

CALENDAR REFORM

Michael J. O'Brien

So much prominence has been given to the question of calendar reform recently that it may be well to comment on it here. The idea of calendar reform is now reduced to the question of replacing the present Gregorian Calendar by the Perpetual Calendar (sometimes called the "World Calendar"). This is a calendar of 12 months divided into four equal quarters. Two months of each quarter would contain 30 days each, and the third 31. A blank day (i.e. a day outside the week) would be provided for common years to bring up the total number of days to 365. A further blank day would be allowed in respect of Leap Years. These blank days would be international holidays and, if possible, church holidays.

Since the turn of the century many international bodies have taken up the question of calendar reform. It is intended to discuss here the proposals of the two most competent authorities of these international bodies to deal with such a question, namely, the Congress of the International Astronomical Union and the Special Committee of Enquiry into the Reform of the Calendar, formed by the Advisory and Technical Committee for Communications and Transit of the League of Nations.

In 1919 the International Astronomical Union formed a special committee to enquire into the subject of calendar reform. The first President of this committee was Cardinal Mercier. This committee adopted certain resolutions at its session held in Rome in May 1922. Three Catholic priests, viz., Father Stein, Father Rhodes and Abbé Chauve-Bertrand made valuable and informative contributions to the discussion on Calendar Reform during that session. The resolutions are summarized as follows :

- (1) That the Festival of Easter be stabilized.
- (2) That a perpetual calendar keeping 52 weeks plus one (for a common year) or two (for a leap year) blank days be adopted.
- (3) That January 1st take the place of the day at present occupied by December 22nd (winter solstice).
- (4) That the 364 days be divided into four periods of 91 days each, i.e. two months of 30 days and one of 31, without excluding an auxiliary division into periods of 14 and of 28 days.

Calendar Reform

In effect, the committee specifically recommended the adoption of a perpetual calendar with the civil year coinciding with the astronomical year. Although recommending that Easter be fixed, the committee did not specify any particular position in the calendar either for this Festival or for the blank days.

The Advisory and Technical Committee for Communications and Transit of the League of Nations, "considering that the investigation of the reforms which might be introduced into the Gregorian Calendar would inevitably affect very considerably the conditions of economic life and international traffic by introducing a more uniform and more rational measurement of time", took up the question by appointing a Special Committee of Enquiry into calendar reform at its session in Geneva in August 1923.

This Special Committee of the League of Nations based its initial enquiries on the recommendations made the previous year by the Congress of the International Astronomical Union, summarized above. It invited the opinions of governments and organizations on aspects of calendar reform and also invited suggestions for schemes for the same purpose. It received 185 schemes in all, one of which came from a contributor in Ireland.

As a result of its enquiries the League Committee issued its report in 1926. This report did nothing more than lay down the basis on which governments and interested bodies should further study the question. The following is a summary of this report.

The League Committee rejected as untenable :

- (1) Proposals to make the civil year coincide with the astronomical year.
- (2) Proposals affecting the length of the present Gregorian year and the existing arrangement for determining leap years.
- (3) Proposals to vary the difference between the length of the months by more than one day.

For the purpose of further study of the problem the Committee divided calendars into 3 groups :

- Group I. Calendars of the type described at the outset, except that one quarter of the year would contain an additional day, i.e. there would be no blank day.
- Group II. Calendars of the type described at the outset (i.e. a Perpetual Calendar having a blank day for common years and an additional one for leap years).
- Group III. Calendars of 13 months of 28 days each and including blank days.

Circumstances have altered so much since the League Committee made its report that the question of calendar reform should be re-examined in the light of recent developments. If a change should be made, it should be comprehensive enough to eliminate the possibility of, or the necessity for, any further change. If this condition be accepted as reasonable, and if only a calendar of the type described in Group II of the League Committee's report is admissible, then three questions remain to be settled before any calendar may be generally adopted. These are :

Calendar Reform

- (1) Whether the civil year should coincide with the astronomical year as specifically agreed to by the Congress of the International Astronomical Union but rejected by the League of Nations Committee.
- (2) The fixing of Easter and the place it should hold in the new calendar.
- (3) The position which the blank days for common years should have.

