

Commentary

THE NEED FOR NEUTRALITY. It was the sufferings that he saw on the battlefield of Solferino that led Henry Dunant to the idea of the International Red Cross, able to intervene across the frontiers of conflict in the interests of humanity. For nearly a century the ICRC has nobly fulfilled its task, though today the assumptions that inspire its work, and the Geneva Conventions it has sponsored, have become increasingly slender. The very idea of a limitation of means of waging war, and the radical distinction between combatants and civilians, have been overshadowed by the new means of universal destruction.

The ICRC is 'international' in the nineteenth century sense, that is to say its field of operation knows no frontier: the Committee itself is exclusively Swiss. It is only the acknowledged disinterestedness of a truly neutral country that has made this possible. Today Swiss neutrality is inevitably threatened, and the recent referendum on the Swiss possession of atomic arms is a reflection of a changing situation. But the need for a genuinely neutral power in the modern world is imperative, and, even though its interventions can only seem slight, they at least represent a point of rest in the universal tumult. As such, the ICRC is not concerned with disarmament or the abolition of war. In a sense its work assumes that war will remain with us, and hence the need to limit its evils. But latterly it has become plain (and the Draft Rules proposed by the ICRC in 1957 emphasize this) that the scale of modern war, and its almost total lack of discrimination, must make even the work of mercy impossible. It may seem a somewhat academic exercise to reaffirm that, 'Since the right of Parties to a conflict to adopt means of injuring the enemy is not unlimited they shall confine their operations to the destruction of his military resources, and leave the civilian population outside the sphere of armed attacks.' But, because everything cannot be done, it does not mean that something should not be tried to be done, and the continuing work of the ICRC as a moderating influence in the name of humanity needs an informed public support. It needs, too, the recognition that neutrality does not mean indifference: it might be the only hope in the face of universal disaster.

THE DISINHERITED PRISONER. The title of Mr R. D. Fairn's recent Eleanor Rathbone Memorial Lecture at Liverpool is a vivid reminder

of the dilemma that lies at the heart of all penal treatment, namely that justice must be done and punishment inflicted, but can it be at too high a cost when so often it must mean the destruction or deterioration of the prisoner as a person? Mr Fairn, as Chief Director of the Prison Commission, is well aware of the practical problems of overcrowded prisons, the difficulties of providing adequate work and the constant danger of contamination. 'Prison should only be considered when all else has failed'. The statement is becoming a commonplace, but unhappily there is little evidence of any wide acceptance of its implications. There is great need for immediate research into alternatives to imprisonment, which has become so discredited as a means of humane rehabilitation. (There will always be those who need to be isolated from society; for them imprisonment will have to remain).

In the meantime there is the ever-present problem of the restoration of the ex-prisoner to his proper place in the community. If he has been disinherited by the very fact of his imprisonment, as is too often the case, then the state must intervene to help—as it seems likely to have to do in the future. This does not mean that the function of voluntary agencies is gone, but it does mean that the old conception of reluctant bounty—the suit of clothes and the food ticket—must be abandoned. The Catholic Prisoners' Aid Society—to mention only one organization—has of recent years greatly extended its operations as well as its understanding of its proper rôle. The need for support is urgent, for, however liberal statutory provision for rehabilitation may become, it can never adequately cover a host of human problems, where intelligent compassion can count for more than cash.

ECUMENICAL ATTITUDES. The Archbishop of Liverpool's Lenten Pastoral, with its list of rules that should govern Catholics in their relations with other Christians, is a useful reminder that Pope John XXIII's initiative is not confined to theologians or to those professionally engaged in the work of religious reconciliation. The astonishing change in the religious climate—perhaps more evident abroad than in this country—undoubtedly reflects a spontaneous response to the Pope's generosity of mind and heart. There still remain such episodes as the burning of the Bibles in Spain to remind us of how strong inherited attitudes can be, and the tide of optimism should not conceal the terrible record of continuing persecution of Catholics in so many lands. But something is achieved when ordinary people can feel free at last to forget the old antipathies. Too much cannot be expected overnight,

it is true, but a single gesture of charity—if the Gospels are to be believed—can reach the ends of the earth.

An Englishman's House

MAISIE WARD

After a war, a housing shortage. This is, of course, inevitable. There is no labour to spare for building when men are all fighting or making munitions, yet weddings are even more frequent than at other times and babies continue to be born. An increase in population is not met by any increase in dwellings. On the contrary, destruction is going on all the time. Throughout England in the last war bombers were razing homes to the ground or were making them uninhabitable. Repairs had practically ceased. Anyone looking for a house after the war found dry rot and woodworm rampant; found, too, that in empty houses broken windows had gone unrepaired, no painting had been done. Again and again, a young couple cheered by seeing a cheaply priced house were told by their surveyor that to make it habitable would cost more than the purchase price.

In 1946 we were looking for a flat in London: success was deemed almost impossible, but by great good luck—and a large premium—we got what we wanted in Kensington. All around us were empty houses, mostly damaged in the blitz, surrounded by delightful gardens run wild and with boards proclaiming that they were for sale. But soon we saw at night in houses with no gas, electricity or water, the faint light of candles moving from window to window: squatters had arrived from London's East End, claiming for themselves the right to a home. 'Communist influence', intoned the daily papers in solemn notes; but it did seem possible that these families, like ourselves, had only wanted a place to live in. They had neither the luck nor the cash to get it in any other way. This was my first sight of the 'Housing Problem' which now besets us, and in dealing with which very little can be said in defence of any post-war government.