

## LAND & LIBERTY

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### THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE GOVERNMENT

Mr. Snowden's reply to the Deputation from the Parliamentary Land Values Group which met him in the House of Commons on 26th March lacked nothing in sympathy and understanding of the case that was put before him. He upheld the pledges of his party, affirmed his own agreement with the theory, the justice and the necessity of Land Value Taxation, and by direct reference to the promises of the Prime Minister, gave an assurance that it was a matter to be dealt with at the first available opportunity. The only point in question was whether the opportunity had arrived. The Deputation learned from Mr. Snowden that there were serious political difficulties at the present moment and so much was said about the bitter hostility of the landed interests that the decision seems to be against anything being done this year. The inference is obvious. Parliamentary time is wanted for less contentious measures that can only be put through if friendly relations are maintained with the other two parties. The Government has led a charmed life so far, and continues to bid for the same kind of existence.

The Labour Party was returned to Parliament with the express purpose of subduing the bitter opposition of the privileged classes, thereby promoting the true welfare of the people, no matter at what sacrifice. It has lived and grown on the sentiment that it alone had the will, the energy and the courage to make war on social injustice. The occasion has come to put all this determination to the test.

If there is any truth in the rumours that reach us, the activities of the Land Values Group were closely watched from the day it was called together. The knowledge that it was organizing a demonstration for a Land Value Tax in the Budget was enough to let loose the "seven devils" that scared Mr. Baldwin on a previous occasion. The landed interests anticipated the Deputation with a warning to the Government what was in store if it offered the Group any encouragement. It was said that the Taxation of Land Values would be fought every inch of the way and Conservative support of other measures would be withdrawn; the land clauses of the 1909 Budget had consumed 148 days of Parliamentary time and if the Government felt equal to a similar demand upon the House of Commons, engaged as it was upon much other pressing business, that was their own lookout. So the story goes, and it is perhaps useless to point out

that reminders of what happened to the 1909 Budget do not apply to the present case. No one is contemplating a repetition of the ridiculous duties then levied, which invited prolonged debates by their attempts to classify different kinds of land for special and invidious taxation according to accidents of time and circumstance. Nevertheless, we have to admit that however simple and direct may be the provisions for the levy of a uniform tax on Land Values, the opponents will do all they can to impede the passage of the Bill.

Something must be done to promote the Taxation of Land Values. Frank and emphatic approval of the principle is not enough even when it comes from a public man of such standing as Mr. Snowden. The urgency and necessity of the policy is admitted in language that cannot be mistaken. The Prime Minister, Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, has also made important declarations on the subject, so significant in fact, that any attempt to solve the problem of housing or unemployment without touching the land question is condemned out of his own mouth. In the House of Commons, on 12th February, in his opening speech as the responsible head of the new Administration, he pointed out that landowners appropriated the benefits of new roads and other public works by charging higher rents and increased prices for surrounding land, and insisted that steps must be taken to retain those benefits for the community. Further, in the matter of local taxation, he said that the Government would make a real and determined effort to produce a scheme of readjustment and reform which would incidentally relieve improvements from taxation. Questioned in the House of Commons, on 19th March, he said that the statement of one of his Ministers, Colonel Wedgwood, that the land question was at the root of unemployment and land monopoly must be broken by the Taxation of Land Values, was in harmony with the views of the Members of the Government; the matter was not escaping their attention but items in a programme had to be taken in a progression and not in a block.

It is, of course, impossible to do everything at once, but it is no less imperative to take things in their proper order and do first things first. What measures are to have precedence over the Taxation of Land Values, admitted to be urgent and necessary, now that Mr. Snowden has attached so much importance to the opposition of the landed interests? All kinds of projects that will cost the taxpayer dear and enrich the landed interests in the manner predicted by the Prime Minister. Previous Governments promoted schemes of the kind without thinking or saying anything about safeguards, but are we to behold a Labour Government undertaking the same policy, knowing and publicly admitting that the inevitable effect will be to provide many millions for landowners out of the pockets of the taxpayers?

A White Paper has just been issued showing that since the Armistice more than £170,000,000 have been spent out of the public purse to relieve unemployment, and the unemployed are still counted by the million. The landowners have reaped a rich harvest, but that is not by any means the whole extent of the wrong. The evil is in the after-effects. The relief schemes give employment

for the time being or, more correctly speaking, direct employment in certain channels by diverting it from others. A load of taxation is left behind to harass and burden industry. What is still worse, the encouragement given to exact higher rents and prices for land stimulates land speculation and the holding of land out of use. That has been the experience in every part of the country where the new roads and new railways are being built "to give employment." When the relief schemes are completed, it is discovered that the original causes of unemployment have in no way been disturbed; the problem has only been aggravated. It is all so much wicked waste and should certainly be regarded as such by a Prime Minister who confirms the view that land monopoly is at the root of unemployment and land monopoly must be broken by the Taxation of Land Values.

