# 20 *Britain in Transition*

## *THE TRANSFORMATION OF BRITISH DEMOCRACY*

The form and institutions of British liberalism and their growth and application to national life can be fully understood only when viewed on the basis of the peculiar and unique British character, a character that is fundamentally kind and tolerant, has a strong sense of fairness, is alien to hatred, and devoid of vindictiveness. The British may be distrustful of intellectuality but they are deeply civilized and humane.

This may well be the reason why the enormous inequalities in all the phases of life have been accepted as inevitable. The ruling class, educated in the "public schools," has had the most important positions in its possession, a fact about which the less privileged have not complained too loudly. Even the failure to reform an educational system based on class distinctions has caused relatively little objection. A British writer stated quite frankly that "the truth of the matter appears to be that the people of Britain do not care greatly for social and economic equality." [1] Certainly there has been in Britain a striking absence of class struggles of Marxist quality. British democracy has been based on political liberalism but has excluded social and economic equality of opportunities. "The traditional English conception of liberty consists, indeed, essentially in the absence of oppression." [2]

The war introduced a new factor. The Dunkirk episode and the subsequent bombings of British cities brought a new sense of unity to the nation. More important still, the colossal task of organizing the country for a protracted struggle became the prime endeavor of the government. Thus, indirectly, the war may be responsible for bringing about profound alterations in the structure of British society.

While primarily concerned with waging the war, the govern-

[1] W. A. Robson, "The British System of Government," in the survey, *British Life and Thought*, Longmans, Green and Company, New York, 1941, pp. 78–79.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

ment, which had meantime become a coalition of all parties, announced its intention of planning for the future on a basis of far-reaching social reforms. Without making too specific commitments, the government simply undertook to sponsor the study of social problems and their possible remedies as they would arise in the years to come. In this way, it kept the development well in hand and made the "British Revolution" a legal procedure.

In addition, it encouraged the drafting of many interim reports, compiled by semiofficial agencies, political parties, and religious and private groups.

In order to give a clear view of the trends which seem to be dominant and which may strongly modify the tenor of social and political life in Britain, there follows a brief survey which sketches the direction and scope of reconstruction plans on the basis of the most important material available at the present time.

*GOVERNMENT POSTWAR PLANNING*

*General Policies.* In January, 1941, the government created a commission for the study of reconstruction and postwar problems consisting of ministers under the chairmanship of Mr. Arthur Greenwood. The object of this commission was to seek practical solutions for the immediate problems of a transition from war to peace. Amplifying these terms, the prime minister stated that it was the task of Mr. Greenwood "to plan in advance a number of practical steps which it is indispensable to take if our society is to move forward, as it must. . . ." [1] The questions involved deal predominantly with social and economic reconstruction, to be solved on the basis of the existing national unity "as has been achieved under the pressure of this present struggle for life." [2]

Physical reconstruction is to be considered within the framework of the study of postwar problems under the following assumptions:

1. that the principle of planning will be accepted as national policy and that some central planning authority will be required;
2. that this authority will proceed on a positive policy for such matters as agriculture, industrial development and transport;

[1] Prime Minister Winston Churchill's statement in the House of Commons on January 22, 1941.
[2] *Ibid.*

3. that some services will require treatment on a national basis, some regionally and some locally.[1]

In March, 1942, the government announced that the duties of handling reconstruction problems, hitherto performed by Minister without Portfolio, would be transferred to Paymaster-General Sir William Allen Jowitt. The intention to establish a central planning agency was also announced. It was to be headed by a Ministry of Works and Planning, a new version of the former Ministry of Works and Buildings.

In addition, the government named a number of committees to study special problems which might arise after the war. As special objects of study it mentioned, among others, the following items: reeducation in agriculture; rehabilitation (reeducation) of demobilized soldiers; education; electoral reorganization; increase of health services; modernizing of medical schools; and redistribution of population in connection with rebuilding. New industries and new lines of communication were to be planned; social insurance and various social services were to be enlarged considerably. However, although the various individuals and committees were duly studying the basic problems, no governmental directives on policy had been issued. The British government remained opposed to any declaration of postwar aims in a definite form. While accepting the Atlantic Charter without reservation, a more detailed program of ideological, political, social, and economic reorganization was withheld. British official opinion was expressed by Lord Cranborne who stated that there are "overwhelming reasons against a unilateral declaration of policy at the present stage. . . . The Atlantic Charter . . . lays down the fundamental principles on which the peace settlement must be based. . . . His Majesty's Government regard themselves as absolutely pledged to carry out . . . all the articles of the Atlantic Charter. . . . But if it is a mistake to make a declaration of war aims, that is not to say it is a mistake for a nation to prepare war aims. . . ." [2] In other words, the British government set up machinery to prepare plans for possible use at a later time. It did not want to commit itself to reforms of too

