

DISTRESS IN THE HIGHLANDS

(*Debate in the House of Commons, 16th December, led by Mr R. Gibson, K.C., the victor at the recent by-election in Greenock, where the seat was won from the Government by the Labour Party.*)

Mr R. GIBSON, K.C. (Labour), on a motion calling for Government action to arrest depopulation and poverty in the Highlands, said: Historically, the causes of the distress go back to the Civil War of 1745. At the end of that war a new system of land tenure was put into force in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The cultivators of the land found that the land had been handed over to the chiefs as their absolute property. The chiefs no longer had duties of a patriarchal type in relation to those who occupied the land, and they were thus able to deal with the land as their own private property. Towards the end of the eighteenth century there took place what are generally recognized as inhuman clearances from the holdings in the Highlands.

Impoverished land and depleted fisheries are now unable to provide in the Highlands and Islands a livelihood for the population who are inexorably shut out from large tracts of country that are dedicated to the deer. Let me take the seven crofting counties in Scotland—Argyll, Inverness, Ross and Cromarty, Sutherland, Caithness, Orkney, and Shetland, the last two being taken as separate counties. In the seven counties the aggregate population for 1891 was 360,367; for 1911 it was 341,535; and for 1931 it was 293,139. The fall for the first 20 years was 18,832, and for the second 20 years 48,398. These figures, taken for successive periods of 20 years, show how rapid the depopulation of the crofting counties has become.

Three successive Commissions have deplored the depredation of deer in the Highlands and the desolation ensuing from the encouragement of deer and deer forests. Already in 1884 nearly 2,000,000 acres had been devoted to deer, and Lord Napier of Ettrick's Commission in that year reported:

"No one could contemplate the conversion of the whole extent of good pasture land, and of possible arable land, at a moderate elevation in the Highlands, into forests, without alarm and reprobation, and it is scarcely necessary to say that any serious movement towards such an issue would be arrested by the force of public opinion, attended by an amount of irritation much to be deprecated."

The report went on to suggest legislative action, but, in spite of it, nothing has ever been done. The Royal Commission of 1892 called for a check to the spread of deer forests and scheduled, in the crofting counties alone, no less than 1,782,785 acres of land suitable for the extension of existing holdings and the creation of new ones and of moderate-sized farms. Lastly, the Departmental Committee on Deer Forests appointed in 1919 declared that

"the withdrawal of so large an area from pastoral uses was, from a national point of view, much to be regretted." Deer roam over a very large fraction of Scotland. I put it at no less than one-third of the country. In a hard winter, a few years ago, deer were knocked down in the public streets on the north side of Glasgow. From there to the Pentland Firth and from the West Coast to the German Ocean the deer attack the crops of the farmer and the crofter. The islands of the west are afflicted with the same pest. The owner of the deer forest is under no obligation to restrict the deer by fences, and farmers, large and small, are not permitted to shoot the deer, although it is no respecter of private property. It is an appalling fact that the Forestry Commission have to pay from 3s. 6d. to 5s. per yard for fencing to protect young trees from the deer. This is an impossible burden for any farmer, far less for a crofter. The landlord has no intention of ending the plague of deer.

The amount of land available for agricultural purposes is restricted by certain operations of the Forestry Commission. In sheep farming the sheep go on to the hill ground for summer grazing and are brought down to the low lying ground for wintering. Roughly, the sheep on three acres of the summer hill pasture require one acre of low lying

winter pasture, but in many parts the Forestry Commission take over a large tract of hill and valley and plant the valley with trees. This at once puts out of commission a large portion of hill pasture for the sheep. An example was given in evidence a few weeks ago, before the Economic Council sitting at Oban, of some 45,000 sheep being cleared off a corner of north Argyllshire within recent years owing to the operations of the Forestry Commission.

The land in the Highlands is impoverished in many instances by bracken. If the land is being properly tilled the bracken will be kept down, but in the deer forests it is allowed to grow. On smallholdings bracken does not become a pest or a scourge, because the ordinary agricultural processes keep it down.

Again, rabbits are a plague—that is quite common, even on golf courses. In the islands of Scotland in-breeding among the rabbits renders them tubercular, so that they are not even suitable as food. Further, while a landholder himself has the right to shoot rabbits, yet, if land is held in common, all the holders are not entitled to shoot the rabbits. They may appoint one of their number to shoot the rabbits, or they may appoint some third party, and in that way the rabbits may quite easily get out of hand.