The housing question is to be tackled by Mr. Wheatley, the Minister of Health, in a new Housing Bill with many promises that only repeat an old story. Poverty and low wages are taken for granted. The remedy is not sought there, but a so-called solution is to be attempted by subsidizing houses on a grander scale than ever before conceived. The loss on former schemes of the kind has added more than £200,000,000 to the public debt. That achievement does not dismay the Labour Government nor Mr. Wheatley, and there is to be another attempt to solve the housing problem without tackling land monopoly or introducing any reform in local taxation. These proposals are doomed to failure, except in the eyes of those who hold desirable sites for sale or control the natural resources from which the building materials are obtained. The rising prices of sand, cement, bricks, lime, slates, lead, timber and the rest speak volumes for the fate of this new adventure.

The Prime Minister has emphasized the case for rating reform. The only hope of promoting house-building lies in the taxation and rating of land values and the relief of houses from taxation. If the Government is bending its attention to this question, has it appreciated the fact that nothing can be done until there is a Valuation showing separately the value of land apart from improvements? Local rating authorities would have to be provided with this new basis on which to levy their rates under powers conferred by Parliament. A national valuation is required for the purpose, and how it can be established with the least possible delay was clearly set forth in the Memorandum of the Land Values Group. Expert opinion alone can decide how long it would take to complete the work, but as we have to look to the date of its completion before any tax or rate on land value can operate, it ought to be begun at once.

The opportunity presents itself in the forthcoming Budget. The Land Values Group reminded the Chancellor that there is a sufficient majority in the House of Commons to carry the proposals into law. This is no more than common knowledge. Both the Labour and Liberal Parties are pledged to support the legislation that the Group has urged with so much conviction. The Budget is a Money Bill and could not be touched by the House of Lords. A Tax on Land Values could be imposed and provision

could be made for the Valuation. Mr. Snowden did not suggest any difficulties on that score. He told the Group that their proposals were perfectly simple and sound, but he emphasized the long and acrimonious discussion they would provoke. It is an attitude not easy to understand. If the present Labour Government is in office next year, precisely the same circumstances will exist. The landlord party will put up the same opposition and use all its agencies and forces to defend its privileges.

But there may be a General Election before the next Budget is due. In that event, is the Labour Party prepared to go to the country with a confession that it could not raise this issue when it had the chance in Parliament? What account will it give of its stewardship when it appeals to the electors for more power and for a second opportunity to redeem its pledges? It will surely be told it had the opportunity, it had a majority at its command to carry the Taxation of Land Values, and it attempted nothing. Meanwhile, we may well ask what is to be the position of the Government if an amendment to the Finance Bill is moved refusing to proceed with the measure because no provision is made for this policy?

A. W. M.

## BYRON CENTENARY

(Died 19th April, 1824)

But what of that? the Gaul may bear the guilt;  
But bread was high, the farmer paid his way,  
And acres told upon the appointed day.  
But where is now the goodly audit ale?  
The purse-proud tenant, never known to fail?  
The farm which never yet was left on hand?  
The marsh reclaim'd to most improving land?  
The impatient hope of the expiring lease?  
The doubling rental? What an evil's peace!  
In vain the prize excites the ploughman's skill,  
In vain the Commons pass their patriot bill;  
The landed interest—(you may understand  
The phrase much better leaving out the land)—  
The land self-interest groans from shore to shore,  
For fear that plenty should attain the poor.  
Up, up again, ye rents! exalt your notes,  
Or else the ministry will lose their votes,

The peace has made one general malcontent  
Of these high-market patriots; war was rent!  
Their love of country, millions all misspent,  
How reconcile? by reconciling rent!  
And will they not repay the treasures lent?  
No: down with everything, and up with rent!  
Their good, ill, health, wealth, joy, or discontent,  
Being, end, aim, religion—rent, rent, rent!

—THE AGE OF BRONZE.

## TAXING ELECTRIC SIGNS

OUR "SYSTEM" OF RATING.—A case decided at the Glasgow Burgh Valuation Committee on 17th March is a typical instance of local taxation methods. Messrs. Treron (Limited) appealed against the entry in the valuation roll of two electric signs erected by them on the front of their premises in Sauchiehall Street. The City Assessor (Mr. Alex. Walker) proposed that the signs should be entered at the annual value of £37 10s. After hearing the parties the committee upheld the Assessor's contention.