[1] Statement by Lord Reith, Minister of Works and Buildings, House of Lords, February 26, 1941.

[2] Statement by Lord Cranborne, House of Lords, June 2, 1942.

definite a character and left the various agencies to proceed at their discretion.

*The Beveridge Report.* The official report of the noted Oxford economist, Sir William Beveridge, who solved Britain's man-power problem and, like Winston Churchill, was one of those who had warned for years against appeasement, is of special significance. Commissioned by the government to undertake a sweeping study on measures for social security after the war, he submitted the document to Commons on December 1, 1942, after nineteen months of work. The report is one of the most advanced documents ever sponsored by a nonsocialist government, in Britain or anywhere else. It may well become Britain's economic Magna Charta; it will remain a memorial testifying to the extent of the transformation of British ideals.[1]

Sir William's report centered on two fundamental issues: unemployment and social insurance in conjunction with a minimum income guaranteed for all British subjects. He did not, however, suggest definite solutions for eliminating unemployment. He stated that unemployment was a separate problem to be dealt with by the government after the war. Instead of suggesting basic changes in British economy which might eliminate unemployment and thus cure the evil at the root, he tried to mitigate its consequences by offering a state insurance scheme guaranteeing freedom from want.

Certain gaps in the report itself can easily be filled from statements made publicly by Sir William before the publication of his report. His own ideas seem to be far more revolutionary than the provisions and points of departure of the actual report. He stressed that it was not in his mind to socialize or bolshevize Britain. Private initiative was to be retained—if only within the framework of governmental planning. Hence laissez-faire economy was out of the question. In two speeches he made statements to the effect that basic economic principles were on the verge of change, thus requiring those fundamental modifications of the existing socioeconomic system which he had failed to mention in his report. "Private enterprise at private risk was a good ship and one that

[1] The Report appeared in the United States by arrangement with His Majesty's Stationery Office as *Social Insurance and Allied Services*, Report by Sir William Beveridge, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1942.

brought us far, but it was for fair weather and open seas. For the ice-bound straits of war and in finding a way out of them a vessel of sturdier build is needed. Private control of the means of production, whatever might be said for it on other grounds, cannot be described as an essential liberty of the British people. Not more than a tiny fraction of them ever enjoyed that right." [1]

If these views should be accepted as guiding principles, then the state would have to undergo a complete reorganization. Hence Sir William said that "any further extension of State activity in the economic sphere involves reconsideration of the machinery and methods of government, including both the central organization and the personnel of the civil service." His conclusion was that "the civil service is quite admirable for the kind of job it has had to do in the past. For the new jobs one may want a new type of official and a new organization. The fluidity of resources and the absence of barriers to the transfer of men from one type of work to another are as necessary as national planning itself." [2]

Without accepting the Soviet ideology, Sir William was bold enough to admit that the experience of the Soviets might be useful. A reasonable national planning and fluidity of labor, he claimed, would create not only employment for all but also much benefit for the communities. Political freedom, freedom of opinion, freedom of personal property, and freedom to save one's income would be the basis of any reconstruction.[3]

Such unconventional reasoning was based on the introduction of two new ideas. First, national planning was to restrict the freedom of action of private enterprise (though not eliminating its initiative when in accord with national policies); second, a new conception of property was introduced by referring, in the enumeration of essential freedoms, to *personal* rather than private property—a differentiation which we also find in the Soviet Constitution of 1936.

However, the guiding principles of Sir William's social-security plan showed very clearly that he did not propose to adopt Marxism,

[1] Speech by Sir William Beveridge as reported in *The New York Times*, October 26, 1942.

[2] Sir William Beveridge's speech before the Fabian Society, London, November 22, 1942.

