

LAND VALUES

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"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.

EMERGENCY LEGISLATION.

The speeches and edicts of the President of the Board of Agriculture, the Food Dictator, the Controller of Cultivated Land Areas, follow one another in profusion. Prices are fixed which raise the protest that they carry no inducement to grow more crops but rather the reverse; and we have the exhibition of a maximum price being fixed for potatoes as a stimulus to increased production, followed by the confession that the naming of the price was really a prevention against a glut. Within ten days a new Order in Council is promulgated cancelling the previous edict and converting the maximum prices into minimum prices. Certain plenary powers are delegated to local authorities to devote building sites to the growing of vegetables and to plough up public parks and common lands. To facilitate their search for suitable land and their decision what to make of it, the dictators call to their counsels such bodies as the Land Agents' Society, the Surveyors' Institute, the Central Chamber of Agriculture, the Farmers' Club, the Farmers' Union, the Royal Agricultural Society, the Rural League, and the Agricultural Co-operative Society—all well-known agencies in the propagation of unsensational schemes that challenge no vested interest.

What is likely to come out of this crucible? We who are lookers-on and interested spectators see at least some surprises that should bring applause from a Radical audience. The first is the extraordinary demand for allotments, a demand the more remarkable at this time, as the kind of people who cultivate small plots are specially busy in other ways. It was always asserted by the opponents of land reform that even if land were made available there would be no one to use it. The second is the decision to make agricultural labourers of men whom the Army Medical Board has certified as fit only for sedentary employment. That dismisses the contention, so often emphasised and so often used to deny even the possibility of access to land, that the soil can only be cultivated by men accustomed to farm

work from boyhood. The third is the admission in an official form and in a ministerial speech that there is such a thing as a penal clause in farm contracts prohibiting the ploughing up of pasture, and the **DAILY TELEGRAPH** is moved to the comment that "Clause 2 (of the form) should have the effect of releasing for cultivation large areas of land which until now have undoubtedly been rendered unproductive by restrictive covenants." The fourth is a concession to the established grievances against the Game Laws, provision having been made in certain cases to stop the hand-feeding of pheasants, and to kill rabbits and deer—the last-named have become such a pest in Scotland that squads of soldiers are to be told off to turn their muskets on that real enemy of the sheep-farmer and the small holder.

The land reformer may take some comfort from this unmasking of the situation, and he is not likely to forget that his platform arguments have thus been confirmed by landlords and their agents in session as bureaucrats, trying to do something for the people. What are more important are the constructive proposals for developing the land and obviating the threatened scarcity of food. The powers of the Food Controller to prevent speculation in supplies are of the widest imaginable description, but it is manifest that the more there is produced, and the better prospect there is of further production, the less need there will be for the exercise of these duties. The solution of the question lies in increased production and in the measures taken to achieve that. Outside of Urban district with the power of Councils to take arbitrary possession of vacant building sites and commons and their instruction to ask, cap in hand, for the use of other land with the "consent of the owner," all farm land is apparently to be placed under the control of local War Agricultural Committees, exercising the powers of the Board of Agriculture to compel cultivation. Labour requirements will be arranged by the Director of Man-Power.

Bringing to a focus all the confusing mass of official declarations made during the past six weeks or more, the practical and immediate plans of the new Government were outlined in Mr. Prothero's speech in the Middlesex Guildhall on 20th December, as follows:—

The first thing to do is to find out what land there is in this country that is either derelict or is insufficiently cultivated, and the next step is to get that land cultivated to the fullest extent. That being so, we are going to supply every County War Agricultural Committee with a list of the products that we believe, from our knowledge of the whole position, to be most essential. We shall give you, county by county, what we think to be the amount of produce and the kind of produce that we specially want you to grow. . . . We hope to be able to give you clerical assistance and assistance in the way of surveyors and valuers, and everything else required to carry out the first step—a survey of the land in each county which can be utilised. . . . With all this help you will be able to plan out your counties in districts and appoint in each district a small committee to work out the local details as to the land to be surveyed and make the survey. If you set to work at once I believe you can do it within a fortnight. . . . One word of warning. Where the committees are not efficient you must admit that the Board of Agriculture in consultation with the County Council must have power to equip an efficient committee and see that the task is properly carried out. We propose to give you wide powers to enter upon, occupy, cultivate,

and plant with the seeds we want grown . . . the land which you yourselves admit to be insufficiently cultivated or not cultivated at all. Wherever you can, make a bargain with the man on the land; but remember that behind you you have the driving force of compulsory powers. In them we propose a clause that no farmer shall be liable to a fine for a breach of covenant if he ploughs up grass land. If you grow crops for us, what security are you going to have as to price? . . . I am out to fix a price which will satisfy you, but which, with other measures, will, we hope, keep the food of the country at a steady level. The contract price we propose to fix for wheat is 60s.

