

## LAND & LIBERTY

Published by the Land & Liberty Press, Ltd., for the Proprietors, the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, Ltd.

Fifty-sixth Year. Established June, 1894.

By Post 5s. per annum.

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JUNE & JULY, 1949

### "BLIND ECONOMIC FORCES"

Mr. Clement Attlee, British Prime Minister, addressing a May Day demonstration at Norwich, recited his "four freedoms" as (1) Freedom of speech and conscience; (2) freedom to choose the Government; (3) freedom of the individual from the oppression of the strong; (4) freedom of the individual from the economic power wielded by the few. And he declared that: "Freedom to-day does not consist, as the old individualists thought, of letting the individual struggle for mastery while the Government hold the ring [sic]. *Freedom can only be secured in an organised society where the blind economic forces are controlled in the interests of all.* The italics are ours.

Having thus bestirred his followers, Mr. Attlee not only assured them of the future reward to be expected by those who behave themselves, work hard and remain contented; he also imparted some noteworthy instruction in the discoveries of modern economists who have so admirably improved on ideas which, as they are "out-worn," scarcely need our attention.

Protected by our rulers' enlightened planning—so conspicuously successful in its application to groundnuts and potatoes—the unruly and undisciplined will be reduced to subordination, Sir Stafford Cripps's Big Business allies may consolidate their position, the stability of society will be assured. The influence of Protectionist Conservatives, intentional or unintentional, will continue to strengthen the Government's economic policy, and Uncle Joe's nose will be put out of joint. We might even be able to obtain bananas without producing blue ration books—a method, however, which the Conservative originators of Marketing Schemes would recognise as superior to the old-fashioned two-a-penny-off-the-barrow chaotic system.

Nobody doubts that Acts of Parliament can improve on Providence. Mr. Attlee's knowledge is so comprehensive that he can take from the haves and dole out to the have-nots (after taking proper commission on the deal) in exact accordance with the wickedness of the former and the merits of the latter. Moreover, the people will be able to enjoy an almost intoxicating allowance of planned "freedom."

It is painful to see that some few are lacking in gratitude for these benefits. We must do what we can to disabuse them of their fallacies.

Possibly this misreading of social principles may proceed from observation of scientific methods in other spheres. Old Thales, some 600 B.C., must share the blame for this. He thought he had made progress when he ventured to question the established opinions according to which mankind was at the mercy of blind forces except

in so far as they were tempered by the intervention of the gods in their respective departments. These departments recall Whitehall in the manner by which they overlapped and conflicted. It was unfortunate that later generations suspected the classical gods were no more than projections of human passion, lust, greed and, occasionally, higher aspirations. Thales pretended to find in nature principles which were fixed and calculable, so that man could build on certainties and, as further such laws were discovered, use them progressively to his advantage. Unfortunately, slowly and painfully, men came to accept these pretensions which by some coincidence seemed to work in practice. After the lapse of two thousand years or so men suspected some vague connection between fixed natural laws and the difference between a coracle and an Atlantic liner, a punch on the jaw and an atomic bomb.

We owe some debt to Plato for delay in the development of these theories. His admiration for success, as shown by the victory of planned Sparta over Athens, led him to discover that the peaceful and mean dealings of the market-place were beneath the dignity of philosophy. He demonstrated that higher knowledge could be imparted only in words incomprehensible to ordinary people and thus incapable of verification by sordid fact. He certainly did well out of it and his affluent leisure enabled him to devote his time more easily to these useful abstractions and thus divert to more worthy channels that intense intellectual vitality and bold enquiry which distinguished ancient Greece. It is comforting to remember that Plato's methods have acquired such a new lease of life in modern philosophy that parts of Bloomsbury (where the Duke of Bedford draws the rent without noticing it) recall, barring the beauty and grace of Hellas, the groves of Academe. Milton, indeed, sneered at some of this "philosophic pride," but he is not in tune with progressive ideas, and he stuck to outworn conceptions, even by the half-lights of his own time. Everyone knows his *Paradise Lost* was a flop, and he would not have been given a minor job in a Carolean B.B.C., much less invited to deliver its Reith Lectures.

Old Thales's notions, however, were revived by such people as Friar Bacon. Even the bow-and-arrow brigades of those times, by improving on the older javelins, unconsciously followed his methods and proved them on St. Crispin's Day when they—

"By many a warlike feat  
Lopped the French Lilies."

The savages of those days, besides writing *Divina Commedias* and building cathedrals, had old-fashioned traditions about common lands. They displayed superstitions against the currency-control methods of clipping the coinage. Instead of abandoning the silver standard, they suspiciously weighed coins as well as counting them.

Uncontrolled research workers like Newton carried on the investigation of these supposedly natural rules, and Adam Smith started the most alarming period of our history by suggesting that even economic transactions were subject to fixed laws. Long after his death some of these suggestions took shape in the "disastrous policy" of Sir Robert Peel. Despite the chaos and wasteful competition thus produced dangerous delusions spread among common people. As wages rose alarmingly and decontrolled currency seemed exchangeable for whatever kind of goods best satisfied individual desires—they had not even developed consumers' councils to direct desire collectively—a dangerous spirit of self-reliance manifested itself. Deterioration of character had been noticed in petitions declaring "We do not seek to depend for a

languid and slothful existence upon the fostering hand of monopoly or privilege." They even objected to having to tell lies to Customs officers; there was a distinct recession in the contact-man trade; and it was even supposed there was an advantage in low taxation and government economy. They selfishly ignored all consideration for "the interests concerned."