[3] Speech as reported on October 26, 1942.

although probably no reformer can escape some socialist influence while planning for the betterment of the lot of man. Essentially, Beveridge suggested social security for all citizens, young and old, male and female, "from the cradle to the grave." In order to achieve this goal with a minimum of friction and resistance on the part of vested interests, he did not hesitate to advocate pushing aside the powerful insurance companies and reorganizing the whole civil-service apparatus whose hidden influence had remained unaffected by changes in governments.

The high light of the plan was a social insurance system of widest range which was to cover unemployment, health, accident, marriage, childbirth, allowances for children, retirement for the aged, and funeral expenses. The coverage was a universal one, with joint contributions by employers, workers, and the government. According to the plan, the population was to be divided into six classes for purposes of social security:

Class I: Employees (persons whose normal occupation is employment under contract service).
Class II: Others gainfully occupied including employers, traders, and independent workers of all kinds.
Class III: Housewives (married women of working age).
Class IV: Others of working age not gainfully occupied.
Class V: Below working age.
Class VI: Retired above working age.[1]

The distribution of benefits, costing the British people roughly 10 to 11 per cent of the national income, would include free medical, dental, hospital, nursing, and convalescent services. It would entail a virtual abolition of private insurance because the government would have to take over private industrial insurance companies whose operating costs were considered unduly high.

The ideological basis of this plan is clearly freedom from want,[2] which the government regards as a crucial postwar issue. The question as to whether freedom from want can be attained in the near future depends on four conditions: first, that in the postwar world nations set themselves the aim to cooperate for production in peace rather than plot mutual destruction by war, whether open or concealed; second, that the British economic policy and

[1] Beveridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–11.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 7–9.

structure after the war shall be adjusted in such a way as to maintain productive employment; third, that a plan for social security —in other words a plan for the maintenance of a minimum income —shall be adopted free from unnecessary costs of administration; fourth, that decisions regarding the nature of this plan shall be made during the war and not postponed until after its end.

It would be the task of a Ministry of Social Security to organize and administer the plan which is certain to encounter the obstruction of those still clinging to laissez-faire economy. "Old conceptions of free trade and protection don't square with the economic needs of today," wrote Sir William, thereby revealing the twentieth-century economic philosophy on the basis of which his plan is conceived. It is a heartening document and may well exercise a great deal of influence not only in Britain but throughout the civilized world, not excluding the United States, where some of Beveridge's recommendations have already been anticipated in a milder form.

### *LABOR'S REFORM PLANS*

The Beveridge plan, radical as it may seem, was sponsored by a British government which is a coalition of conservative and liberal elements but, as a whole, more conservative than progressive. It is only natural that the Labor Party, officially representing the masses of workers, should be vitally interested in both the domestic and international aspects of planning. The party published a manifesto in 1918 entitled *Labor and Social Order*. The disappointment over the lack of success of this program was not forgotten when, after the outbreak of the Second World War, the party pledged itself to fight "until Nazism and Fascism are overthrown" but, at the same time, expressed its belief that "the world is a single economic unit" for which "we must have international economic planning." [1]

The Labor Party has also published an Interim Report on Reconstruction, and it may be enlightening to compare its demands with the ideas emanating from official sources. The basis of the Labor plan is an indictment of governmental policy between 1918 and 1939—a policy which, incidentally, their own party members

[1] See *Annual Conference of the British Labor Party*, 1941.

were not able or willing to change while in power. The privileged forces, the report states, "sought to meet the social and economic problems of the twentieth century with ideas which were already obsolete. They refused to recognize that a democratic civilization is incompatible, under conditions of modern science and technology, with either the parochialism of national sovereignty on the one hand, or the confinement of freedom on the other, to those whose possession of property gave them, and them alone, access to economic security. . . ."

After the lessons learned during the years between the wars, the Labor Party has arrived at certain definite conclusions: An unplanned society cannot maintain a reasonable standard of living for many of its citizens; private enterprise will think in terms of private profit, resulting in mass unemployment; backing systems like Nazism or Fascism by tacit consent or appeasement is but a consequence of private control of the means of production because of vested interests and opposition to planning; only the extreme war emergency made it imperative to subordinate private interests to planning for victory.

