

## MUNICIPAL CONFERENCE IN MANCHESTER

ON OCTOBER 2, 1946, the Manchester City Council decided on the motion of Councillor Herbert Eastwood to invite all Local Rating Authorities in Lancashire and Cheshire to a Conference in Manchester 'in order to consider the advisability of joint action being taken to secure the necessary powers from Parliament to enable Local Authorities to levy a tax on land values.'

Invitation was issued by the General and Parliamentary Committee and the Conference took place on February 6 with 453 people in attendance, representing 175 Local Authorities from the two counties. Councillor Dr. Mabel Tylecote, deputy chairman of the General and Parliamentary Committee of the Manchester City Council, presided and at the close the following resolution was adopted by 42 to 28, each vote representing one Local Authority:

'That, without committing the Authorities we represent, this Conference, consisting of representatives of Rating Authorities in the County of Chester and the County Palatine of Lancaster and of the County Councils of those Counties, welcomes the statement made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the House of Commons on January 30, 1947, during the debate on the Motion for the second reading of the Town and Country Planning Bill, that the Minister of Health and the Chancellor were seeing whether they could work out a practicable scheme which would give enabling powers to local authorities to levy a local rate on site values within their area.'

The lady chairman in opening the proceedings drew attention to the publicity which had been given to the question by the recent statements of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and also referred to the 'betterment' proposals in the Bill recently introduced by the Minister for Town and Country Planning. She suggested a general discussion with questions asked, to which Councillor Eastwood would reply and thereupon move a resolution. This procedure of leaving the resolution, and the competent speech, to the end was scarcely fair to the Conference itself. No proper lead was given and much time was consumed in desultory talk, with confusion added by diverting attention to the Town and Country Planning Bill. Until Mr. Eastwood spoke, most who took part were rather groping in the dark. There appeared to be a good deal of ignorance as to what the taxation of land values meant. The 'old guard' voiced its opposition with its plea for the 'poor widow with three houses,' who would have to pay 'a lot more than she did now'; and there was the other one about 'how can you separate the value of land from the buildings upon it.' In the course of the discussion, the Manchester Town Clerk made it clear that delegates undertook no mandate, and in expressing their views they would not be committing the Authorities they represented.

'Most of the speakers,' said the *Manchester Guardian* report, 'seemed anxious to put questions rather than discuss the broad principle': and according to the *M.G.*, the Borough Treasurer of Southport (Mr. A. B. Dawson) said any new income would have to come from undeveloped land but where was such undeveloped land? He could not think of any in Southport where one person owned the building and another the site, would not the owner of the site have to bear the whole of the rate burden without being able to increase the rent, and might his contribution to local government become greater than the rent he received from the property? [Apparently Mr. Dawson's education is still far from complete, despite our own attempts to improve it which were assiduous enough as any one can agree who looks again at the October *LAND & LIBERTY*. Copy of the article was sent to each member of the Southport Council and Mr. Dawson will surely not object to our sending it to others.]

In the opinion of Councillor Thompson, of Blackpool, the idea of taxing land values was 'perfectly ridiculous' because it 'would only add to the burden of the present householders.' Other speakers asserted the absence of undeveloped land in Lancashire and Cheshire and even if it did exist it would be dealt with by the Silkin Bill! But these hostile voices were

answered by others again who pointed to the urgent need for a new source of local taxation and it was only fair that landlords who enjoyed increasing values in land should contribute to civic burdens.

Councillor Eastwood, of Manchester, and member also of the General and Parliamentary Committee replied to the discussion and moved the resolution which was carried. He instanced the Piccadilly and Market Street areas lying idle because of the 'blitz' and now rated at no more than 16s. 6d. an acre, but if the Corporation wanted to buy it the selling price was £1,000,000 per acre. It ought to be rated at some figure nearer to that value and that was the broad basis of the case for taxing land value. He gave convincing illustrations from several other towns. He spoke of the successful operation of the land values system in Sydney, as an example. The tax on land values could not be shifted in higher rents and prices but would be paid by the owner of the land. Agriculture also, which had been referred to, would be advantaged when the land value tax was able to ease the burden of present ratepayers in other directions, such as householders and occupiers of business premises, factories and the like. The tax was meant to absorb ultimately the whole of land values and the lightening of the burden on all other forms of rate payment.

Councillor Eastwood writes: 'It is good that the Conference has been held. Although a number of delegates cast no vote the appeal to the Chancellor will now be made. The Local Authorities concerned will now have a further opportunity of considering the matter in their own district because the Conference agreed to forward to each authority represented there that day a report of the Conference together with a copy of the resolution so that they may, if they so decided, send a similar resolution to the Chancellor themselves. If they will only discuss it there is hope for them.'

The Manchester City Council appointed as delegates Councillor Tom Nally, the chairman of the General and Parliamentary Committee (who was unable to attend because of illness) and Councillors Mrs. Tylecote, Eastwood and C. B. Walker. To them, at his own instance, the Town Clerk sent a long memorandum which enclosed the report of the Land Values Committee of the Council issued in November, 1944, repeated Mr. Dalton's statement in the House of Commons on May 16 last, described the main provisions about development values in the Town and Country Planning Bill ('during the course of the discussion it seems likely that reference will be made to them') and cited Mr. Dalton's remarks about land values when concluding the debate on the Second Reading. Whether this official *aide memoire* was in place or not, it contributed little to an understanding of the matter before the Conference. Rather the contrary. The Report of that Land Values Committee approved the proposals of the Uthwatt Committee for purchasing 'development rights.' It affected to state the arguments 'for and against' Land Value Rating, but its treatment of the subject was incompetent and evasive, with no other recommendation than that the Government should appoint an expert Committee of Inquiry. The Report was reviewed in *LAND & LIBERTY*, and the article is the United Committee's Leaflet No. L 31, which is still available for anyone interested. As for the Town and Country Planning Bill—a Bill with provisions which not only have not the remotest connection with Land Value Rating, and the *unrating* of buildings and improvements but would also frustrate all development—the Conference was not well served by throwing that ball into the discussion. The situation deserves watching because of the uses to which this Bill will undoubtedly be put in certain circles, helping sinister influences to sway opinion in an entirely false direction.

A free copy of 'Land & Liberty' is an invitation to become a subscriber. Monthly 6d. By post, 5s. a year; U.S.A. and Canada \$1.