

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES — HOUSING

(House of Commons—Debate on the Address, 7th December, 1944)

Mr. DOUGLAS (Battersea, North): The situation which faces is now is far worse than that which arose at the end of the last war. We had already at the beginning of this war a residual of insanitary, dilapidated, worn-out houses which required to be demolished and replaced. We had the problem of overcrowding and to that has been added the cessation of building during the war. There is the wear and tear and the dilapidation which has taken place, worse than during the last war, because of the greater restriction on the employment of labour, the obtaining of paint and other materials to keep the houses in repair. In addition to that, there is the devastation caused by bombing.

Particularly, I want to refer to the situation in the London region, which is one of extreme desperation. I do not think that the Ministers responsible realise what the position is. The population of London at the present moment is denuded by evacuation and because people have gone to industrial employment in other parts of the country or are enlisted in the Services. There are far fewer people to be accommodated than in normal times, and when demobilisation and industrial transference begins, the pressure upon accommodation is going to be extremely severe.

The repair of war damage is not sufficient; it is a temporary expedient in order to tide us, to some extent, over the present difficulty, but after that there will remain a vast deficiency of accommodation. According to present estimates, the cost of building after the war is going to be 30, or 60 per cent. perhaps, above the pre-war level. The burdens upon the local authorities are going to be increased by all the multitudinous duties and the expansion which public policy has imposed upon them in education services, and town planning, particularly in those areas which have suffered from bombing and where, therefore, it is an imperative necessity that the rebuilding that takes place should be upon a better planned lay-out. The opportunity cannot be lost, but these districts are going to suffer the double burden of an excessive amount of expenditure upon housing and upon planning, with all the outlay in compensation or purchase of land which that involves.

The rates will go up, in some areas very considerably, and it is high time that, while we are thinking about the permanent housing problem, we should think not merely about the mechanics of it, but about the economics of it. Can we go on imposing, as we are doing at

the present moment, a heavy burden of rates upon every house that is built and make them dearer for the tenants who live in them. There is support very frequently on the other side of the House for proposals for relieving industry of taxation. Here is an object which ought to be relieved of taxation. The alternative is that we go on subsidising the building of houses to a larger and larger extent out of the Exchequer and out of the local rates, with consequent discrimination between one class of tenant and another, those who get municipal houses and those who are condemned to occupy the worst houses which are provided by private enterprise. Subsidisation inevitably involves these discriminations, this choice of tenant.

It is time that we relieved houses from local rates, and at the same time we ought to deal with the other part of the problem—the price of land—which is the obstacle to all housing enterprise and re-planning. We should at least put some of the burdens of rates upon site values so that we could eliminate at its source the speculation, which every one of us who has been engaged in local affairs knows, holds up housing, requires the local authority to pay excessive prices and handicaps the operation of these proposals from the start. I beg the Ministers who are concerned with these matters, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who is concerned with national finance, to consider what the economic position of housing in this country is going to be after the war.

Mr. MACLAREN (Burslem): We have committed ourselves to legislation on education, a national health service, and half-a-dozen other schemes which will cast such rates on houses as will make housing an impossibility. The rates to be levied on houses commensurate with the requirements of the new legislation are such that we cannot expect any working man or woman to pay the rent and the rates. The three causes, therefore, are land, rating and low wages. We have three or four Ministries dealing with housing, and not one of them has any power to deal with any of these three causes. We cannot possibly deal with permanent housing if we persist in our present rating system. It has been condemned time and time again by commission after commission. An hon. Member for Glasgow spoke this afternoon from the other side of the House about families of 11 or 12 people living in Glasgow in two rooms. Those houses in Glasgow, with their serried storeys, their one-close entries, no bathrooms and no lavatory accommodation, still have people living in them. It is appalling.

It was that state of affairs in Glasgow that more than 40 years ago made the Glasgow people arrive at a solution of this problem. We were able to proclaim, more than 40 years ago, that the royal road to rehousing was to abolish the rating system, put the rates on the site values, and so break down the land monopoly and enable the city to extend its outer perimeters. Are vested interests so sacred that we must not touch them, and that, rather than touch them, we must set in motion an expensive process of alternative houses and new Ministries?

Mr. MURRAY (Spennymoor): I intervene in the Debate, not because I represent a bombed area or because I am a housing expert, but because I represent a division different from those that have been spoken about to-day. My division has four townships, four urban areas and 29 villages. During the August and November Recesses I made up my mind that I would look round my division. I spent my holidays touring the villages and the outposts of the division. I thought that I knew the conditions under which my people lived. For 40 years I have played among them, worked with them, and attended their social functions, their religious services, their educational classes and political meetings. I honestly confess to this House that the bad conditions that I found in some of the houses occupied by people whom I represent were beyond even my comprehension. We are not suffering from a blitz by the enemy without; divisions like mine in the county of Durham are suffering from the enemy within. For 90 per cent. of my constituents the kitchen still remains the living room, the dining room, the washhouse, the bakehouse and even the bathroom at nights after the door has been locked and the blind has been drawn. The bath tub still steams for father when he comes home from the pit and for mother after a hard day's work in the house. Those are the conditions in the Spennymoor Division. A very few minutes' walk from where I live I can go to two-roomed houses where women still give birth to children in the kitchen and where eight in a family live in two rooms, and all sleep in one bedroom, though they are of all ages from 14 years, boys and girls, downwards to two.

