

LAND & LIBERTY

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TWO SHILLINGS

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EDITORIAL

A Timid and Incompetent Measure

AN UNBRIEFED OBSERVER sitting in the public gallery of the House of Commons during the opening of the debate on the Land Commission Bill (January 31) might be forgiven for thinking he was witnessing the passage of a revolutionary land reform measure, particularly if he found the technical details of the Bill too involved to follow.

The opening shots of the debate were fired by the Minister of Land and Natural Resources, Mr. Fred Willey, and they sounded like broadsides; they were, however, but noise and smoke.

Referring to the landed interests, Mr. Willey said that the governing core of the landed class, which controlled Parliament one hundred years ago, could be comfortably seated in the Albert Hall. No wonder that the landlords hated to be counted, and that so far they have managed to defeat all proposals to bring the records up to date.

The so-called Domesday Book of 1873 completed by the Local Government Board had shown, he said, that 750 persons owned one quarter and 4,500 owned one-half of the total acreage of England. The landlords has repealed provisions in Lloyd George's legislation which were obnoxious to land speculators, just as they had repealed Lord Silkin's 1947 Town and Country Planning Act.

Mr. Willey went on to quote John Stuart Mill and Winston Churchill and then added some revolutionary phrases of his own. It was morally outrageous, he said, that the landlords should profit at the expense of the community who themselves create the land value. "A growing population increasingly making their homes in great cities, has not only made effective control over the land indispensable;

it has made finally indefensible a system which has allowed land owners or land speculators wholly to appropriate the increases, frequently enormous, which result from government action, whether central or local, or from the growth of social wealth or community endeavour."

John Stuart Mill's proposal to nibble at land reform with 100 per cent increment taxes could hardly be called revolutionary, yet it could be regarded as such compared with the Lloyd George Act, the development charges of the 1947 Act and the Land Commission Bill. It was Mr. Eric Lubbock (Liberal) who, later in the debate, cut the Land Commission Bill down to size by asking: "How does the right Hon. Gentleman decide in equity that if the value of land for its current use increases, no charge should be made on the owner of the land?"

Mr. Willey replied: "I know the Liberal Party's views about these matters—the taxation of site values—but having looked at this problem, I also know the many difficulties. I make no pretence of going further than to isolate the development value and to ensure that a substantial part of it is returned to the community."

This blew away the smoke and showed just how revolutionary the Bill was—a timid, involved and regressive measure that (a) left untouched all existing land values; (b) left untouched increases in land values that accrue to land already developed; (c) left vacant land exempt from any charge whatsoever; (d) put a once-for-all levy of 40 per cent on increases revealed only when the owner sold, let or re-let; and (e) while leaving capital gains taxes of 30 per cent on capital, abolished the 30 per cent "capital gains" on land sales. And to make the land situation worse, the Bill imposes bureaucratic compulsory purchase orders when land owners refuse to take the initiative and "bring their land forward".

For all the brave talk of land monopoly, Labour's "New Britain" is to be saddled with an obnoxious, complicated and pusillanimous measure doomed to fail as ignominiously as the development charges of the 1947 Act.

Mr. Willey was perhaps too ashamed or too poorly briefed to make reference to the Labour Act of 1931 which set out to tax all land values and which was also repealed by the landed interests.

The only note of real radicalism was made by Mr. Peter Bessell (Liberal).

"The reason why we shall vote against this Bill is that it is not a radical one," he said. "It does not attempt to deal with the problem in anything like the drastic manner which over the years we were led to believe was the intention of the Party opposite when it was in opposition. The Bill is a disappointment to us. It is a disappointment to radicals throughout the country, and I believe that it is a Bill which Her Majesty's Government will regret, should it ever reach the Statute Book.

"Had we found that even though it might not meet the demands which we have made over the years for a reform of the whole rating and taxation system, and the whole system of acquiring and selling land, it was possible to give the Bill a Second Reading because it went some distance towards meeting the requirements which we have stated, we should have been glad to do so, but the truth of the matter is that the Bill is in direct conflict with the aims which we have expressed, and the principles for which we have fought for so long."

Mr. Boyd-Carpenter (Conservative), chief Opposition spokesman in the debate, referred to Mr. Willey's speech as a political claptrap and stoutly defended the landlord class. The real purpose behind the measure they were debating, he said, was an attack on the landed interest, an attack on what Mr. Willey called land monopolists. The landlords had undertaken splendid development and town planning, and not just sit back and draw their profits.

As for the land monopolists, Mr. Boyd-Carpenter drew attention to the eight million freehold house owners, conveniently forgetting that millions of these were taking twenty to thirty years to become freeholders and that there were far many more millions of landless.

However, although the landed interests were not in any real danger from the Bill, Mr. Boyd-Carpenter played Mr. Willey's game in the approved parliamentary manner. The Bill was passed by a majority of eight votes, all Liberals voting against it.

(Extracts from the debate follow on the next page.)

E. J. CRAIGIE

WITH the death of Mr. E. J. Craigie, in his 95th year, our movement loses one of its outstanding personalities and most capable advocates. He was, for 37 years, the Secretary of the Single Tax League of South Australia and, from 1930 to 1941, a member of the South Australian House of Assembly as an Independent, on a Single Tax policy. He was well-known to our supporters in Victoria and Tasmania, where he visited and lectured on various occasions, and in 1939-40 was President of the International Union for Land-Value Taxation and Free Trade.

He represented the Australian Henry George Movement at the International conferences held in Edinburgh in 1929, and in New York in 1939, and visited Britain in 1954.

He took an active part in most of the rating reform campaigns in South Australia, taking the platform and supplying information. The fact that more than one-third of the South Australian municipal councils have switched over to site-value rating is an eloquent tribute to the effectiveness of his efforts.

—*Progress*, Melbourne.

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