

"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.*

THE HOUSING OF THE PEOPLE.

The proposal to build houses and cottages, which shall be let to tenants at "uneconomic rents" has become almost a fetish among certain would-be reformers who look upon even the cheapest kind of dwelling as something necessarily beyond the means of the class of people most in need of houses. The labourer cannot himself pay for proper accommodation, and therefore if he is to be housed at all he must have the assistance of State charity, or public money must be placed, on specially attractive terms, at the disposal of landowners, local councils, and others to enable them to build and let cottages at less than cost. This "uneconomic rent" proposal is continually cropping up in one form or another, sometimes in the most unexpected places, where it is put forward in no half-hearted spirit but as a national solution of the housing problem. Those who advocate it ignore the economic effect of bad taxation upon house-building and employment, and would cheerfully increase the burdens of the general taxpayer to pay for labourers' cottages, without any notion that in the end possibly more harm would be done than good. They accept the poverty of the labourer as a feature in the general make-up of society, which they believe can only be modified by gradual changes or by most elaborate schemes of State interference. Faced with the terrible nature of housing conditions they wish to be "practical" and to do something at once without attacking the cause of poverty or quarrelling with vested interests. They take a leaf out of the book of municipal authorities who, in feeding necessitous school children "free of charge," collect the money by the taxation of industry, and thereby perpetuate the poverty of the parents.

The two Unionist Housing Bills, discussed in the House of Commons on the 4th and 18th April, are based upon this alleged need for State charity in order to make provision for people whose poverty denies them a decent home. They were supported on both Liberal and Labour Benches on the ground that they would at least do some good in the absence of competing proposals. We certainly deplore the fact that the Government gave no indication that they favoured any other solution of the problem, but left the President of the Local Government Board to criticise at large and flatter

himself and the House on the progress in housing that was now being made. We must protest that these Bills, far from offering any betterment in conditions, will only aggravate the evil. The provision of cottages at nominal rents as contemplated in the Rural Cottages Bill would stereotype low wages and increase the number of tied cottages, while the one million pound grant proposed in the Housing of the Working Classes Bill would only stiffen the price of land and enable landowners to pocket the whole sum. It was argued that the Irish Acts for the provision of cottages at "uneconomic rents" had been a great benefit to Ireland and had raised instead of reduced wages, but the reply to this contention is that the Acts stipulate that the cottages shall only be occupied by labourers who are in receipt of 2s. 6d. a day or less in wages. In passing it may be noted that the cottages are let at 1s. a week, already some of the labourers have fallen into arrears. The Irish policy has artificially raised the value of land, and the burden of the scheme has been thrown upon the Irish ratepayer and upon the taxpayers of this country. Yet, notwithstanding this legislation, the Irish Census shows that 24 per cent. of the population live in one and two roomed houses.

The only answer to measures of this nature and to the insinuating proposals on which they are based is the taxation of land values and the un-taxing and un-rating of all houses and improvements. Unless the Liberal Government take up that policy and apply it courageously, they can only give way to their opponents and allow the country to drift down the road of State charity and landlord endowment. Their spokesman in the Debates turned a deaf ear to the argument for abolishing the tariff upon buildings and attempted to dispose of the case for the taxation of land values by stating that the price of land was only a negligible factor in the rent of cottages—not more than a half-penny a week. This estimate is flatly contradicted by the universal experience of all who undertake building schemes, the landlord either charging the highest price he thinks the purchaser can pay (a price usually out of all proportion to the rateable value of the land) or refusing point blank to allow his land to be used at all. The price of land is an important factor in any housing scheme, but it is not the only factor. A typical illustration has been given to us by the chairman of a rural district council in Bedfordshire, which has submitted to the Local Government Board a scheme for the building of 20 cottages at eight to the acre. The price of the land is £17 10s. per cottage, which works out not at a half-penny per week but fourpence per week. The annual charge on each cottage will be £11 7s. 2d., of which £2 0s. 8d. are rates and taxes. Were the rates and

taxes placed on the value of the land, not only would the original cost of land be very much less, but it would be possible either to rent the cottages at a lower figure or to build considerably better cottages at the same annual rent. But the most important aspect of the question is the effect of rating and taxing land values upon employment generally and upon wages. It is frankly acknowledged that low wages prevent the success of Housing schemes even if the land for any particular cottage site were given free, and therefore the solution of the problem lies in raising wages just as the solution of the problem of insufficient food and lack of clothing lies in increasing the power of the people to buy these things.