On the 12th January, Orders in Council were issued conferring on the Board of Agriculture, after consultation with the Food Controller, among other powers, the power to enter on and take possession of any land which in their opinion is not being so cultivated as to increase as far as practicable the food supply of the country and after entry thereon to do all things necessary or desirable for adapting it for cultivation; and by notice served on the occupier of any land, to require him to cultivate the land in accordance with such requirements as the Board may think necessary or desirable.

Once more the most urgent of all domestic questions is approached by surveys, inquiries and reports to ascertain quite notorious facts. The work will necessarily involve great delays, and much will depend in this case upon the judgments farmers and the local county magnates will pass upon one another. If the compulsory powers of the Board of Agriculture rest upon that basis, and not upon some independent investigation free from local influences, the menace to the delinquent land-holder is somewhat remote. According to reports of discussions at some of these War Agricultural Committees, the land Valuation Department will assist in the deliberations and provide information, but we have seen no ministerial or official statement as to what the precise functions of the Department will be. We can only gather that it is introduced as a Cinderella into the household to fetch and carry documents and do other humble work quite out of proportion to the specific purpose it has achieved in the past five or six years. If the authorities were determined to allow no prejudice to stand in their way they would have placed the Department, not in the kitchen, but in complete command of the situation and given it a free hand to make use of its very effective machinery. Granting that such bodies as War Agricultural Committees are needed to co-ordinate the mere business side of an unusual farming effort, the District Valuer could and should preside over each and order the publication of the Domesday Book it has already prepared, showing the full site value and the gross value of each piece of land in separate occupation. No other particulars are necessary. They are the final and the sufficient criterion, adequately established by facts which no survey of interested parties "made within a fortnight" can override, as to what land is derelict or improperly cultivated. The market value of the land, compared with its assessment to local rates, would reveal everything. Should it happen that the valuation is anywhere incomplete, the Department could compel from the landowner any information it required, under the same compulsory powers of request, entry, inspection, statement on oath, &c., as those with which the Food Controller has been so fully armed. It can no longer be said that a landowner's valuation is impracticable when the food-owner can be threatened with the direst penalties if he refuses

to be perfectly frank with the authorities about what he has in his possession.

The next step could be taken long before the lapse of a fortnight—to use the machinery of the Valuation as originally intended and place at once a tax on all land values in face of which it would be impossible to withhold any land whatever from development to its fullest extent. It would act automatically and impartially without waiting for the consent of the land-owner and independently of any consultation between him and members of farmers' committees.

In saying this, we do not ignore the question of labour scarcity and the drain of men to the Army and war factories. Arrangements are being made to stop the drain and provide such substitutes as dictators can get; the valuation of the land and the tax upon it would direct, better than any conceivable expert judgment, where that labour could be used with best results. The best land would be cultivated first with the kind of produce suited to it; and the worst form of economic waste—the use of inferior land while superior land is withheld for speculation, amenity or idle pleasure—would be terminated. Democratic despotism, if such a contradiction of ideas is conceivable, would adopt that plan in unflinching recognition of the cause of present evils, but we see no signs of such an awakening in the directorate now in control. There has not been a hint or suggestion that the whole system of land tenure is at fault, that landowners' claims are obstacles to be removed, or that the burden of rates and taxes on improvements have helped to produce stagnation. On the contrary, the President of the Board of Agriculture takes advantage of the occasion to attack Free Trade and to declare that it is our fiscal policy that has ruined British farmers. Protection and bonuses to farmers, not the destruction of monopoly and the establishment of equal rights to the use of land, are the underlying principles of the new agricultural schemes, with some sort of compulsion, applied here and there wherever local committees may have the courage, and unaccompanied by any stated penalty for refusal to comply with the instructions of the Board of Agriculture. Meanwhile the food scarcity is aggravated and prices continue to increase.

The economic effects and the justice of a tax on land values are left to be explained outside the charmed circle of those who would nurse agriculture back to health without cauterising the wound, and we must proceed with this task undeterred by the present bleak outlook, and in cheerful remembrance of the stirring speeches of the present Prime Minister when in the days of the People's Budget he blazed a path for our reform.

A. W. M.

ERRATUM

On p. 234 of January issue, the sentence "*That was what I meant by broadening the basis of taxation*" should form the conclusion of the second quotation from Mr. Lloyd George instead of the first quotation. The sentence will then read:—

"But we do intend that the taxation of site value shall henceforth form an integral part of the system of local taxation. That was what I meant by broadening the basis of taxation."—Mr. Lloyd George, House of Commons, May 14th, 1914.