

## LAND & LIBERTY

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### A NEW ERA

The outstanding event of the month is the successful termination of the Conference of London, which Dr. Marx and M. Herriot have called the beginning of a new era in Europe. It marks the overthrow of the war spirit and its blindness, and will lead we all hope to the triumph of the spirit of commonsense, goodwill and peace. The agreements arrived at ought to make possible, not only for Germany but for France and this country as well, the resumption of international relations on a pre-war footing and especially the growth of commercial relations beneficial to each nation. The doctrines of Free Trade have won a partial and belated victory over a narrow and a self-destroying nationalism. But how much labour has it been to break down to this extent a policy of actual non-intercourse, leaving standing merely the tariff and other barriers which a large part of the world still regards as necessary if not normal. And how much inferior is the position of every nation taking part in the Conference to its pre-war position. Each one is overloaded with a national debt which is perverting the distribution of wealth, and burdening the poor for the benefit of the rich. The load of oppressive taxation, of exorbitant house rents, of low wages, of unemployment, weighs down the working masses.

The beginning of a new era in fact means the abandonment of warfare by the withdrawal of the military occupation of Germany and the adoption of a policy which will (if anything can) make the exaction of reparations a reality instead of being merely ruinous and oppressive vindictiveness. To those who have lived through ten years of anxiety and turmoil, and who have seen the madness of violence and unreason in possession everywhere, even these are by comparison great achievements. But some at least of the actors in these events seem to suspect that the most that has been gained is the resumption of the economic life of the world upon a somewhat lower plane than that of 1914. We notice that at the close of the Conference the Prime Minister, after referring to certain matters

which ought to be dealt with by the League of Nations, said:—

There is another great class of dangers which we have to face. I refer to the economic problems which are bound to arise so soon as the Central European Powers find their feet. There will be an attempt on the part of soulless international combines, using the weapon of political pressure, to subordinate common interests to their own. The defence of national interests and of national well-being against such moves as these must receive the careful consideration and firm action of democratic Governments.

We have a long way to go before we reach the goal of European peace and security. The all-important thing to-day is that we should be sure that we are on the right road.

It is indeed.

We do not know what Mr. Ramsay MacDonald had in mind in making these remarks, but our view of the matter is quite definite. The work of the London Conference will in all probability set free the wheels of European industry to revolve as they have not done for many a long day past. The depression of trade through which we have been struggling will diminish. The demand for manufactures and for labour will increase somewhat and wages will possibly increase also. But will the menace of unemployment entirely disappear? Has anything been done that will make the lot of the majority more happy than it was in 1914 or their livelihood one whit more secure?

The revival of trade which may now be expected will very soon mean an increase in the effective demand for land, whence all the raw materials of industry are derived, and that in its turn will bring an increase in land-values. The landlords, who are the residuary legatees of every social and economic advance, will very soon take their pound of flesh, and the rest of the world will be left in much the same predicament as they were before.

We do not say this in order to decry the London Conference, but we think it foolish in this moment of relief to rush to an extreme of optimism. On the present lines of action (progress so-called!) we move merely in a circle, because nothing is done to remove those fundamental causes of social inequality, the results of which are only too patent to every sensitive human being. The most that is done is to lop off the most gross excrescences, while leaving the noxious growth still strong and powerful.

The cessation of war, the restoration of industry, are but steps to a greater end—the freedom and the emancipation of the human spirit from the bondage which everywhere enslaves it, and that bondage is on the whole an economic one and is in some respects stronger now than ever it was.

We have to-day in power in Great Britain a Government which is from the constitution of its personnel more sympathetic to the workers than any previous administration; and yet how small is its programme in respect of the matters most vital to its citizens, small not merely in performance but even in promise. In regard to housing its policy consists essentially in bridging the gap between the rents that the workers can pay and the rents

which ought to be charged to recoup the cost of building by subsidies from the rates and from the taxes. The ultimate results of this are yet to be seen, but no one is quite happy about it. It is a form of socialization which seems almost fatally easy to carry out with the acquiescence if not the blessing of all parties. But how much nearer to emancipation will it bring the worker, when he does obtain that maximum of stereotyped accommodation which he is promised after many weary years of waiting and for which he will pay indirectly much more than he knows? Yet hardly anyone devotes attention to the fact that it is the normal practice in this country to tax and rate houses, and to make so much dearer one of the elements of human existence.

