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Address by Perry A. Fellows, Assistant Chief Engineer of the Works Progress Administration, at the Washington meeting of Society for the Advancement of Management, May 4, 1936.

Federal work projects cannot be fairly judged by the rules applying to enterprise for private profit, as they arise from a motive alien to the traditional thinking of individual business men, Perry A. Fellows, president of the Society for the Advancement of Management, said in addressing the organization's Washington meeting at Wesley Hall, 1703 K Street, N.W., at 6 P.M., May 4, 1936.

"What commercial enterprise is not able to do for private profit will be done for the public benefit by some kind of public agency, if it is really necessary that the work be done," he asserted, urging recognition of the fact, "that this motive of public benefit has come into America to stay."

Mr. Fellows, assistant chief engineer of the Works Progress Administration and acting chief engineer of Region Six, including New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware and the District of Columbia, formerly was city engineer and manager of the city airport at Detroit. His address follows:
"Worthwhile Work"

Now that the Works Progress Administration is approaching the close of its first period of operation and a bill to extend its program is being considered by the Congress, it is desirable that we should pause to take a broad view of our problems. Mr. Hopkins, in a recent message to the State Administrators, outlining the possible extension of the work program into the next fiscal year, has pointed out the importance of making full use of the experience already gained. That experience of course includes everything concerned with the actual work of putting materials together to form a completed project; but that is not all. Our experience also includes some psychological and emotional matters which may be of the greatest importance to us in determining that work projects are most worth-while in the present and future Federal work program. I am not referring so much to the way we ourselves think and feel about these projects, as the way other people think and feel about them. Although courses in psychology and public opinion have not been a regular part of our formal schooling as engineers, we have been obliged to learn something of these matters in the school of experience. What can be done in our government work program depends to a very great extent upon what people feel should be done. We find that we have to be practical psychologists and empirical interpreters of public opinion. We must not only do our work well
by our own standards, but we must continually run the gauntlet of public criticism. Nor am I referring merely to partisan political criticism, which has its high tide in a campaign year. What I have in mind is something which has at all times to be taken into account in the execution of a government work program, and something upon which our success will ultimately depend—the slowly changing American ideal of worth-while work.

What the American notion of worth-while work has tended to be for a good many years is perhaps best shown by contrast with some other ideas which have prevailed in previous ages of our human history. We may suppose that in ancient Egypt no question was raised as to the worth-whileness of the project of King Cheops for building the great pyramid on earth as an eternal resting-place for himself. The ideas and feelings of the ancient Egyptians are so alien to our own that we cannot be sure that we understand them. Much nearer to our sympathies are certain projects which the ancient Greeks considered eminently worth-while—the adornment of the Acropolis of Athens with temples and sculpture which represented not only the finest achievements of Greek art but the religious and patriotic ideals of a people who were proud of their freedom. Again, in the Middle Ages we find great cathedrals built, as the builders expressed it, "To the glory of God". When we come down to our own American history, we find that some at least of these motives have actuated many people as a force behind their achievements.
artists, religious workers, soldiers and sailors, have found worthwhile work to do in serving causes greater than themselves, greater than their own personal comfort or profit. But to a very large extent in America, as throughout the modern world generally, the motive behind work has been the profit motive—the individual's desire to achieve economic advantage and security for himself and his own children.

Up to this decade the profit motive for work in America had so perfected the means for producing the goods and comforts which we all cherish that it was not strange if many people forgot the existence of any other significant motive for human endeavor; and within its own realm of operations, the profit motive has set up standards of achievement so logical and widely accepted that it is all too easy to make the mistake of attempting to apply such standards where they cannot rightly be applied. That is one of the difficulties which we face not only in the execution of our Federal work program, but in the very formation of it. We are from first to last judged by many people having the point of view to which the profit ideal is the supreme criterion. These critics are not necessarily any more selfish than any of the rest of us; they may be, personally, generous and philanthropic, but they have not conceived of the Federal work program as being a kind of large social-economic endeavor to which their familiar profit standards cannot at all points be correctly applied.
The word "efficiency" is a term in which many familiar profit standards are customarily summed up. It is supposed to connote the best way of doing things. Actually it may mean only the best way of doing things for a private profit. Instances can be found without searching very hard in which a private profit involves a public loss. Social bookkeeping includes items on its balance sheet which do not appear in private ledgers. The matter of slum clearances and Federally-subsidized housing may be mentioned. It may seem inefficient that the Federal government should put money into house-building which cannot be got back in rents within a reasonable time as calculated from the ordinary profit point of view. If, however, we take into account the taxpayers' money that is spent in giving fire-department service to firetraps, if we attempt to count up the cost to society of disease-breeding slum conditions, if we set down on our balance sheet any due part of the cost of protection against tuberculosis and other diseases, to say nothing of the despair of those who succumb; the cost of our police, our criminal courts, and our prisons, then we find that it is socially inefficient in the highest degree to maintain our slums, and that it is efficient to replace them through a Federally-subsidized housing program.

