

THE CURE FOR FOOD SHORTAGE

By H. G. Chancellor, M.P.

At last the public and even the Government have woken up. The shortage of crops the world over, the famine in tonnage due to the withdrawal of ships from commerce for naval and military needs, and their destruction by submarines, have convinced the Government of what land reformers have been preaching for years.

Bread is up to 10½d. a loaf. Supplies of corn, potatoes, and other agricultural produce are causing grave anxiety. An Agricultural Minister has been appointed to control production, and a Food Controller to control distribution. In recent years four million acres have been let down from arable to grass, *i.e.*, from more to less productive use, whilst at least ten million acres of cultivable land have been left uncultivated, *i.e.*, used for sport or other non-productive purposes.

Mr. Prothero, the new Minister for Agriculture, announces that he will commandeer unused land, or empower local authorities to do so, and let it, presumably without rent, to whoever can and will cultivate it. He will guarantee to cultivators a minimum price for wheat of 60s. per quarter, apparently for eight years, *i.e.*, for long after the war is over, however plentiful the world harvest, and however much less the world's price may be. That means forcing other taxpayers to make to cultivators a gift of public money over and above the value of their product, as an inducement to put their land to its proper use. He will also have the land again surveyed, though that has already been done by the Valuation Department, and cause those crops to be grown which in the judgement of his department are most needed for the national requirements.

No longer, during the war, at any rate, is the owner of land to be left free to "do what he likes with his own." Under the stress of national peril and need even a Tory Minister sees that. It is an assertion of a truth which land reformers have preached as long as I can remember. The land of a nation belongs to the people of that nation. It cannot be, and in English law it is not, recognised, in theory at any rate, as a proper subject of private ownership. The possession and use of land, whether by free-holder or by tenant, is not a private property but a public trust, the conditions of which should be fixed in the interests, not of an individual or class, but of the whole community. That is only another way of saying that all usable land should not only be used but used for the purposes to which it is best suited, building land for building, mining land for mining, agricultural land for cultivation. That is true not only in war time, but equally so in peace time. Had it been recognised and enforced before the war, these arbitrary and un-English methods would not now be necessary, for what they aim at would have been accomplished without them. If the use of land is a trust, its non-use or improper use is a breach of trust. But it is a breach which our system encourages.

The private holders of a public trust should pay to the public, who are the real owners, the value of the privilege they hold from the public. Had this been done our food supply would not to-day be short of the produce from ten million acres of cultivable soil, and we should be far less dependent on foreign produce and on the tonnage which the German submarines are destroying day by day.

For, let it be observed, this land is not "waste" but wasted. It is not out of use because it cannot be used,

but because its owners have chosen that it shall not be used. They have thus chosen because we tax and rate on use, not on value. By stopping its use they escape all taxes and rates, and by reducing its use from arable to grass, from productive to less productive use, they secure abatements of rates and taxes, whilst at the same time by decreasing the supply they increase the price of the smaller area of land remaining for production. Hence the depopulation of the Highlands and overcrowding of Glasgow; the growth of deer forests, which means not timber but sport; and the growth of slums, which means not population but disease and death.

Mr. Prothero sees that unused land is not "waste" but wasted. He knows that unused land is not unusable, or he would not commandeer it for use. This must not be forgotten when the war is over and the land restored. The war measures will end with the war or soon after. But the need for keeping the land in use will persist. If the old conditions are restored the land will become derelict again from the same causes as before. That must not be. For the temporary and arbitrary methods of the Minister of Agriculture must be substituted a just and simple method permanent in operation and unescapable by land holders. Instead of taxing and rating on use there must be taxing and rating on value, whether used or not.

Much of the land in and around towns now to be forced into cultivation will be much more badly wanted for housing. It must be taxed and rated on the same basis as neighbouring land that is built upon. Then the holders will have to build or lose. In the same way mining land must be taxed and rated on its mining value, agricultural land on its agricultural value. Then holders must mine or cultivate, or else lose. Losing is not popular, and holders who are not prepared to use and use properly will be compelled to sell to buyers who will buy, not for the "industry" or speculation, *i.e.*, holding up for a rise in price, but for such present use as will yield them a present profit after paying the current taxes and rates on its value. Value will decide use, which will be that most productive and profitable to the user and to the nation.

Thus the nation will get, through the holders who are its trustees, the best that the trust will yield. Shortage of coal, iron, corn, houses, etc., will no longer be artificially created by wasting land. That would cost the holders more than they could afford.

Any shortage will depend on the limit of our national resources, which have never yet been anywhere near fully used. When fully used, our dependence on overseas products will be so greatly reduced as to make the recurrence, even in time of war, of the danger which Mr. Prothero describes as that of a "beleaguered city," improbable if not impossible, except for such things as cannot be produced at home.

Meantime, the demand for labour which the development of our hitherto unused land and minerals will create will ease the awful problem of the return to industry of millions now engaged in war. By giving free play to economic principles, permanent in character and in operation, it will provide a solution instead of a temporary palliative for the problem which, without this, will soon reappear in derelict land, uncultivated and undeveloped resources, with their inevitable results, unemployment, depopulated country and congested towns, and the unsatisfied hunger for houses and bread.