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	Page		Page
Town and Country Planning	26	Municipalities and Land Value Rating	31
Young Liberals at Oxford	28	Gains at Danish Elections	32
Anna George de Mille	29	Progress in New Zealand	32
Planners and the Tea Trade	30	Land Values Campaign in Malta	33

UNDER TORY-SOCIALIST AUSPICES

The Agriculture Bill is the instrument by which the Government proposes to regiment the production of food in this country. It embodies Socialist and Tory policy. The two are married in this measure. Extraordinary powers are to be conferred on officialdom to enforce obedience to prescribed methods of farming. On the other hand these compulsions are sugar-coated with an extra layer of endowment and protection enforced upon the public for the benefit of the industry. The comforting thought for the landlord element, which every economist worthy of the name will confirm, is that the eventual beneficiaries of the price-raising schemes, and of the call upon consumers and taxpayers to 'help agriculture', will be those who are entitled to appropriate the rent of land. In good time, they hope, the hated and mischievous controls can be swept away, if nothing material can be done to mitigate them during the passage of the Bill. Meanwhile, whatever may be the fate of the actual cultivator under the harrow of the new bureaucracy, it is sufficient satisfaction to the landed interests that *their* prerogatives are ensured, and under patronage of a Labour Government. Significantly the Bill received its second reading without a division. It now remains to be seen whether the farmer, grasping at the subsidies which will slip through his hands, has not sold his liberty for a mess of pottage.

The Ministry of Agriculture clothed with its despotic powers in the administration of a huge bureaucratic machine is unable to reckon what its spoon-fed agriculture will cost the rest of the community. Parliament itself is left in the dark as to these commitments, the effect of which let it be frankly said make privilege and parasitism a still greater burden upon the producers of wealth in all occupations. In the Financial Memorandum to the Bill the legislators merely present a blank cheque for the sums to be filled in after the signature. The cost of the guaranteed prices, it is said, 'cannot be accurately estimated', much depending upon the methods adopted for price fixing including what the Government may do as purchasers of farmers' products for sale to consumers at a loss; or alternatively on the subsidy needed to support prices paid to farmers over and above the free market prices. The cost of the land purchase schemes for establishing small holdings cannot be estimated but on the assumption (here making brave show of promises likely to prove quite illusory) that 5,000 new holdings were established in the first five years, the loss to the Exchequer may be 'something of the order of' £300,000 annually apart from the loss borne out of County Council and County Borough rates. Larger land purchase schemes are involved under general powers of acquisition and management including large tracts the development of which is said to be beyond the capacity of private owners; but 'no estimate can be made' of the net cost of thus buying out the monopolists of that and all other

land which today is completely quit of taxation under the notorious Derating Act of 1929. The grants from the Exchequer for field drainage are to be continued for five years at an estimated total cost of £6,000,000. The liming subsidy has cost £3,000,000 in the last three years, and it is to be continued for five years at a gradually increasing expense but 'an accurate forecast cannot be made at this stage' of what it will amount to. As for the provision of goods and services to farmers, which apparently they are expected to repay, the total has been running at £14,000,000 a year, but 'it is expected that this total will decline'—well may that be, in view of the lavish grants now being showered on the industry. Finally there is the administrative control over farming operations. The machine comprises a greatly increased hierarchy of officials at or under the Ministry, an Agricultural Commission and Sub-Commission, Agricultural Land Tribunals and their assessors, County Agricultural Executive Committees, Agricultural Statistics Advisory Committees, an Agricultural Research Council and Improvement Council, and other bodies including the National Agricultural Advisory Service and the Ministry's Land Service. The cost of this welter of officialdom? The Financial Memorandum concludes by stating that 'it is not possible to give an estimate of expenditure likely to be incurred'.

For the tenant farmer provision is made for his increased security so far as his relationship with his landlord is concerned. The law regarding tenant rights and compensation for improvements will be amended in his favour. The tenant farmer is said to be pleased, but it should not be overlooked that he now has his eyes on more than the tenant rights to which he is normally entitled. His greater security will give him a guaranteed share in the spoils afforded by government assistance, which would otherwise go to the landowner in increased rent. So long as he is secured against landlord action revising the rent or depriving him of the farm he has his hand in the pool which is fed by prices rigged against the consumer.

The Bill is acclaimed in Labour Party prints as a New Charter, but for the agricultural labourer there is nothing really in it except the raising of prices so as to enable farmers to pay the guaranteed minimum wage. He is made aware of his interest in the subsidies and other 'stabilising' assistance to the industry. The argument savours of all the protectionist propaganda which promises the worker the benefits of tariffs and which has so largely captured the Trade Unionists in most of the bolstered industries. The way in which the Government has fallen for Tory policy and outlook is revealed in the Bill's explanatory memorandum. For instance it is said that 'in the interests of agriculture' men who wish to seek a career on the land should first of all take employment as agricultural workers and so gain the necessary experience to fit them to run a holding

of their own. In the interests of *whose* agriculture it may be asked shall men be ganged as labourers and not aspire to independence, free from impertinent enquiries, investigation and search into their capabilities? Is it that they shall subserve the interests of landlords and farmers?

The provisions in the Bill for the creation of small holdings can be dismissed as mere window-dressing. The holdings will be procured under land purchase schemes and at a cost so high as to involve a heavy annual subsidy. They will be reserved only for men who (in the Minister's opinion) are skilled, experienced and capable. They will be let at a full fair rent 'thereby excluding the possibility of unfair competition between smallholders and ordinary farmers'—words of high significance expressing the dear land policy the Government has embraced and its surrender to monopoly. These holdings will be few and far between. The great mass of agricultural labourers, not their competence but their equal right to the use of land being their qualification, are denied the opportunity to become farmers on their own account. The State-fixed minimum rate of wages is their only privilege, and a worthless guarantee if they can find no one able or willing to hire them.