This is a familiar example, and represents one aspect of the situation with regard to which there are already signs of a changing ideal in America as to what constitutes worth-while work. It is becoming recognized that work may be eminently worth-while in which
immediate efficiency according to profit standards may be rightly
given up in return for the larger benefits of a long-term social
efficiency. If this newer understanding did not exist as widely
as it does, we should have had more difficulty than we have actu­
ally experienced in carrying out our work program. But this newer
understanding is far from being widespread enough to give us any­
thing like full public cooperation in our undertakings. We do
things differently from the way they are done in private business,
and many business men who wish to be helpful nevertheless feel
that our way is all wrong.

The Works Progress Administration's mode of operation
reverses private contract procedure, as between project and personnel.
This is often misunderstood, for our efficiency does not consist
merely of getting work done at the least possible cost. Here are
a definite number of distressed people in each community. Each can
do only certain kinds of work. These specific people must be put to
useful work, so projects must be proposed by local officials which
fit the work-ability of the people, rather than the traditional place
of selecting a project first and hiring the necessary labor to accomp­
lish it.

This is a serious limitation from the standpoint of tradition­
al thinking on this question, but the basic purpose is to put relief
people to work. Construction of public facilities must be secondary.
Yet despite the speed with which this vast program got under way and
the lack of comprehensive advance planning, local communities are
bettering themselves tremendously. There are, of course, enough impor-
tant tasks in our country to use the energies of every one of our unemployed. Thus far we may not always have had those tasks ready when the need for work arose. In an amazing number of cases we have.

Before I go on to speak of some less familiar conflicts of the profit motive with our Federal work program, I should like to mention one example in which it seems to me that the idea of "efficiency" has been misapplied so ineptly that it no longer has any meaning at all. I refer to the road-building situation. The question to be answered is, "What roads shall we improve?" And the answer which many people still give in the name of efficiency is, "Improve the roads that are most used." In effect this means the improvement of main highways, and the neglect of farm-to-market roads. Our Federal work program takes a different point of view, and concentrates upon farm-to-market roads. It pays the public in a great many ways to get the farmer out of the mud. The farm-to-market road gives an outlet for his produce before it rots or sours; it gives his children a chance to get a better education; it makes it possible to get a doctor or reach the hospital; it makes better citizens, and--

automobiles and trucks used more freely, eventually warranting even the traffic count. The historian of the future may find us more pathetic than efficient in the subservient way in which we have followed the tourist's automobile in our road-building, as the road builders of old Boston are said to have followed the path of a wandering calf. The shibboleth of efficiency can, as in this instance, defeat its own
proclaimed purpose. Social efficiency may sometimes find that it
is not the road the most people travel over, but the road the
fewest people travel over, which ought to have money spent on it.

So far I have not spoken of what is one of the most im-
portant of all the opinions as to the worth-whileness of our Feder-
al work projects--I mean the opinion of the man who is working on
those projects as a WPA employee. It is hard enough to have been
forced by circumstances onto the relief rolls. But now that he has
work on a Federal project, what kind of work is it? Is it work of
which he can be proud?

This is all the more important to him--and to us--because
there is absent from such work one element of satisfaction which all
of us have been encouraged to demand in America--a wage or salary of
which we can boast, or which we can construe as an indication that
we are getting on in the world. A security wage can scarcely afford
the worker this satisfaction. Nor can his Works Progress Administra-
tion job quite give him the assurance of a steady job, which in the
past has often been taken for more than it proved to be worth in
fact. Things being what they are, his Works Progress Administration
job may be considerably steadier than private employment; and he
does have a chance to "work up" to a better job. But he cannot say
to his wife, "The way my work is appreciated, I think I can keep this
job as long as Uncle Sam is in business!" No, this is a queer sort
of job, in which ultimate "success" is gained only by leaving it for
private employment. It is in that respect unlike any other job that
the man is likely to have held. No matter how hard a man may work
he is still working at a subsidized job. Both he and his friends have great difficulty in measuring it by any yardstick except the traditional private profit standard. If a man is privately employed in making court-plaster, it will give him some reassurance to hear that his employer is selling lots of court-plaster to Italy and Abyssinia, and making lots of money. But Uncle Sam's business offers no such familiar reassurances, the public motive behind it being much more involved and difficult for the average man to grasp.