When this victory has been achieved, according to the report, the problems arising will be "no less profound" than the struggle against Hitlerism. The Labor Party therefore set out to enumerate four items as a "deliberate part of our war effort": first, to provide full employment; second, to "rebuild a Britain to standards worthy of the men and women who have preserved it"; third, to organize social services covering health, food, and old-age care; fourth, to provide equal educational opportunities for all. Interestingly, in the report, the party referred to the President of the United States who enumerated essential political and economic privileges for a healthy democracy, such as equality of opportunities, jobs for those who can work, security for those who need it, the ending of special privileges for the few, the preservation of civil liberties for all, and the constant rise of the standard of living based upon technological progress. These ideals are implied in the Atlantic Charter; the fact that the British government has declared its adherence to the Charter amounts, in the opinion of the Labor Party, to official acceptance of these principles. The party is careful to stress that it does not think that the transformation of society can take place over-

night. It does point out, however, that the acceptance of principles must, immediately, bring about a change in the control of "essential instruments of production."

In the international field, the party advocates an early understanding on postwar programs between the United Nations, and arrives at the following conclusions. Aggressor nations must, after their defeat, be kept disarmed; the principle of collective security must be reintroduced; this principle must go hand in hand with a recognition of the interdependence of nations, but each country, not excluding the defeated Axis nations, is entitled to its form of government, subject only to acceptance and respect of the four freedoms and their international implications.

At the time of the publication of the Beveridge Report, the Labor Party set forth further points elaborating its previous demands. Arthur Greenwood, the Labor spokesman, reiterated that a return to prewar standards and conceptions was out of the question; consequently, he thought the government must plan now so as to avoid the possibility of facing the immediate postwar period with inadequate preparations. Moreover, it was recommended that most of the war agencies should be retained after the cessation of hostilities until the functioning of the agencies of reorganization was assured. In detail, the Labor Party called for a "development board" with a parallel finance board, to prepare assistance for Britain, and a similar organism for countries ruined by war and those undeveloped economically and culturally. It goes without saying that one of the most emphatic demands of Labor remained the creation of the best educational system possible, free for all children and adults.

### *AUSTRALIA'S RADICAL PLAN*

In his report, Sir William Beveridge urged the attention of his readers to the New Zealand plan, which he considered rather similar to his own. However, the government of Australia has by far outdone every country in mapping out a radical departure from prewar economy and society.[1]

[1] It is of interest that the relations between Australia and the Soviet Union have been increasingly cordial since the outbreak of the German-Russian war; one should not forget that the predominance of Labor in both countries happens to coincide with a growing industrialization.

Australia's Labor government not only proposes complete social security for all but also wants the state to assume the burden. In other words, while the Beveridge plan suggests a contributory scheme—insurance premiums are to be paid by employers, employees, and the state—the Australian plan proposes to be noncontributory. In addition, a comprehensive program of socialized medicine forms an essential part of the plan, together with slum clearance to be financed as public works. Australia is to be divided into medical districts, each containing health centers open to everyone regardless of his economic status. The government proposes to engage for this purpose at the outset two thousand doctors, many nurses, and a big hospital staff.

Very different from Britain's Beveridge report which on the whole aims to retain private enterprise, the Australian scheme wants industry to be state-controlled and education to be entirely free for all, including university study If this sounds like the fulfillment of a socialist's dream, one should not forget that there is a fundamental difference with the Marxist doctrine, namely, that the necessity of a class struggle has not been recognized and that, therefore, a proletarian dictatorship is out of the question. Moreover, no attempt will be made to establish a communist society.

Australia, like the United States, has a federal system of government. Since the plan calls for a centralized administration, the individual states of the Australian Commonwealth would have to give up part of their sovereignty for the common good. It should be mentioned that this plan has not been published in its integrated form but that it developed during the year 1942; it was made known gradually, not all at once. While the spirit of the plan can be clearly recognized, its details may be modified by its own originators before it goes to parliament.