There are thousands of men in the Highlands and Islands and many more in the towns and villages of the Lowlands of Scotland, who want holdings. Their number is far larger than the number of outstanding applications for new holdings and enlargements stated by the Secretary of State for Scotland on the 8th December, 1936, when he gave the figures as 2,911 and 2,975 respectively. Applications have been put in for holdings and for enlargements since 1911, and applicants are "postcarded" at long intervals asking them whether they still want holdings or enlargements. As only something like 86 new holdings and four enlargements were provided last year it is obvious that there is small chance of applications for either being successful.

In the Islands and along the coast of Scotland piers are privately owned; they fall into disrepair and not a few have gone out of commission. The same applies to harbours. The consequent distress on the seaboard of Scotland and on the Islands where these piers and harbours have become derelict is obvious.

In the Highlands and Islands the tourist traffic is amazingly small in dimensions. It prospers in Iona and Gigha, in Islay and in Arran. In Skye there are notices warning off visitors, and you find the same thing obtaining in Sutherlandshire. In the Island of Rhum, which is 28,000 acres in extent, one finds only five families there. They are the caretakers for sporting interests. Formerly 10,000 sheep were supported on that island; to-day there are no sheep, the whole place is devoted to deer. The landlord in Skye and in Sutherlandshire warns off the visitors. The landlord is unlike the deer, he firmly believes in the sanctity of private property.

Let me take a practical example from the Island of Tiree, that magnificent island to the West of Iona, which might be called the granary of the Hebrides. A pier was erected there at the public expense, to the tune of £13,000. The rentals of five farms were straightway increased by something like 25 per cent. Smallholdings were constituted on one of the farms and the rents of the others were again increased. The last farm had a rent of £700; it was increased to £1,000. That is typical of the way in which the expenditure of public money on land goes at the present time to help and to enrich the landlord.

In Scotland, we have been celebrating the centenary of a distinguished Scottish statesman, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman. He was a man of principle, and on this topic his principle was: "We should make the land of Scotland a treasure house for the people instead of a pleasure ground for the rich."

Mr MALCOLM MACMILLAN (Labour—Inverness, Western Islands): There are holdings needed in the Western Isles. There are about 1,000 squatters in Lewis alone waiting for holdings, and thousands of others in the Highlands waiting for holdings on land that is occupied by deer. The very necessities of life are denied to the people who are living in houses for which they are paying

far too high rates of interest and have other liabilities. With the exception of a couple of towns there is no communal sanitary system at all for 40,000 people in Lewis and Harris. It would be a disgraceful, unthinkable thing in any other part of the British Isles. Yet this is the state generally in the Western Isles. Outside Stornoway and Tarbert and the few smaller towns in the Hebrides there is no such thing as a communal water supply. I wish to quote a letter which I have received from North Uist:

"Our domestic supply is obtained from shallow surface wells. These in many cases are merely dip hole wells and are unprotected by either wall or fence, so that it is impossible to keep such wells free from the contamination of animals or from refuse thrown about by the wind. In winter during heavy rains the water falls into them carrying impurities of all sorts, and the surrounding soil being of a soft nature soon turns into mud with the tramping of people and cattle. . . ."

These people have been patient up to the present, but they are getting very impatient now, and I am encouraging them. There was once a famous rising in connection with the Land League, and the Government, unless something is done, may have to tackle another such rising again.

Sir MURDOCH MACDONALD (Liberal Nationalist—Inverness): The question of deer forests has arisen in my lifetime. When I was a child the whole of the deer forest area of the Central Highlands of Scotland was let to a well-known sportsman of those bygone days for £50 a year. One small portion of the vast area that he rented was let in recent years for £4,000 a year. Deer shootings were let long before I was born, but as a general statement it is accurate to say that during my lifetime the great increase in deer forests has taken place.

Mr THOMAS JOHNSTON (Labour—Stirling and Clackmannan): It is upon record in the last annual report of the Department of Agriculture that:

"Damage by red deer has been a serious problem for many years in Scotland, and proposals for legislative protection for smallholders and farmers from damage by deer have been made by departmental committees as far back as 1921, but owing to the difficulty of reconciling conflicting interests"—

that is a polite way of saying that landlordism is very strong—

"no progress has been made."

