists it would ever have occurred to the men themselves to make it. Nor was there the smallest need in our opinion to fear a general military conscription unaccompanied by the conscription of wealth which would almost have made a virtue of the necessity. Both Mr. Asquith and the Labour Party have, therefore, we think, been frightened by bogeys; and the position now is such that they have fallen upon worse misfortunes than they sought to avoid.

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Even assuming, however, the reality of these fears, it can be easily enough shown that the figures of Lord Derby's Report do not warrant either the execution of Mr. Asquith's pledge or the support of the Labour

Party to the smallest measure of conscription. Other arithmeticians have been at work upon the Report, and we need only say that we agree with the general result which is to confirm the experience of all of us that in truth the single shirker, like the war-baby and the drunken workman earning £10 a week, is a mythical being. Lord Derby himself, as was only to be expected of a not very impartial mind, has counted every one of the six hundred thousand odd unattested single men as shirkers in the Northcliffe use of the word; and the "Spectator" has constructed out of this material a potential addition of twenty-five divisions to the Army. But without vouching for the strict accuracy of the "New Statesman's" calculations—supported though they are by the "Nation," the "Manchester Guardian," the "Star" and other journals—we are prepared to stake our reputation that a single division is much nearer the mark than twenty-five as an estimate of the single men still eligible for military service. And are not thirty thousand—if so many exist, and we do not know of one!—a "negligible minority" of a total of three or four millions; but must the slime of an invidious compulsion be plastered over the whole for the sake of a fragment, of a possibly non-existent fragment? A feebler case in mere arithmetic upon which to raise an infamous monument to the presumed death of the British spirit there never was and never will be. Humouring all the phobias of the conscriptionists and taking them upon their own childish ground of simple arithmetic, their case for compulsion is still the worst that can be conceived. And the nation that admits the principle upon the evidence now before it must be pronounced to be madder than its maddest advisers.

* * *

That something like madness has fallen upon the House of Commons the vote in favour of the first reading of the Conscription Bill clearly enough proves. For, apart from the inadequate arithmetical backing of the Bill, its supporters had not even the manliness to demand proper military excuses for it, and still less to insist upon conjoining it with a similar measure for conscription of wealth. But what, we should like to know, is the duty of the House of Commons, as distinct from the Cabinet, if not to require of the latter an account of