### *THE CHURCH AND PLANNING*

Finally, the church too has taken cognizance of the imperative necessity for postwar reform. The most radical member of the Anglican Church, the Rev. Hewlett Johnson, Dean of Canterbury, seemed very definitely on the side of Labor in his demands that banking and big industry be controlled by the state. Dean Johnson was well acquainted with the Soviet Union; in his popular book *The*

*Soviet Power*,[1] he gave a very vivid, if perhaps too optimistic, account of the Soviets' achievements. For him, the Soviet system was a long step toward the realization of a better working Christianity. No doubt Dean Johnson was inclined to go farther in some respects than the Anglican Church hierarchy might conceivably care to venture. The statement of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the late Rev. William Temple, probably represents the opinion of the majority of the Anglican Church; and it is important to remember that the Church of England has a great deal of influence upon public opinion if not on governmental decisions.

The Archbishop recognized the necessity that the church concern itself with social problems on a much vaster scale than heretofore. Mere charity, he knew, is not enough if the church is to retain its influence. While stating that "there is nothing wrong about profits as such," he recognized that an "economic system of justice" must be built upon the conception that the consumer is not the means but the end of the economic process. In order to direct the economic mind toward such an ideal, the Archbishop suggested a new "Christian order," namely, the "fullest possible development of individual personality in the widest and deepest possible fellowship." Specifically, he proposed six points to achieve this goal: first, every child should grow up in a decent environment both at home and in the community; second, every child should have equal educational opportunities and his education should be inspired by faith in God; third, every citizen should be secure in the possession of a minimum income, sufficient to bring up his children under good circumstances; fourth, every citizen should have a voice in the conduct of the nation's economy and "the satisfaction of knowing that his labor is directed to the wellbeing of the community"; fifth, after the war, every citizen should have sufficient leisure time and two days of rest a week and every employee should be given annual vacations with pay in order to further his personal interests and health of mind and body; sixth, every citizen should be granted freedom of worship, speech, assembly and association.[2]

This is a generous program although it would preserve the social

[1] Hewlett Johnson, Dean of Canterbury, *The Soviet Power*, Modern Age Books, Inc., New York, 1940.

[2] Cf. The Most Reverend William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, *Christianity and Social Order*, Penguin Books, New York, 1942.

*status quo* to an even greater extent than Sir William Beveridge's report is willing to concede. The larger issues on whose settlement the realization of such a program would depend, are briefly defined in a clear and down-to-earth formulation by a "Committee to study the foundations of a just and durable peace" in March, 1943. The theses of the Committee are called the "Six Pillars of Peace" and signed by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York and some of the most prominent British churchmen and teachers. These are the "Six Pillars":

1. Political collaboration between the United Nations and ultimately between all nations.
2. Collaboration on economic and financial matters of world-wide import.
3. Adaptation of the world's treaty structure to changing conditions.
4. Assurance, through international organization, of ultimate autonomy for subject peoples.
5. Control of armaments.
6. Establishment of the principle of the rights of people everywhere to intellectual and religious liberty.

The Catholic bishops of England, too, have drafted "minimum conditions for Christian life" which demand some social reforms but, on the whole, are the most conservative of all. They state cautiously that "the enormous inequality in the distribution of wealth and control of the lives of the masses by a comparatively few rich people is contrary to social justice" but they do not make any practical suggestions as to the remedy. They agree, with the Anglican clergy, that decent living conditions are of extreme importance, and they urge industry to grant its employees a living wage, meaning one that will make possible comfort and savings. On the other hand, they advocate the abolition of work for wives, the abolition of birth control, religious education, and a ban on obscene books by a board of publishers. These are issues of secondary urgency by comparison with the pressing problems Britain and the world will face during the postwar reconstruction period.[1]

To complete this survey, it should be stated that there are also groups which demand a return to prewar ideals. The so-called Individualist Group wants individualism restored to its fullest. Profit,

[1] Pastoral letter of the Roman Catholic Church of England, June 21, 1942.

they claim, should be regarded as a proper motive of commerce and "trade whether domestic or international, should be freed from unnecessary restrictions." [1] The phrasing of their Manifesto evinces a dislike for new tendencies which are comprehensively described as "regimentation of opinion." It is not difficult to recognize the old-school tradition of self-centered nationalism, fostered by representatives of those groups who do not favor reforms that might impair their privileged position.

However, such an attitude is rarer in war-ravaged Britain than in America which has not experienced the horrors of war on its own soil. It is hard to believe that the British people will ever endorse a return to outmoded times. But their revolution may proceed on the basis of the continuity of their history, thus avoiding a violent break with their cherished traditions.