Things might have gone further if the Reverend Mr. Malthus had not been at hand to show how war, poverty, disease and crime were the means by which a beneficent Creator limited surplus population. This brought rash thoughts under control. Some unruly elements emigrated to America where poverty was not prevalent and, by pure coincidence, land was partially free. It suited the upholders of the Malthusian doctrine that this coincidence passed unnoticed; just as it was fortunate for the defenders of the existing order that the theories of such philosophers of the time as Patrick Edward Dove failed to gain general circulation.

Patrick Edward Dove, author of *The Theory of Human Progression*, expressed the truth in these words: "When the world discovers that God has constituted nature aright, men will have arrived at the first and greatest principle of social science." From the recognition of this premise he deduced that wealth could be produced only by labour and thus became the natural property of the producer. He contended, moreover, that labour could never be

applied to anything but land or its products, and thus access to land was the first necessity for the production of wealth. He even dared to say labour produced rent, which was the natural property of the producer in the same way. He supposed the value of each plot of land depended upon the advantages it afforded, such being the natural division of the collective product of labour and the natural fund to supply society's collective desires as expressed in the necessary services rendered by governments executing their true functions. From this argument and the evidence of his own eyes, clearly the diversion of this fund to land monopolists had something to do with poverty and toil on one side and wealth and idleness on the other. He thought men would do better for themselves by enacting human laws in conformity with natural laws instead of assuming economic forces were blind and incalculable, and presuming to be able to control them.

Mr. Attlee is partisan of the latter view and he put it in these words when he addressed the joint session of the American Congress (November 15, 1945) at the beginning of his term of office: "We have not stood up to our enemies for six years to be beaten by economics." Four years now of the beating process which is called economic planning. Man, proud man, dressed in a little brief authority, in what has he succeeded except to make the angels weep?

F. D. P.

## THE STATE'S BOTTOMLESS PURSE

ANOTHER stone was added to the building of the Pauper State when on, May 30, the Minister of Health's Housing Bill was read for the third time without a division. Briefly, the Bill is to "promote the improvement of existing houses and the conversion into houses or flats of existing houses and other buildings, by making available Exchequer assistance and local authority grants in respect of approved proposals, whether carried out by local authorities or other persons." The Bill includes certain amendments to the Housing Act of 1936, the one receiving the most publicity being the dropping of the words "working class" from the Act.

Under the 1936 Act, local authorities had the power to advance up to £1,500 for the purchase of houses. This is to be increased to £5,000.

Local authorities are to be given the power to provide laundry facilities and to sell furniture to their tenants.

Houses and buildings improved or converted so as to provide "satisfactory housing accommodation for thirty years," will, if approved by the Minister of Health, be subsidised annually for twenty years. "The amount of the Exchequer contribution will be three-quarters of the annual loss estimated to be incurred by the local authority in carrying out the proposals (to convert and improve)." The difference is to be made up out of the local rates. New towns development corporations are to receive like subsidies.

Private owners are to be subsidised to the limit of one-half the cost of the improvement or conversion—subject, of course, to the approval of the local authority. Improvement must come within the range of £100 to £600. Private persons taking advantage of this subsidy are to have their rents controlled for twenty years, and increase of rents over those existing will be limited to 6 per cent. of the owner's share in the cost of improving. The converted houses or flats must always be available for letting. On any breach of these conditions the owner

will be liable to repay with compound interest a proportionate amount of the subsidy received based on the proportion of the twenty years' term which remains unexpired.

The National Exchequer is to reimburse to local authorities the grants they may make to private owners. New Exchequer subsidies are to be specially provided for houses built on expensive sites; increased subsidies to be provided for houses designed to preserve the character of their surroundings, and new subsidies are to be made available for hostels and building experiments. Each bedroom in approved hostels is to be subsidised to the extent of two and sixpence a week for sixty years. Where a licence has been granted for an improvement or conversion under the Act, the building as a whole automatically becomes subject to control as though the whole building had been constructed under licence.

In the explanatory and financial Memorandum from which the foregoing is culled, it is stated: "It is not possible to estimate the financial effect . . . Until some experience is gained of the extent to which advantage is taken of the facilities for improving houses, precise estimates cannot be made."

This legislation follows the usual pattern. It is another example of the battle against what Mr. Attlee calls "blind economic forces." It seems that the poor will always be with us—or for sixty years, at least! The phrases with which we are now only too familiar occur in the Bill with monotonous regularity. "Exchequer assistance," "local authority grants," "new Exchequer subsidies," "proposals approved by the Minister," "any breach of the conditions," "increased subsidies," "special experimental measures," "controls to be extended," and so on. At any rate, no one can complain of lack of generosity on the part of the Treasury in distributing public funds; and as for the controls, are they not inevitable string to the purse in such circumstances?