

LAND VALUES

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"OUR POLICY"

"We would simply take for the community what belongs to the community—the value that attaches to land by the growth of the community; leave sacredly to the individual all that belongs to the individual."—*Henry George.*

VALUATION AND THE CORN PRODUCTION BILL.

It seems to the superficial observer that Land Reformers are having a bad time. Land taxation, people say, is a failure, because land value duties are not bringing in millions. There are others who think the great Valuation cannot be finished until all the legal points that have been raised by the Land Union are fought out in the Law Courts—after the war. The man who turns back after putting his hand to the plough is always a pathetic spectacle; and the fact that the author of the Budget of 1909-10 has now become responsible for the Corn Production Bill of 1917 may well cause feelings of bitter disappointment. The worst symptom of all, perhaps, is that displayed by a House of Commons, expressly elected to prosecute the taxation of land values against the veto of the Upper House, now—effete and war weary—tacitly consenting to a measure intended to strengthen the position and increase the incomes of the landowning class which finds its last refuge in the House of Lords.

This, we repeat, is the superficial view. There is no real substance in it. The time of great danger and worst emergency is the great opportunity of the seeker after Truth. Truth inspires courage; and her loyal followers learn to know and depend upon each other best in days of stress, when fair-weather opportunists fall away. The cause of Truth depends not on the number of shouting supporters that follow her banner for a time, but upon the sincere conviction of those who, knowing the truth, have "in their heart of hearts, taken the cross of a new crusade."

Let us take courage! Let us close our ears to the babel of nonsense—and worse—that too often passes for patriotism nowadays, and fix our eyes on the future,

for which it is ours to work in unceasing vigilance. Great indeed will be the harvest of that future.

As Henry George has well said: "We shall win if the agitation be maintained."

Now is the time to consolidate our position, bring up our reinforcements and prepare for the next attack so thoroughly that it shall carry us victoriously into the citadel of Landlordism. What is that position? Not only have we carried the "lords' veto" trench, but we have taken and garrisoned the vital hill of Valuation, which dominates all the ground over which our next advance must take place. It is true that some *quondam* friends have failed in their misguided efforts to defend this all-important position by the vedettes miscalled "Land Value Duties." We knew, from the outset, that they were wrong—that these vedettes could easily be driven in by the enemy, as they have been—and that Valuation could only find its ultimate goal in a uniform tax. Part of our business now is to expose the continuous, subtle attempts to confuse Valuation with the fatuous "Land Value Duties," in order to drag it down to the same failure.

The contests in the Law Courts do not really touch the basis of valuation; they turn upon the technical points arising out of the quite unnecessarily complicated system of levying the duties. We know, of course, that millions of provisional valuations have not become final, and must be kept open until after the war; but what does that matter except to the collection of these absurd "duties"? The whole of the land of the country has been surveyed by competent official valuers; full particulars of its condition, the improvements made upon it, its owners and occupiers, have been officially recorded, in addition to its values—both with and without improvements—at the statutory date. That date relates to a time eight years ago; but there should be no difficulty in bringing the valuations up to date whenever Parliament chooses, for the Commissioners of Inland Revenue receive particulars of every transaction involving the transfer of land, or any substantial holding of land, from one person to another; and by means of these data the original valuation can be revised to any date, and adapted to any purpose, that Parliament may determine. If the Government were really bent on, say, the reform of taxation (not mentioning that of land values) they could easily direct a revision of the valuation in time for next year's Budget.

The Corn Production Bill is undoubtedly an attack upon the position of Land Reformers. The question is to what extent will it be an effective one. Of all the pills to cure an earthquake, surely it is one of the most absurd! Agriculture is one of the most difficult

branches of the great land question. It has occupied the attention of thinkers, expert and visionary, interested and disinterested, for generations. Seldom does a Session pass without a debate upon it, and it has been investigated by Royal Commissions and Committees without number—three since the war began. From this welter of inquiry nothing has hitherto emerged. The farmer has been left to find his own way, bear his own burdens, and grumble in vain. Now he suddenly finds himself—most unwillingly—the centre of attraction. Everyone is telling him what he ought to do—very few are helping him to do it, and the War Office has hindered him in a very real sense.