Or, let us take the matter of unemployment to which the same principle is applied. The only attempt which is made to deal with this is once more to offer subsidies, and thereby encourage municipalities to undertake works which otherwise they would not or could not embark on. But does this increase the sum total of employment in this country, or does it not rather mean that funds which would have been used to provide employment in one direction are diverted towards providing it in another? It may be said that the provision of better roads and means of transport (the stand-by of all Governments anxious to inaugurate relief works!) does in the end mean an improvement in the national economy, an addition to the facilities for producing wealth. No doubt this is true, and the proprietors of the lands that are benefited by these improvements will in due course reap the benefit of them, at the expense of the State, at the expense of the taxpayer, at the expense of the worker.

So we come back once more to the fundamental fact that the whole economic life of a country depends upon its land. The whole income of its inhabitants is nothing but the annual produce of its land and their industry, or what they exchange that produce for. There can be no freedom so long as those lands are monopolized and made the sport of the avarice of monopolists and speculators and the people charged toll for the privilege of making use of their birthright, nay, are denied altogether the opportunity of making use of the earth and so supplying their needs.

Was it "the defence of national interests and national well-being" against landlordism that Mr. Ramsay MacDonald had in mind when he spoke at the London Conference? We hope so.

Now that a settlement apparently lasting in nature has been attained of the international difficulties to which so much attention has for the past few years been devoted by the Government of this country, it is not too much to expect that the Prime Minister and his colleagues will be able to devote themselves to those even more pressing problems whose solution the democracy of this country has so long expected. We are in fact entitled to insist upon it. The Labour Party has quite definitely pledged itself to deal with the Taxation of Land Values. The Prime Minister has before and after his accession to office indicated quite clearly that he was pledged to this policy. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has made it plain

that his Budget was but the stepping-stone to a more radical policy. The Liberal Party, upon whose support the Government depends to carry any progressive measure, is equally pledged and bound to support such a policy. Yet members of the Government are strangely silent on this question.

We appreciate what difficulties are in the way, but we think those difficulties are often grossly exaggerated. The Tory Party is disrupted, disorganized, and discredited. The House of Lords, where its strength lies, is powerless to touch any financial measure—so much at least was achieved in the last battle over the land question.

It may be said that there are other measures which the Government is pledged to carry, but what is there that in the least compares with this? The problem of unemployment is pressing, but we cannot think that anyone is satisfied with the *ad hoc* measures which have so far been adopted to cope with it; and if these measures were multiplied ten times (if that were possible) would the result be any more satisfactory? There are those indeed who look to a wholesale policy of nationalization to solve it, and the inauguration of national workshops, but apart from the merits of this proposal what likelihood is there of such measures being carried at any time within the next few years?

In the Taxation of Land Values at least there is a policy which can be put into operation at once, and which will by forcing land into use provide fresh opportunities for employment in countless industries. The policy of relief works is discredited in the minds of thinking men; and members of local authorities who are engaged in putting it into effect do so with an uneasy feeling in their minds that the subsidies from rates and taxes would equally well have been spent in providing employment if they had been left in the pockets of the taxpayers. But they go on and on, as do Members of Parliament also, from the feeling that they must at least *appear* to do something for the unemployed. Surely it has at last become obvious that there is only one thing that can be done and that is to open up the unlimited possibilities that lie idle in agricultural land, building land, brickfields, coalfields and other natural resources now held out of use.

It is only by means of a Budget tax on land values, necessitating a valuation of land and so paving the way for the rating of land values, that any advance on housing can now be made. It is only in this way that much-needed relief can be given to the tenants of existing houses, who as things are must be burdened with high rates in order to provide more modern houses for their fellow citizens; and it is only in this way that a natural, healthy and economical expansion of our cities can take place.

For these reasons, and many others that need not be argued here, we are justified in insisting that the most important and urgent measure, and the foundation of all permanent advance, is the Taxation of Land Values; and the Government will be false to their pledges and to the trust which the country has reposed in them if they fail now to take every possible step to enact this reform. We trust that the hope held out to us by Mr. Snowden in his Budget will shortly be realized and that it will prove to be no mere meaningless gesture.

F. C. R. D.