

"OUR POLICY."

"We would simply take for the community what belongs to the community—the value that attaches to land by the growth of the community; leave sacredly to the individual all that belongs to the individual."—Henry George.

THE POSITION OF TENANT FARMERS IN ENGLAND AND WALES.

As it was considered that the agricultural tenants in England and Wales were placed in a serious and difficult position by the, assumed, abnormal sales of agricultural land during the past two years—to the extent, according to the *TIMES* of about half per cent. of the whole agricultural land of the country—a special Departmental Committee was appointed by the Board of Agriculture to inquire into this subject. Their Report was published late in January, and, as may be gathered from Press comments, has aroused considerable attention in both political and financial circles. Nor is this surprising. For it certainly makes some very remarkable and sensational suggestions and recommendations. The main portion of their Report, however, as well as its main recommendations, treats of subjects quite outside the scope of their inquiry, subjects of the most fundamental and far-reaching social and political importance, and deals with them in a manner which, to say the least, is far from convincing.

The interests of a class are tacitly accepted by the Committee as necessarily the interests of the whole community; very questionable ends, of more than doubtful value, seem to have been unquestionably accepted by them as "consummations devoutly to be wished"; and means to these ends, popular with many uninstructed and half-educated publicists and weak-kneed politicians of all parties, Whig, Tory and even Labour, are without serious inquiry assented to as the only means by which the grievances, real and assumed, not only of the tenant farmers affected by sales of estates, but of tenant farmers as a class, could possibly be removed. Suggestions and recommendations based upon such assumptions, unsupported by any indisputable reasoning, facts or evidence, may reflect the personal opinions of some of the members of the Committee, even of some of the witnesses they were pleased to call, but they are scarcely likely to command unhesitating, unqualified and unreserved acceptance by others. However, it is only fair to state at once that of the twelve members who signed the Majority Report, only two, Lord Haversham and Mr. F. Cawley, did so without reservations, whilst six out of the remaining ten attach "reservations" practically condemning the two main recommendations.

To quote the words of the Minutes appointing it, the Reference to the Committee was:—"To inquire into the position of tenant farmers in England and Wales on the occasion of any change in the ownership of their holdings, whether by reason of the death of the landlord, the sale

of the land, or otherwise, and to consider whether any legislation on the subject is desirable."

The Committee soon found, however, that "the percentage of cases in which a sale results in the dispossession of the tenant is small at present"; that "several witnesses stated, either that no hard cases of dispossession and inability to obtain another holding had been brought to their notice, or that they were comparatively rare"; and that "it would be impossible to maintain, in the face of this evidence, that the grievances, however acute in individual cases, were widespread." Moreover, not to overlook "an important question affecting the position of the landowner," the Report points out that "the evidence the Committee have received proves that tenants do not ask for leases," but prefer the usual twelve months' notice, and concludes that "it may be argued, therefore, that the tenant who wishes to hold his farm on comparatively short notice in order that he may have facilities for leaving when he desires, cannot himself, in justice, demand absolute security of tenure from the landlord should he find it to his interest to remain."

In view of these facts the Committee would have been justified in asking the Board of Agriculture what all the fuss was about—why, in fact, they had been appointed at all; or in briefly reporting that they found no special legislation called for or desirable; and allowing its influential members to devote themselves to other and more important duties. But no! for some occult and hidden reasons, this Committee does not seem to have been inclined to take any such limited view of its functions, or even to feel itself bound by the terms of its appointment. So we find, in paragraph 5, the following somewhat ambiguous passage:—"The Committee feel that, under their terms of reference, whilst bound to consider what could be done to meet the case of the individual tenant farmer who was about to be dispossessed in connection with a sale of the land, the matter had to be looked at from the standpoint of the interest of the State as affected by the agricultural condition of the country, and it is with this object in view that the Committee have endeavoured to frame their suggestions and recommendations." What this passage means, or to what the words "the matter" refer, we confess ourselves unable even to imagine. At all events, the Committee seem to have lost all interest in the matter they were appointed to consider, and their Report plunges at once into questions as remote from it as that of the habitability of Mars.

Without giving any reason the Committee seem to have accepted the fashionable view that the increase in the sales of agricultural land is necessarily a bad thing for the country, and one which, as one of their number, Mr. Colin Campbell, says, "we wish to prevent in every way"! Why, we are quite at a loss to understand. The land is not thereby lessened or its utility diminished; and it may reasonably be argued that its passing out of the hands of those who regard it mainly as a "means of investment," or as a possible source of social influence and political power, into the hands of those who use it, is a very good thing both for the community and the State. However, the very opposite view was evidently held by this Committee, who therefore fussily concern themselves with ascertaining, or at all events formulating, the accepted views as to the underlying causes of such increased sale.

Though apparently dimly realising that owing to economic causes, the recent marked development of agriculture, the rise in prices of agricultural produce, and so on, landowners "are now in a position to sell to advantage"—"at prices," says the *TIMES*, "unobtainable during the past 30 years"—they lay little or no stress on this point. They content themselves with echoing the opinion expressed by some of the witnesses they called—representatives of the Surveyors' Institute, the Central Chamber of Agriculture, the Land Agents' Society, the Central Association of Agricultural and Tenant Right Valuers, the British Dairy Farmers'

Association, the Incorporated Estate Agents' Institute, the National Farmers' Union, the Farmers' Club, the Cheshire Chamber of Agriculture, the Rural League, and the Lancashire Farmers' Association—some of whom, at least, had special interests to serve or special hobbies to ride. They, therefore, find that such sales were partly due "to a feeling of apprehension among landowners as to the probable tendency of legislation and taxation in regard to land." And thereupon find room in their Report (§ 7) for the view that "Any assurance with respect to future legislation would go a considerable way towards restoring confidence in landowners, thus resulting in the continuance of the system of land-tenure, which, in the opinion of such witnesses, has worked admirably from the point of view of the tenant farmers of the country."

