

UNEMPLOYMENT, HOUSING AND LAND SPECULATION

What the Government should do

By ANDREW MACLAREN

(In an interview with the GLASGOW FORWARD, 16th February.)

When the Government begins to carry out its housing policy it will immediately have to face the whole question of speculation in land. Already the ramp has begun, and the land speculators are busily at work preparing to exploit the Government and the community. Exorbitant prices will be charged for building sites, and landlords are already going to their bankers pointing out the increased value of any land from which clay, stone, slate, and other material for the building of houses is likely to be obtained. Everything tends to show that the landlords are going to get as much as they can from any housing schemes which will be initiated either by the local authorities or the Government.

The time has come for the Government to stand up to the landlords and prevent their wholesale fleecing of the community.

How Landlords have Robbed Scotland

In the Report of the Royal Commission on Housing in Scotland there is to be found some amazing evidence of the extortionate prices that the landlords have charged for land needed by the local authorities. Take the case of Glasgow, for instance. According to the report, the evidence of Mr. Peter Fyfe, the Sanitary Inspector of Glasgow, showed that 30s. per square yard was not a usual charge for ground, meaning, as his further evidence showed, that it was less than is usual. The same witness stated that ground at Brownfield cost £4 10s. per yard, which represents a capital value of £21,780 per acre.

The Town Clerk of Glasgow stated in his evidence that the capital cost of building land in Calton district equals 26s. per square yard, and in Parkhead 30s. per square yard. The latter figure is at the rate of £7,260 per acre.

The Report of the Commission also quotes numerous cases of exorbitant prices of land. At Edinburgh the Commissioners were furnished with a return made some years ago by a large Corporation near Edinburgh of the rates of feu duties at which they had feued land between the years 1850 and 1907.

There are 109 cases of feuing for working-class tenements as follows:—

	Per acre.	Per annum.
	£	£
2 cases between	65	and 100
45 " "	101	" 200
35 " "	201	" 300
20 " "	301	" 400
1 case	401	" 500
3 cases "	501	" 600
3 " over	600	

The highest figure was £656 per annum. "When it is taken into account," the Commissioners say, "that these figures represent at the lowest (viz., £65) a capital value for land at twenty years' purchase of £1,300 per acre, and the highest (viz., £656) a capital value of £13,120, it will be seen that the housing of the working classes in Edinburgh has, so far as the use of land in various districts is concerned, been attended with great financial difficulty."

Dundee is another town which has paid heavy toll to the landlords. According to the MUNICIPAL JOURNAL of 28th March, 1919, the Local Government Board formally consented to the borrowing by Dundee Corporation of £4,500 to defray the cost of the acquisition of the site at Logie for housing purposes. The area of the land extended to some 20 acres, and so the landlord received £225 an acre.

There is only one way of meeting this situation, and that is by taxing land values.

Unemployment Schemes and Landlordism

Whatever problem the Government attempts to face it will have to meet the same old problem of landlordism. Take the problem of unemployment. The Government proposes to face the unemployment problem by making roads, canal developments, and the electrification of the railways, all excellent schemes in themselves, but if carried out before you have taxed the value of land every one of these projects carried through by the taxpayer will increase the value of the land, and the landowners will reap the harvest. Lord Montagu of Beaulieu informed me himself that after new roads had been made in and around London the value of the land had risen from agricultural value (30s. to 35s.) to £300 an acre.

If the ground landlords are not going to be allowed to make money out of the schemes which the taxpayers have financed for the purpose of finding work for the unemployed, then such schemes should be prefaced by a scheme of land taxation.

If the land is not taxed the landlords will benefit, too, from railway development schemes. We have the outstanding example of the extension of the Golders Green tube in London. £6½ million was guaranteed by the Government to carry out this extension from Golders Green to Edgware. That extension is now almost completed, and to-day enormous hoardings can be seen on the roads advertising the building land for sale. The railway will be completed in 1924. The Vicar of Edgware told me not long ago that the speculation in land sites which he had witnessed in Edgware he had only seen equalled in the blockhouses of the Western towns of Canada.

With regard to canals, we should not forget the lessons of the Manchester Ship Canal, and the huge sums made by the landlords both in compensation and increased values.

The same thing will happen again if the landlords get the necessary opportunity and the Government does not take steps to prevent it. All this indicates the necessity of the Government adopting a bold and uncompromising attitude towards landlordism.

The Government should immediately set up a Land Valuation Department at Somerset House, with full powers of restoring the clause deleted in the debate on the Finance Act of last year.

Labour has now its great opportunity. It should go ahead with a big scheme for land taxation and break the monopoly of the landlords.

A new weekly paper, the LABOUR CHRONICLE, with Mr. Andrew MacLaren as Editor, has been started in the Potteries and already enjoys a wide district circulation. Our readers need no assurance that our new contemporary, under Mr. McLaren's direction, devotes very much of its space to the advocacy of the Taxation of Land Values. We wish the LABOUR CHRONICLE the greatest success. The offices are at 4, Lyndhurst Street, Tunstall, Staffs.

The movement has lost a good friend in the death of Mrs. Fred Crilly, which took place at her home at 19, Haycroft Road, Brixton, London, S.W.2, on Wednesday, February 27th, following a sudden attack of influenza. Mrs. Crilly was ever attached to her husband's work in the cause of political and social progress. In our movement she had the sympathy that comes from understanding, and they worked well together in the course of a long and happy union.

Mrs. Crilly was in attendance, with her husband, at the Oxford Conference, and no one better grasped its significance as a landmark on the road to our objective. There are very many who will join with us in extending to Mr. Crilly and family our sincerest sympathy in their great bereavement.