This is the moment selected by the stage management of the country for the entry of the political clown! He has no need to cry, "Hello! here we are again"; we know him only too well. The problem that has baffled statesmen for generations, that learned economists fear to grapple with, and that fills all true patriots with anxiety, is to be settled—and at once—by the simple method of bribery. Doles all round are certain to please landlord, farmer, and labourer alike (except those born with the thinking faculty); and if the expected wheat increase does not materialise, the political clown has dozens of clumsy excuses and absurd reasons ready to hand; and will have no difficulty in making another "quick change," forgetting his little excursion into agriculture.

Whether the production of wheat in 1918 is increased or not, another tangle will be made for Land Reformers to unravel. We are getting used to doles for landlords. Indeed, the landlord is the pensioner on the nation's bounty *in excelsis*. It never seems to occur to farmer and labourer that their industry would be far better off if the lion's share of profit were not absorbed by the landlord, as landlord. The removal of that leech would be worth ten times as much as minimum prices and wages boards. It does not need a prophet to foresee the certain failure of spoon-fed industries; and the sooner farmer and labourer perceive it, the better for agriculture. The curse of agriculture is the system by which the men who do nothing to help it are permitted by unjust laws to live in luxury on incomes derived from work for which they do not pay, to hamper cultivation by their selfish pursuit of sport, and to destroy the self-respect of the countryside by teaching people to venerate the idle oppressor and to despise the honest labourer. Those who follow agriculture are entitled to independence and honour; but they can preserve neither if they are content to follow their oppressors' example and become pensioners on the nation's bounty. Rule out the landlord, levy taxation on land values and

not on improvements, let the farmer raise his own capital and the labourer have the right to cultivate a small holding, and agriculture will be able to hold its own with any industry in the land. And let farmer and labourer both remember that profits and wages honestly earned are sweet and honourable; while those bolstered up by doles from the Exchequer will sap the vitals of their manhood and their self-respect.

However, the astute quack often finds a market for his wares, and it is quite possible this new Agricultural Doles Bill will become law this Session. So many M.P.s seem half-bereft of their usual foresight by war-panic, and so many others fear to voice their doubts, lest they be accused of lack of patriotism by the Stunt Press, that the opposition to this measure of waste (except in the ranks of the Land Values Group) bids fair to be half-hearted. There is not the least reason in all this why Land Reformers should be cast down. When the nation finds—as it will—that it has to pay millions in extra doles without getting anything like the promised increase in corn production, the time will be ripe for the expert physician to take the place of the quack, and for dealing with the land question on radical lines.

But there is a more far-reaching, a more statesman-like way of insuring, not only the largest possible increase in food production and a supply, if the war is to continue another year, which will enable us to supply the nations with all that they need, but of supplying the money to pay for the war as we go without placing any burden on production comparable to that which must be imposed if this plan is not adopted. If the Federal Government, backed by the State Governments, will, as a war measure, place a tax of from three to five per cent. on all land in cities, villages and country, in proportion to their unimproved value, without any tax on improvements, and on all land, whether improved or unimproved, the problems, both of feeding the nation and financing the war, will be solved and a permanent prosperity for all will be guaranteed. It is said that there are constitutional limitations in the way of such a plan. Not in an emergency like this. . . . Is the American constitution to be made a bulwark behind which in this hour of the world's need the worst of all monopolies and special privileges can entrench itself? God forbid. And, farmers of Washington, it will be impossible if President Wilson is the great man and far-seeing statesman we believe him to be. A proclamation by him appealing to the nation for the power to meet the issue in this way would be instantly responded to, the Congress would pass the necessary legislation and the Governors of at least the required two-thirds of the States would see that their Legislatures ratified the act. —C. B. Kegley, *Master of the Washington State Grange, in opening the Annual Session on June 5th.*