Of course, the effects of the prevailing system of land tenure on the agricultural labourers of the country is not considered in this Report, nor in any other of which we know. However, the Committee give us no clue as to where they hoped to find the living man, or existing body of men, in a position to give assurances which would bind future generations, or be accepted as binding by the legislators of the future.

The special scheme of which they most approved was one placed before them by the eminent banker and financier, Sir Edward Holden, Bart., himself a member of the Committee. Practically it amounts to the establishment of a State Land Bank, "to lend to farmers four-fifths of the purchase money to be repaid by annual instalments spread over a period of 75 years or such period as may be arranged between the purchaser and the institution." "The possible depreciation of land" is supposed to be provided for out of the one-fifth the purchaser has to provide; and thus the State is supposed to be safeguarded against loss, which would fall upon the purchasers. The landlords, of course, are to be paid in cash. That any such scheme would greatly advantage the selling landlord is undeniable; but its advantages to the purchasing tenant, immediate or ultimate, are problematical and very doubtful. Still, the Committee recommend "that a scheme of State-aided purchase should be instituted on the lines of Sir Edward Holden's scheme." It is only fair to state here that one of the Committee, Mr. James Parker, who nevertheless signs the Report, in his special reservation, unhesitatingly condemns any such proposal, and says: "In my opinion a scheme of occupying ownership would not tend to the improvement of agriculture, the well-being of the farming community, or the good of the State." An opinion we most unreservedly endorse.

However, expressing the belief "that only a small proportion of the tenant farmers of the country will be able or willing to avail themselves of the provisions of State-aided purchase on the lines of Sir Edward Holden's scheme," and recognising that "the evidence we have heard makes it quite clear that tenants do not desire to purchase their farms except as an alternative to leaving altogether," the Committee realised that something more ought to be done either for the benefit of the tenants or for the benefit of the landlords whose tenants could not be induced to buy. So "to protect the tenant against dispossession, whilst at the same time securing to the occupier all the advantages now enjoyed on well-managed estates," they boldly advocate "the acquisition and management of landed estates by the State."

In other words, our wise Committee advises that the State should throw its bottomless purse and inexhaustible credit into the land market—a fine thing for the landowners who have of late freely proclaimed their intention to sell, and for clever land speculators, local or absentee, always on the look-out to make a profit. It is to buy at the market price, and let at the best possible price: holding up land, we presume, if it seems likely to enhance the rent of other land. The State, the Report

admits, would take some risk—we rather think it would—but the Committee think this is justified by the fact that it would also "take the profit, if any." The Committee avows the belief that as "the State would buy in large blocks and choose its own time, it would be able to acquire the land much cheaper [than the tenant buying in the open market] and would enjoy the advantage of the large owner [who by the way just now is the very man most eager to sell] as against the small man in cost of administration and repairs, &c., whilst it could, moreover, borrow at a much lower rate of interest": "all this," they sanguinely add, "should ultimately be to the benefit of the State tenant." But, as the TIMES (January 29th, 1912) pertinently asks, "If the Committee's own statement is correct that land is at present let below its economic value, how can it possibly justify its allegation in this connexion that the State, by buying in large blocks and choosing its time, would be able to acquire the land much cheaper, and would enjoy the advantage of the large owner as against the small in cost of administration and repairs? . . . No talk about the State's command of cheap capital or of the economy of purchase and administration in bulk can get away from the fact that if a farm rented at £30 a year is worth £1,000 in the open market the State will have to put up the rent if it takes over the business of land-owning."

We think we have said enough to convince our readers of the intrinsic merits of this Report. Some people seem to think anything good enough for public consumption. But that it will be eagerly welcomed in certain quarters is undoubted. Who will welcome it? Primarily those who, like Lowell's Pious Editor, are willing "to believe whatever trash'll keep the people in blindness." Landlords and their estate agents, and other retainers, professional and unprofessional, who will at once realise the immediate benefits any such schemes, however unpractical and ruinous to the nation, would yield them, and who are clinging to the hope of foisting on the British public a scheme similar to that forced upon the Irish tenants by the power and influence of Irish landlordism. To the instructed Land Reformer, "who knows what he is fighting for and loves what he knows," any such side-tracking schemes, however plausible and by whomsoever commended, will appeal in vain.

All such schemes are useless, dangerous and unnecessary: the admitted evils against which they are avowedly directed will not be removed, but rather intensified, by the drastic, expensive and revolutionary methods they involve. They would be removed, effectively and permanently, by the more simple, equitable and constitutional means of removing the taxation now imposed upon both labour and capital, upon earnings, improvements, enterprise and industry, and substituting in its place a universal and uniform scheme of the Rating and Taxation of Land Values. Under this system of taxation no one would escape, as each one of us has to use land, for dwellings, farming, mining, manufacturing and trade purposes; and each would be called upon to contribute to the public revenues in exact proportion to the value of the land he was using or engrossing. Under such a system of taxation the holding of land would automatically pass to those who would put it to use, for to none other would its "ownership" be profitable or advantageous. Such a policy would benefit every land user, whether miner, farmer, navy, manufacturer, trader, banker or merchant. Land Purchase schemes can benefit only landowners, land speculators and financiers. Too long have the land users been patient; too long have they allowed themselves to be fooled and the resources of the nation to be squandered on such pseudo reforms. It is time to put an end to such fooling and to take steps to place our system of Rating and Taxation upon a rational and equitable foundation.

L. H. B.