The advocates of the Taxation of Land Values wish also to be "practical," and they are determined to get at the root of the problem by removing the stranglehold of land monopoly over the whole field of industry. But to do this we have to wait upon the Valuation, and the duty of providing this essential basis of reform lies upon the Government. The Land Values Group in Parliament have consistently urged that the Valuation shall be completed and made an effective basis for the rating and taxation of land values, and we are encouraged to believe from Mr. Lloyd George's speech on the Budget that a Revenue Bill will be submitted to the House of Commons in which the necessary amendments in the Valuation will be incorporated so as to provide an accurate standard for the new taxation.

We see in the Housing problem the poverty problem, and the fruits of the unequal distribution of wealth which was so strikingly illustrated in one of the passages of Mr. Lloyd George's speech. He stated that in the past year estates to the value of 276 million pounds had been subject to death duties; one-third of this sum had been left by 292 persons. How enormous is the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the few is shown in the fact that it would take 7,200 years for 292 Irish labourers at their maximum wage to produce wealth of an equal value. Material progress, in a condition of society based upon private property in land, results simply in increasing land value, leaving wages at the subsistence level. The right of individuals to appropriate this ever increasing value raises the problems which housing reformers are battling against, and for which State charity is no remedy. Existing taxation protects the privileges of the land monopolist and aggravates the evil by imposing its burdens upon industry and improvement. This was seen by the Liberals ten years ago, when, led by Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, they urged upon the House the break-down of land monopoly by the rating and taxation of land values.

It is well that the Liberal Government should be reminded of their efforts and be asked to stand by the pledges they made to bring this question to a successful issue. The solution of the housing question, like the solution of the unemployment and the wages question, is to be found in the more equitable distribution of wealth which the taxation of land values and the untaxing of improvements would bring about.

A. W. M.

THE SPANISH CONFERENCE.

Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Fels returned from the United States last month and are settled down for another term in their London home at 10, Cornwall Terrace, Regent's Park. Mr. Fels' next missionary trip abroad will be to the Spanish Land Values Conference to be held at Ronda on the 26th, 27th and 28th inst. He goes along with Mr. Harry de Pass and Mr. A. W. Metcalfe, of Belfast, to represent the United British and Irish movement. There are seven resolutions on the Agenda, and our Spanish confrères are anticipating an event of national importance with far-reaching international possibilities. This Spanish Convention is a sign of the times, telling to all concerned the wonderful growth and expansion of our liberating movement. Mr. Fels will move the first resolution, to the effect that measures be taken to link up and unite the efforts of Single Taxers throughout the world. The most practical way, indeed the only way, at this stage of the movement, to develop its international character is for each section to concentrate on its own territory. Each separate national organisation must in the nature of the case devote itself to the work which lies at its own door. By all means let us hold to the idea of an international movement, but do not let us force this into being by the sacrifice of time and money which is urgently wanted for home-work. As the various national movements have grown, so in due time will the international movement develop. Language and distance are the chief obstacles to this ideal; they are formidable and cannot be lightly set aside. The best that can be done at this time on international lines is for the various organisations throughout the world to keep in touch one with the other, by correspondence, and by giving as much space as possible in their various journals to the news of the movement. Whatever is accomplished in Spain will strengthen and help forward our advancing cause in Great Britain, and action taken here in the practical field of political endeavour will rouse interest and enthusiasm in Single Tax circles in all other countries, and beyond these confines to where democratic sentiment and high ambition is ever battling with the all-powerful enemies of human progress. Meanwhile we can cordially congratulate our Spanish co-workers on the success of their advancing propaganda, and wish them, in this their biggest effort, all the success they have so well earned. Our representatives at the Conference, with their glad tidings at first hand of the progress of the movement in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain, are fully equipped to make useful contributions to the debates, and to the more informal and enlightening conversations which form so pleasing a feature of such gatherings.