There are uses other than ploughing up the land to which deer forest land can be put. Some of it can be used for an extension of grazing and some for cultivation. There is the case of Lusskintyre. A previous Government could see nothing for the men of Lusskintyre but that they should be kept permanently in Inverness gaol. They were in and out of gaol, I do not know how many times. Another Government came in and acquired a deer forest at Lusskintyre compulsorily, seized it, took the men out of Inverness gaol and put them back with the right to cultivate farms at Lusskintyre. And they are there yet. The last time I was in the Isle of Skye, going down the hill towards Sligachan, I saw, copied and photographed a notice stuck in a tree in the following words:

"Warning to trespassers and visitors. The soft-nosed bullet carries far and inflicts a nasty wound. Visitors are warned to keep away."

It is common knowledge that lands have been closed, that roads have been closed, and that everything possible has been done to turn vast tracts of the Highlands of Scotland into a wilderness, a sportsman's paradise.

There are villages in the Island of Lewis I can name which do not receive a penny of income unless it be from public assistance. There are villages suffering poverty such, as the distressed mining areas never knew. The people are in a condition of fear and hopelessness with the roads barred to them, the piers rotting, and the harbours silted up. I hope that we shall take united action, as representatives of Scotland, even at the eleventh hour of the last day to stop the depopulation and impoverishment of the northern parts of our country.

THE LIVE STOCK BILL

(Money Resolution imposing Customs tariffs on foreign imported Beef and Veal.—House of Commons, 15th December.)

Mr A. MACLAREN (Labour, Burslem and Tunstall), taking part in the Debate, said: Here a special tax is to be collected. It is a tax which the poorest of the poor will have to pay. A good old-fashioned Conservative opposite tried to advance the argument that the foreigner pays the tax. Just before he got up, the hon. Member for Petersfield (Major Dorman-Smith) read a long list of commodities which the farmers have to use, that are taxed. He advanced the argument that because the farmers have to pay heavy taxes on these imported articles, they are entitled to receive this appropriation to-night. We have been told that poor agriculture is a timid thing that needs protection. One hon. Member said that the one section of the community that wanted protection was agriculture. Millions of pounds have been given already by way of protection.

There are three parties to this industry. There is the farmer, there is the agricultural worker and there is another gentleman who always gets his tribute from farming, whether it is doing well or not, and he is the landlord, the rent-receiver. Whether farming is in a good condition or a bad one, that toll is paid, and I hope at another time, when it will be more appropriate, to prove by figures and facts that that is where these millions are going.

Until the rents of the agricultural areas of this country are deflated and prices are brought down to a competitive level, as they could be if there were not these tolls to be paid in rent, you are living in a fool's paradise. This appropriation to-night is part and parcel of an injection of a sort of intoxicating drug; agriculture must be kept going by new and fresh injections of public money.

LIBERAL SPEAKERS

The Liberal Publication Department issued on 10th November an addition (Cards 13 to 28) to its series of *Speakers' Notes*. On Cards 19 and 20, facts about monopoly prices for land in London are cited, taken from the official report of the London County Council on the Rating of Site Values, also the recommendation of the L.C.C. and the demand for this reform on the part of 230 British local authorities. Card 28 says:

"The Rating and Taxation of Land Values would remove one of the principal causes of the maldistribution of wealth by impounding those socially created values, which at present go to enrich the landholder, and utilizing them for the general benefit. It would make land more easily and cheaply available for smallholdings, allotments, etc. By untaxing improvements and reducing the burden of rent and taxes, it would help the small tradesman and house-owner. And by providing a new source of revenue, it would render the reduction or abolition of indirect taxation possible, thus raising real incomes and promoting the accumulation of savings."

We regret to report the death of Alderman W. G. Wilkins of Derby which took place in November last. He was a doughty campaigner for the land reform cause. Land value taxation had his keen interest, but he will best be remembered, and with lasting gratitude, for his short histories of England and Ireland, issued in popular setting and revealing the insidious growth of landlordism. The English booklet renamed and sold as *The Penny History of England* had an enormous circulation.

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"Green Belt" sales (about 45 square miles already) have poured large sums into the pockets of owners of properties suitable for public acquisition with an eye to the future."—From the Annual Market Report of Messrs John D. Wood & Co., the London firm of real estate agents.