The Bill turns the whole farming industry into a vast closed corporation ruled by committees to decide, by their tests of so-called efficiency, who shall gain their livelihood within its precincts. Whoso wishes to take up farming can be required to satisfy official bodies that he is qualified by experience and capital resources. Pioneering enterprise, initiative and independence, equally with alleged negligence, can come in conflict with the official 'rules of good husbandry' and suffer the penalty. If the farmer does not conform he can be 'supervised,' and if he still proves recalcitrant he can be dispossessed and turned out of house and home. Driven off, branded as an incompetent or rebel by his County Agricultural Committee, he can give up all hope of ever farming again. The vacancy can be retained for a more pliant occupant or one who has not the same scruples. Nothing could be better calculated to run down the whole standard of agriculture or lead to all manner of corruption and abuse.

The passage of this Bill as a deliberate long-term policy, based

on bribery and compulsion of producers and exploitation of consumers, will be the reinstitution of the Corn Laws. A hundred years after their repeal we will be back to the famine-stricken conditions caused by the taxation of food, the closing of a free market and the consecration of privilege. The Labour Government accepts and pursues the policies which in the last number of years have steadily trended in that direction. Trade barriers have risen higher and higher and increasingly the grants-in-aid of special interests mount up. Richard Cobden warned against the collateral course that landlord influence would take in its 'revenge' for the Corn Law Repeal and prophetically it has been followed. Burdens have been progressively taken off land and progressively taxation has been shifted on labour and its fruits. The process is written chapter by chapter in the series of Agricultural Rates Acts culminating in the Derating Act of 1929—Mr. Churchill's vile gift to the people—and now all agricultural land is completely free of local taxation however valuable it may be. The inevitable economic effect has been to entrench the land monopoly in greater power and make habitation and work on the land the continuing victim of its claims to tribute. The relevance of those circumstances to the welfare of agriculture and the far wider 'condition of the people' question cannot be ignored, and only right action taken with regard to them can hope to save the situation.

Free Trade and the Taxation of Land Values, are they not clearly indicated as the policies that must be adopted in the interests of agriculture as of all industry, and the general welfare? Irrespective of the fiscal policy of any other country, let British ports be opened NOW to the trade of the whole world. Let every artificial barrier to the entry of raw materials and farm and other products be abolished. The essential accompaniment of that freedom, indeed it is precedent, is the freedom to produce which the Taxation of Land Values would attain, at the same time deriving the public revenue from that fund, the rent of land, which belongs rightfully to the people as a whole; and correspondingly, taxation bearing on labour and its products would be remitted. It is by these means and these means only that agriculture like all industries would achieve efficiency and progress—efficiency through competition on the free world market and progress by securing that encouragement is everywhere given to the wisest and best use of land.

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING

The massive and complicated, and highly controversial, Town and Country Planning Bill has emerged from the Committee Stage with 37 of its 126 clauses and seven of its 13 schedules undiscussed. The 'guillotine' with its fixed time-table has been brutally used to force this legislation on the Statute Book. The Bill is to be reported to the House of Commons on May 12, only three days being allotted for the Report Stage and Third Reading, after which it goes to the House of Lords where it may be hoped it will secure the thorough discussion it needs.

One of the amendments tabled by the Government is of vital importance. Driven by the vigilant watch-dogs of the landed interests and by admittedly irresistible logic, the Government has abandoned the '1939 ceiling' price for land acquired by public authorities. The price is now to be based on the considerably higher 'current market value' as on January 7, 1947, the date on which the Bill was published and which is used in connection with other provisions. This concession will involve the payment of vastly increased sums, considering that the Bill is so largely a land purchase measure irrespective of what it proposes by way of the gift of £300,000,000 to landowners as compensation for the deprivation of their 'development rights'. But making January, 1947, a standard for the prices to be paid for land hereafter leaves the 'landlord' argument as it was. It will be equally an anomaly to pay a 1947 price for land bought in 1960 or 1970 which may have then an actual value of a much higher figure. The same argument applies to any arbitrary date

as it applied to the choice of March 31, 1939. That argument is sure to be pressed as time goes on, leaving any Government which has embraced this folly and wickedness of public land purchase no alternative but to submit. But we imagine that it will not be long before public indignation will rise in revolt against these land purchase schemes, and because of their inflationary effects and burdens upon ratepayers and taxpayers (besides their obvious injustice) it will be imperative to call a halt. Public sentiment will turn all the more swiftly to more radical measures for making land accessible for use and development. Meanwhile we can congratulate the landed interests on their having so made their own case that in effect they have smashed this most iniquitous Bill, as *others* see its iniquity. They have brought proper discredit upon legislators who, betraying the interests of the people, have been prepared to play fast and loose with the publicly created land values, capitalising them and handing them as a gift to the landowners whereas they should be taken in taxation for the public revenue.

The condemnation of the Bill on other grounds is complete. What is this madness that is going to hold up all building development unless permission is given by some over-ruling authority? Its machinery is inoperative or if it operates at all it will be under the infliction of most foolish and arbitrary taxation. It has been interesting to follow the discussions that took place in Committee and we wish we had space to report them. It has been abundantly revealed that the so-called 'development