

But I am a business man with no interest whatever in the fortunes of one political party or another. To me it does not matter which party gives effect to this policy. I want the policy: the circumstances can take care of themselves.

This question must appeal to business men, for whatever their politics are, they must remain keenly interested in good trade. It is obvious that the existing system of rating is a hindrance to trade and a menace to all industrial aspiration. The rate collector dogs the footsteps of the man who would do things for his own benefit and for the benefit of the community. Is it not about time the rate collector was directed to look for his revenues in the value of the land which is created by the community as a whole?

Give this your attention as a business man, and you may be persuaded to help to make the public opinion necessary to carry a just and expedient reform. Let me hear from you and I will forward explanatory literature of the advancing movement for the taxation of land values and the untaxing of improvements.

Yours faithfully,

JOSEPH FELS.

THE FABIAN LAND POLICY.

The Draft Report of the chairman (Mr. H. D. Harben) of the Land and Rural Problems Committee of the Fabian Society, was published as a supplement to the NEW STATESMAN of August 2nd. Apart from the fact that it contains some useful statistics scattered through it, we must say that the Report is most unsatisfactory in its character. Perhaps its faults may best be indicated by saying that it suffers from the great vice of the age, Opportunism or Fabianism: it tries to break up the land question, as the very phrase "rural problems" shows, into isolated compartments, each evil requiring a different and distinct remedy, and the recommendations finally made are a strange *mélange* of Liberal, Tory and Socialist proposals. In the space at our disposal it is naturally impossible to criticise such a lengthy report point by point, but we shall endeavour to extract some gems from it which will give an idea of its spirit.

From statistics of prices and consumption it is calculated that the average family ought to have a wage of at least 25s. a week. "The calculations of the needs of the average family," says the report, "prove that if 5s. a week be paid in rent, nothing less than 25s. a week will provide even the necessities of life, and any diminution of that wage will also render void the hope of bettering the housing of the labourer on economic lines. To anyone with a knowledge of agricultural conditions, an attempt immediately to raise wages all over the country at once to 25s. must appear fantastic." And at another point it says: "In view of the difficulty of raising wages to this figure immediately a scheme of State-aided cottage building is foreshadowed by which rents would not exceed 3s. a week, and if this scheme were adopted a minimum wage of 23s. a week would meet the needs of the case. To discourage casual labour the wages should be 25s. a week, if the engagement were for less than a year, and 5s. a day if the engagement is for less than a week."

It does not seem to have occurred to the author of the report that the minimum wage might make any difference to employment. Yet the fact that it will throw men out of employment is implied in the statement that the cost will be shifted from the farmer to the landlord. If landowners are compelled to exact less rent because farmers must pay more wages they will look for tenants who will employ as little labour as possible. Some farms will go out of use and the farmers and labourers employed on them will be driven out of employment, or at the least out of that employment. These unemployed will either migrate to other industries and

help force down wages there, or they will remain unemployed and become a charge on the Poor Law, and in either case the granting of a minimum wage to some working men will do a corresponding injury to others.

The farmer is to have compulsion put upon him to employ the labourer for a year at a time. Is the labourer to have compulsion put on him to stay with the farmer for a year? If so, it would seem that we are rapidly drifting back to the tyranny of the Act of Settlement.

Strange to say, Mr. Harben does at one point come very near the solution of the problem, where he mentions that "in Hampshire the rural labourers seldom reached work in winter before 8 or 9, or even 9.30, and left about 3; while in summer they would generally be met returning from work about 5; the reason given being that they had great choice of occupation there, and could not be got to work longer at day work on a farm than other labourers wrought at task work in the forests or at the salt pans, or on canals, or at the variety of jobs to be found at Portsmouth." In fact, the root of the evil is that opportunities of employment are closed to the labourer and he is compelled in general to accept the lowest wage compatible with existence. And it is here that the greatest weakness of the Report lies: it makes no provision, or next to none, for the labourer to become a free land cultivator on his own account, but rather contemplates that he should continue for an indefinite time to be a servant, a cultivator of land, on behalf of others. All the elaborate, difficult, and costly schemes of Minimum Wage and State Aid for Rural Housing might have been let go by the board if only some means were devised of enabling the labourer to get land for himself to cultivate on fair terms. That this could be done and easily done need not be doubted. The essential thing is to impose taxation on land value in order to break the great estates and the game preserves and at the same time to relieve the cultivator of rates and taxes on his improvements. The working of the Crofters' Acts in Scotland, which were but a faint and piecemeal approximation to this policy, is sufficient proof of that.

This report says, however:—

Some people, especially politicians, speak as if the landlord, by withholding land altogether, or by asking too high a price for it, rendered cottage building impossible. There are, doubtless, cases in which, for his own selfish purposes, the landlord refuses to sell land for cottages altogether, but they are certainly not very frequent where the land is wanted for agricultural labourers' cottages only, and they could, and should be met by powers of compulsion.

Statements of this kind would well adorn the literature of such organisations as the Rural League, but from people who call themselves Radicals—. Not only do landlords refuse to allow land to be used for cottage building at any reasonable price, but—and this is worse—even where they allow land to be used for that purpose they generally refuse to let land in small amounts for labourers to cultivate and earn the money with which to build cottages. In the few cases where small areas of land may be had, it is almost invariably at a much higher rate of rent than the large farmer is charged, and of course the assessment and rates of the small cultivator are increased correspondingly. The essential thing to be done in solving the land question is to let the small cultivator have land at a reasonable rate and to free him from all taxes and rates on his improvements or the commodities he buys—in fact to make the only charge upon him a small rent-charge, which would go ultimately to the State—and the only way we know of doing this is by readjusting the incidence of rating by making certain local charges national charges to be defrayed out of a national tax on land value, by collecting the remaining local charges by a rate on land value and by making the national tax large enough to remit the food taxes, inhabited house duty, &c., in short, the policy of the Land and

Taxation Reform Memorial. This would dispense with all necessity of a minimum wage for those labourers who still remained in the employment of farmers would have the alternative of working for themselves and would be able to demand a higher wage.