*CONCLUSION: PROBLEMS BRITAIN FACES*

The continuous development of political liberties in the centuries during which little England grew to be the mother country of the greatest empire that the world has known will always remain an outstanding monument in the political evolution of man. To be sure, economic democracy has not been achieved in Britain. State and church alike have accepted social and economic inequality as inevitably in the order of things. Parliament has represented predominantly the interest of the upper and middle classes which, in turn, have monopolized education, thereby denying the masses equality of opportunities. However, all the injustices, inequalities, and class distinctions do not invalidate the picture of steady, if unfinished, progress. The practical development of a liberal political philosophy is characteristic of Britain's constitutional history.

The ideological power of British constitutionalism has been such that, in spite of social and economic disabilities, the lower classes have remained loyal to king and parliament. This is all the more remarkable when one considers how great the privileges of birth and money have remained to our own time. The reluctance of the ruling classes to acknowledge the significance of the cata-

[1] "Manifesto on British Liberty" by the "Individualist Group," *International Conciliation*, No. 384, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November, 1942, pp. 452–454.

strophic years from 1914 to 1918 and their inclination, between 1933 and 1939, to regard Nazism as a possible safeguard against popular movements, have substantially contributed to the disaster which befell the world in 1939.

It was only the impact of the Second World War which induced the British conservatives to admit, up to a point, the necessity of a change of domestic policy. They saw that mere political democracy and the razing of some slums would never solve the social and economic problems bound to arise after the war. The realization of the limitations of British power and the military performance of the Soviet Union also led most of them to revise their views about the latter country.

The British leaders agreed that it was impossible this time to go back where they left off when the war began. The problem for Britain—and for the world—remains how to combine political liberty with social security. Obviously, this must have been in the mind of Beveridge, for the British are too sober to believe in the idea of a classless society. This problem cannot be solved, however, without a reinterpretation of democracy in social and economic terms. It involves the difficult task of reeducation in modern democratic living. Intellectual understanding and ideological assent are equally necessary; longstanding traditions will have to be modified or abolished. In economic terms, the world faces a "profound modification of the conception of property" [1] and will have to divert its attention from profit to service. Such an attitude needs mental preparation. Since 1940, the establishment of planned production and supervised consumption, and the elimination of want under state control, have made quick progress in war-torn Britain, particularly after the dark days of Dunkirk and the mass bombings of British cities. War is a great teacher; Professor Carr goes so far as to call it "the most powerful instrument in effecting . . . transformation"; [2] for him, "war is at the present time the most purposeful of our social institutions; and we shall make no progress towards its elimination until we recognize and provide for the essential function which it performs." [3]

[1] Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 80.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 116–117.
[3] *Loc. cit.*

Yet the current necessities of war alone cannot transform the traditions of a mature nation, but they may serve to initiate a new era. The creation of new social conceptions cannot be a mere matter of months or even of a few years. The spirit of a new world may be born in war but it will take a sound peace, and a long period of peace, for it to grow.

Moreover, it is dangerous to believe that postwar plans, however excellent they may be, will immediately solve all problems. When the guns cease firing, political battles will again rage violently. The proponents of social and economic discrimination will not yield without a protracted struggle; neither will the advocates of Marxian communism easily give up their fight for a proletarian dictatorship.

While it may not be possible, for a long time to come, to picture a reformed postwar world in definite terms, war-torn Britain offers some clearly visible prospects of a constitutional state, living in a culturally close but politically loose union with its dominions, granting India the rights of an independent dominion, and gradually freeing its colonies from central control through educating them toward the goal of self-administration. It is conceivable that Britain may eventually discard the philosophy of its former ruling classes, further restricting their political power by increasing the democratization of parliament; she will no doubt continue to grant wide freedom to local authorities but may demand, at the same time, the subordination of personal and group interests to national planning. The process of planning may serve gradually to right basic injustices.

Britain is already committed to enlarge its social services, to introduce a new educational system designed to wipe out class distinctions, to eliminate slums, and to put every citizen under the care of a free and universal medical supervision. Britain, because of its sufferings through the rigors of war, may well be the first country in the world to furnish the example of democratic evolution from a constitutional class state to a cooperative liberal democracy.

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