In short, many of the familiar emotional satisfactions to which workers have become accustomed in private employment are not to be found in the Federal work program. The emotional satisfaction which it provides, above the level of immediate subsistence and relief from desperate economic anxiety, must be found if at all in the worker's pride in the social importance of the project that he is helping to complete. It must be something of which he can be proud. It must give him the feeling of being identified with something larger than himself, something of more-or-less permanent value to the community or the nation. He can get this feeling in helping to build a new school house, for example, and perhaps his sense of the worth-whileness of that project is kin to that of the builders of the pyramids, the Parthenon, and the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. His work has gone into something that will live on. We all know of particular projects, of the most diverse sorts, which have evoked these feelings in the workers employed upon them. These workers have become so interested in their work that they have come early and left late, they have used their own leisure time in ways which would help the project along;
an, unfortunately, we all know of projects—indeed themselves of civic
importance—where everything went wrong and nobody got any satisfac-
tions out of the job at all. Evidently it is not a matter merely of
kinds of projects. It is a matter of the way those projects are
managed. In the management of those projects, it is evident that
more is involved than efficiency of the familiar profit kind. In
these Federal work projects there is required a kind of efficiency
which, over and above ordinary engineering requirements, can in some
way communicate to all the workers a sense of the social dignity
and value of their task and evoke in them the pride from which their
best efforts will spontaneously flow.

It is perhaps not so much a question of which kinds of
Federal work projects are most worth-while—since all of those upon
which we intentionally concentrate have unquestionable social
usefulness—as it is a question of which projects can be most effici-
ently demonstrated as worth-while to the public and the workers.
We cannot, however, ignore nor expect the public and the workers to
ignore, any failure of ours to undertake such work as seems most
socially needful and important. Private employers may without ques-
tion or criticism arbitrarily decide to brighten some obscure corner
of our lives with their products, while leaving our chief needs to be
taken care of by whom so will; but the Federal work program, if it is
to stand on the high plane of social usefulness, cannot but be
criticized and questioned if it fails to deal with our largest social
needs.
Perhaps the most outstanding of all these large social needs at the present time is shown in our national housing situation. I need not repeat the figures, now well known to us all, which show how far short we are falling in America from our previous normal building operations in the field of domestic housing. We all know that there are grave difficulties in Federal entrance into this field of work, and objections both from vested interests and from organized labor to the most obvious attack upon the problems through the Federal work program; and we know also that at least a beginning which obviates some of these difficulties is now in prospect, through the Wagner housing proposals now before Congress, and this brings us to the largest question of all, one so large that I can only state it here without encroaching upon the field of social-economic prophecy.

The Brookings study of America’s capacity to consume has acquainted us with the fact that even during the "prosperity days" of 1929 national consumption should have been 80% higher than it was. A very large number of American families were obliged to live in ramshackle hovels, went underfed and underclothed, had little or no medical care and suffered other privations unnecessary in a civilization with the potential capacity to provide a full life for all. Such of this situation is to be charged against the arbitrary and socially planless operations of our industrial system. A very large field of operation is left for the planned activities of a Federal work program—much larger than is as yet generally contemplated.
In the realm of public works, there is a huge deficiency, as a result of the depression, which might take more than all our unemployed to make up in several years of planned activity. The realms of erosion control, flood control, afforestation and irrigation, if seriously dealt with in the way that will be necessary to save our country from the fate of Nespotamia and vast tracts of China, suggest the possibility of a Federal work program stupendous in comparison to the one upon which we are now engaged. We have nearly five and a half million school children not provided with schools or housed in unfit buildings or temporarily and inadequately provided for by double sessions. We are at the present time in need of nearly a million and a half hospital beds. Nearly half of our population is unprovided with public sewerage systems. How efficiently private commercial enterprise can rise to meet these national needs remains to be seen.

There is an attitude on the part of many citizens toward our Federal work program which might be described as one of tolerance. We do things differently from the way to which they are accustomed. We do work out of which nobody makes any profit except the public; and this is tolerantly forgiven us on the understanding that this is a temporary state of affairs during great emergency. They concede the emergency, but they ask, "When shall we all be back doing business at the old stand?" It seems probable that they will have to adjust themselves to the fact that what commercial enterprise is not able to do for private profit, will be done for the public benefit by some
kind of public agency, if it is really necessary that the work be done. The gradual recognition of the necessity for such work, and of the inadequacy of any but a great public agency to its performance, and the final acceptance of the idea of permanency in such public operations will no doubt take some time. The people of America, brought up so largely to judge the worth-whileness of nearly all work from the point of view of the private profits to be derived from it, have been patient with us while we did work from a motive as alien to their traditional thinking as that of the builders of the Pyramids, the Parthenon and the cathedrals of Medieval Europe; and we, on our part, I hope, will be as patient with them while they are learning that this motive of public benefit has come into America to stay.