The mothers in my division are bitter, dissatisfied and disappointed. They ask me point-blank, pointing to the paper hanging from the walls, to the roofs where the rain was coming in, and to the beautiful furniture that they will not set against the wall because of the dampness: "Is this what my husband is fighting for?" One night I took a walk

from my home, not very far away into a colliery village. There I found a father, mother, daughter of 25, married, and with a child of two, another daughter aged 20 and a son aged 22. They were all living and sleeping in one bedroom. In another house in the same street was a family with a T.B. child attending a clinic, and they were six people, all sleeping in one bedroom. The local authority in the division has for years pressed upon the colliery companies to improve housing conditions and the street conditions. The dirty, filthy old earth-closet is still in operation. In the division we have sorrow, suffering and death. It is from places like this, from these dens, that we breed tuberculosis, that every sanatorium in Durham is full to-day, and has long waiting lists. How can it be otherwise? In all the urban areas there are long waiting lists for houses. In the Crook and Willington urban district the first applicant on the list has been waiting for nearly ten years for a house. They have 1,679 applications, and they have 2,000 people returning from the Forces. The total number of condemned houses was over 848. In 1943, the Medical Officer of Health reported to the Council that he estimated the immediate future housing needs of the area to be not less than 2,500 houses.

I felt that some of these things ought to be said from the representative of a division like mine, because all that has been said to-day has, of course, and probably rightly, been really representing the problem of the bombed areas. Men are being turned out of the factories at the present time. They are being sent to the employment exchange, which means that their spending power is reduced by pounds a week. Following on that is a lack of confidence, for as soon as you take away a man's job he loses faith. Men and women are thinking very seriously, and are saying with conviction that this House is rushing headlong into the abyss of 1918.

SCOTTISH LIBERALS' CONFERENCE

THE ANNUAL Conference of the Scottish Liberal Federation was held in Glasgow on December 20. On the motion of Capt. A. R. McDougall, the official resolutions on "Social Security" and on "Housing" were amended by addition of clauses, as follows:

Social Security. "The Council further maintains that the full benefits of the (Social Security) scheme cannot be reaped unless the protectionist tariffs are reduced or abolished and unless the toll of inflated land values is countered by a system of taxing these values which will take for the public benefit those values in land created by the community."

Housing. "The Council points out that the Government have ignored the primary causes of inadequate housing which are the crushing rates levied on houses and improvements and the extortionate prices of land for sites, wayleaves and water. It further regrets that the Government have made no proposals for the derating of houses and the Taxation of Land or Site Values and points out that no housing policy can succeed until these fundamental issues are properly dealt with. Nothing would stimulate building enterprise more than the relief of buildings from rates and the raising of the required money from a tax on the capital value of all land, excluding improvements, following the practice successfully adopted in Australia and New Zealand and elsewhere. The Liberal Party will continue to urge this reform. Profiteering and speculation in land must be stopped, and the acquisition of land, wayleaves and water must be cheapened, compensation being paid on the basis of its present annual value, as assessed for rating and taxation purposes."

TASMANIA

Rating Reform Advocated

Mr. E. J. Craigie, president of the International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade, and former Member of Parliament for South Australia, addressed a largely attended meeting in Launceston, the capital of Tasmania, on October 16, which was well reported in the *Examiner*. He said that rating reform was one of the most important questions demanding the attention of the citizens of every town and municipality in the Commonwealth.

"Our present system penalises the man who puts his land to the best use and offers a special premium to men who hold their land out of use for speculative purposes," he continued. "The more a man wants to improve his land, the more, under the present system, he is regarded as an enemy of society and fined year after year for his improvements."

Under the unimproved value system, however, land would be put to its best use and there would be nothing to discourage owners from improving their properties. At present, if an owner of slum property decided to improve the buildings on it he would immediately be required to pay higher rates. As families grew up, it was often necessary for a home owner to add an extra room to his house. If he did so now, he would be penalised by extra rates.

The unimproved land value system of rating was very desirable from the point of view of the worker, said Mr. Craigie. Its adoption would encourage the erec-

tion of new houses, shops and factories, thus opening many avenues of employment. From a business standpoint, too, every business man should support it because of the manner in which it tended to develop the building of new homes and therefore the creation of new customers.

By preventing speculators from buying land close to the city and holding it for a high price, thus forcing settlers out to the outlying suburbs, the unimproved value system had the effect of reducing local body expenditure on roads and footpaths and other services to the more distant suburbs.

Tested by Experience

Mr. Craigie emphasised that the unimproved value system was not new. It had been compulsory in Queensland since 1890, most local government revenue was raised by it in New South Wales, while in Victoria 14 areas had adopted it. In South Australia 20 local government bodies were rating solely on the unimproved value system.

In South Australia it was necessary to take a poll of landowners and tenants to approve of the introduction of the system. After two years landowners could demand another poll, to be taken among owners only, as to whether it should be continued. In all cases the second poll had produced a greater majority among owners only in favour of the unimproved value system than the first poll among both owners and tenants.

A vote of thanks to Mr. Craigie was moved by the Mayor (Ald. Clarke).

New League Formed

After Mr. Craigie's address a meeting was held, attended by delegates from progress associations and other bodies, to form a Tasmanian Rating Reform League. The object of the league will be to seek the exemption of all improvements from municipal taxation and instead the raising of municipal revenue by an ungraduated rate on the unimproved value of land. The motion for the formation of a Rating Reform League was moved by Mr. E. W. Sayer and seconded by Mr. C. Thompson. It was supported by Messrs. Quintal, M.H.A., E. D. Pinkard, J. D. Valentine and others. Ald. Oldham, who was one of several aldermen present, moving a vote of thanks to Mr. Craigie, said there was a considerable body of opinion on the Council was perfectly open minded on the question of rating reform. Those in favour of it should have no hesitation in putting proposals before the council, which would certainly give them very careful consideration. The meeting was presided over by Mr. J. W. Seaton.