The League of Nations Committee rejected No. 1 above and gave two reasons for doing so, viz :

- (1) "The confusion inevitably created by dropping ten days" (i.e. by changing New Year's Day from Jan. 1st to Dec. 22). This had particular reference to countries which had only recently (1926) changed over to the Gregorian Calendar or to those which were about to do so (Turkey, Russia, Greece, Rumania, etc.).
- (2) The year in which these ten days were dropped would be of no value whatever for the comparison of statistics of any kind, and particularly statistics relating to economic and social life.

These reasons, which may have been strong enough to cause rejection of a change to the astronomical year at the time when the report was issued, seem weak with reference to present conditions. An opportunity, such as the reform of the calendar would provide, should not be missed to change New Year's Day from its present arbitrary position to the definite position of the winter solstice. It would have the effect of placing the calendar on a permanent basis; that is, it would eliminate the necessity for any future change. It would also have the effect of making the quarters of the calendar coincide very closely with the seasons of the year. It certainly does not seem consistent that, while rejecting the logical change of the civil year to coincide with the astronomical year, the League Committee would evidently be prepared to admit the drastic change from a 12-month to a 13-month calendar. The greater interest in, and the increased intensity of research into the sciences of astronomy, cosmology and meteorology in recent years should give added weight to the argument in favour of bringing the civil year into line with the astronomical year.

The question of fixing Easter involves finding the most suitable position for it within the new calendar and within the period corresponding to the period on which it may fall according to the Gregorian Calendar. The most convenient position for it, then, satisfying this latter condition and with a calendar having the civil year coincide with the astronomical year, would be the first Sunday of April. It would thus have Easter Week introducing the Spring quarter just as Christmas Week would introduce the year.

As far as fixing the blank day for common years is concerned, new considerations must now be taken into account. The vast majority of the people of the world live in the northern hemisphere. More and more employees are compulsorily granted annual holidays. Having regard to this, then, it would not seem feasible to place this blank day, which, as is proposed, would be an international holiday, anywhere other than in what would be the summer time for the majority of the people of the world. The position, then, suggests itself as that between the second and third quarters of the year. The extra blank day in respect

Calendar Reform

of leap years would be added at the end of the year. In common years this blank day would hold the unique position of being the Middle Day of the year, and for that reason may be called "Mid-Year Day" (or Marian Day?) and dated "June M". It would also have the function of dividing the second and third quarters by a "long week-end". The Bank Holiday which is now given on Good Friday in this country may well be transferred to this blank day and thus no work-day would be lost by its introduction. Another change which may well be brought about here by the introduction of the Perpetual Calendar would be to change the present position of the August Bank Holiday to the first Monday of the fourth quarter. It would have the effect of dividing the third quarter from the fourth by another "long week-end" and would give a better distribution of holidays throughout the year. The blank day in respect of leap years would be added to the end of the year and would be called Leap Day (dated "December L").

It is known that proposals regarding the introduction of the Perpetual Calendar are at the moment awaiting the consideration of the United Nations Organization. According to the information available these proposals fall short of the ideas in regard to this matter as stated above. Furthermore, it is hoped by the sponsors of these proposals that the Calendar will be put into operation in 1956. This choice of year (made necessary since it is the next year having New Year's Day fall on a Sunday—a necessary condition for introducing the Perpetual Calendar) is most unfortunate for the introduction of the Calendar since, being a leap year, we would be confronted with the problem of introducing not one blank day, but two on the very first year of its operation. If the supporters of this proposal were agreeable to starting the year on the winter solstice, the Calendar would be introduced on December 22nd 1957 and it would have two years of smooth operation before having to allow a blank day for a leap year. It is to be hoped, however, that no rash step will be taken in the matter without giving the governments and other interested bodies sufficient time to examine the whole question afresh.

It may be appropriate to conclude this commentary by noting that the next session of the Congress of the International Astronomical Union, which was the first and most competent authority to take up the question of calendar reform on the international level, will be held in Dublin in 1955. It should be interesting, and certainly enlightening, if a discussion on calendar reform could be initiated at that session by having a suitable motion placed on the agenda.

Dublin, December, 1953.

The World Calendar table on the following page is reprinted from the *Journal of Calendar Reform* (630 Fifth Ave., New York 20).