Further examples of the nonsense of the report are such statements as the following :—

Proposals to "tax the landlord" (? to tax land values) are open to several objections, such, for instance, as that they spring from political hatred of this particular class, that they would act as a relief to the industrial capitalist at the landowners' expense, that they would confer no benefit on the countryside, but actually cripple agriculture, on the prosperity of which the agricultural labourer depends.

There are at this moment some 12,000,000 acres of poorly laid down, neglected, unproductive grassland, which could be put to much better use*; and this deplorable fact is not due, as is often supposed, merely to the selfish sporting instinct of the landowner, but rather as has already been stated, to the extensive methods adopted to meet the period of depression, involving the employment on the land of less labour and less manure than the economic minimum.

This is, to put it mildly, rather startling. What possible advantage is it to the landlord or farmer to use "less labour and less manure than the economic minimum"?

The Report advocates land purchase by public authorities. "Speaking generally," it says, "the local authority is the proper authority to purchase land for special purposes, and the State for general purposes. A local fall in the value of land would severely hit a local authority; but there is no general fall in the value, so the State could not be a loser." Yet on the following page we read: "A permanent charge attached to land value would have beneficial effects. It would tend to decrease the value of land by more than the amount of the mortgage." So after all, there might be a general fall in the value of land and the State might be a loser.

The Report attempts to prove too much when it says:—

In answer to the fear of the financial magnitude of the above proposals [for land purchase], it is sufficient to point out that the nationalisation of the whole of the land of the country at once—which is not what is proposed—would not be a much bigger operation than the late Lord Goschen's Conversion of the National Debt.

But soon after we find this:

Purchase of land is best from many standpoints—it nationalises a certain area, it secures the small holdings for ever, and allows the county council to build cottages freely. On the other hand, it tends to raise the price of land, it involves an increase of county loans, and, most serious of all, it is almost impracticable where land has a substantial building value—that is, in the neighbourhood of large towns, and, in the case of London, in the greater part of the home counties. . . . It is almost impossible for county councils to buy and let to small-holders at a possible rent for cultivating.

In an article on the Report the NEW STATESMAN says:—

Most of the proposals in the present Report though they represent the Socialist view, would certainly be accepted by the great mass of the Liberal Party and by a considerable number of Conservatives."

We know some Socialists who would object to this, but let that pass. The NEW STATESMAN continues:—

It is, for instance, agreed that as a preliminary to any sort of improvement the wages of agricultural labourers must be raised, that they must be raised direct by State action, and that the proper machinery for the purpose is to be found in the Wages Board system. Two Bills have already actually been introduced, one by the

Labour Party and the other by a number of Conservatives, both having as their principal object the establishment of Agricultural Wages Boards; and of the two the Conservative Bill is perhaps the better. In regard to Housing, again—the second or rural problems in order of importance—the same two political sections have produced concrete legislative proposals differing in no really vital particular. In the matter of rural Education, no hint of party divisions can be discerned; and when we come to the question of productive and distributive co-operation, as applied to agriculture, it is to Conservative at least as much as to Socialist or Liberal sources that we must look for both motive force and guidance.

This is a very fitting comment on the Report. It is Tory to the backbone.

F. C. R. D.

BOOK REVIEWS.

MAKING THE MOST OF THE LAND.*

To those who wish to acquire a knowledge of what can be done to make land productive, and of how near or far we are from reaching its possibilities, we heartily recommend this work, which contains all the evidences of being written by a man who knows his business at first hand.

We here learn in which departments of husbandry the British farmer is supreme; in which he lags behind his colleague abroad, and in each case the reason why. We are told of the lamentably low average of British production (£4 10s. per acre) and the steps which can be taken by the aid of agricultural science to immensely increase it. Our author vouches for the accuracy of Prince Kropotkin's remark that a large area of grass land within sight of the Cross of St. Paul's fails to produce an annual crop to the value of £5 per acre. When this takes place within carting distance of the finest market in the world something is wrong indeed.

His accounts of what has been done to grow good crops and convert into good meadow land tracts which before were barren moor or parched downs must stimulate effort and must come as a revelation to most people, more especially when it is shown by balance sheet that the work has been made to pay handsomely, and that there are millions of acres in these islands with which the same could be done. In some senses this book might be described as Kropotkin's FIELDS, FACTORIES, AND WORKSHOPS brought up to date, and we regard it as a very valuable supplement to that work. But Mr. Long is not content to appear as an agricultural expert alone. He also grapples with the questions of land tenure, land ownership, and reform in taxation. His ideas on these subjects are quite definite, and he is not the least afraid to express them boldly. While not an enemy of the large farm in its proper place, he quotes chapter and verse to show how much more is usually got out of the land when in the hands of the small cultivator. He condemns in round terms a system of land tenure such as we at present groan under, which makes it possible for immense tracts of land to be locked up though in urgent demand by cultivators.

Such passages as the following—writing, as our author does, mainly for the eye of farmers and landlords—lack nothing in directness:—

"Land is awaiting reclamation and development, but is largely withheld by the few while the many are waiting for work. That we should import food to the value of nearly 200 millions when we have land awaiting occupation and men to till it is one of those stupendous facts which are being gradually realised by the public."

And again:—

"The many must leave their native land to satisfy their

* LAND PROBLEMS. By Christopher Turner, p. 17. (John Lane, 1911.)

* MAKING THE MOST OF THE LAND, by Prof. James Long. Hodder & Stoughton. 5s.