

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.*

THE SCOTTISH NATIONAL CONFERENCE

We adduce very definite views on the relation of land to housing. The question of the land is fundamental. If nothing is done to make it possible either for individuals or for public authorities to obtain building land at more reasonable prices than hitherto, housing reform will be paralysed at the outset.

It is often said that the tenement system causes a rise in the price of land. It is just as true to say that it has been impossible to break from the tenement system of working-class houses in large towns and cities because of the enormous price exacted by owners of ground for building sites. The high feuing rates which have in the past been paid for building land undoubtedly influence owners of land in the direction of holding up land until they can obtain these high prices. . . . The result frequently is that the owner of the ground waits till the requirements of the community become so urgent that he is able to exact his own price for land.—*From the Majority Report of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland (1917).*

In Edinburgh the highest feu-duties appear to be those charged by two large educational trusts, one of which is occupied in addition with the promotion of temperance. Had these respectable, and presumably intelligent, bodies been possessed of any considerable foresight they would have seen that by placing such heavy burdens on the provision of small houses, they were actively promoting the creation of these very conditions against which educationists and temperance reformers have continually to struggle, and often struggle at a fatal disadvantage. . . . The descent to the avernus of slumdom becomes not only easy, but inevitable, and the best-intentioned of educational trusts may find it too hard a task to raise their unfortunate tenants again to the upper light.—*From the Minority Report of the same Commission.*

The Scottish National Conference held in Edinburgh on the 6th October has added one more to the series of meetings that have been and are being convened in one centre after another to consult democratic opinion and declare a policy on the relation of the land question to the reform that must come in financial, industrial and social conditions. It was a Conference which brought together from all parts of Scotland, particularly from the South-Eastern and South-Western districts, four hundred and fifty delegates from local authorities, trades unions, co-operative societies, and many industrial

and political organisations. The rest of the audience who attended as visitors for the most part represented the same public bodies, the invitations with few exceptions having been confined to them. It was a magnificent response and an unmistakable demonstration of public feeling and determination.

Such an assembly at a time when the public mind is unsettled and distracted by horrors like the present is not, however, a matter for astonishment. The questions the Conference was called on to discuss are decidedly part and parcel of the great conflict and they are intimately bound up in its issues. The causes of war have to be sought deeper than the crimes of despots and the mad acts of irresponsible statesmen. The causes of war are the same causes that have built industrial conditions and our so-called civilisation on strife and misery. Leave the power to absorb wealth in the hands of those who do not produce, continue the struggle for existence as it is, and the masters of the people will ever be able to invent a pretext for the defence of the extension of their power. They will set nations against one another and within the confines of one nation they will ultimately produce a revolution as the process of dispossession is completed. And the issues of war? It was never true that during wars the laws are silent, except that they speak not for those who are most oppressed. Parliaments legislate then, if ever, for the privileged, and the vested interests whet the scythe for a golden harvest.

These are the circumstances of the time and they demand the closest consideration. There is a reaction in domestic politics, not a reaction from a good state of things but a going back from conditions that were crying aloud for betterment to conditions that are worse; and it is undermining the paltry but hard-won victories for social progress. Landowners have recently been endowed by an Act supposedly framed to increase the production of corn, but whose main effect is to create a boom in land and erect the greatest possible obstacle to the re-population and the regeneration of the countryside. It is the most notorious instance of the trend of affairs which has taken the anti-democratic direction through the beginnings of Protection, through indirect taxation, through the Indian Cotton Duties, and through a war finance which is not only largely responsible for the grievous increase in the price of living but also permits those to escape a burden who ought morally to pay. The latest achievement of the Government has been to ask the House of Commons to spend public money on petroleum boring so that, in addition to compensation for disturbance and surface damage, oil royalties will be established for the lucky owner of the land. These are the measures and this is the spirit of the legislation that will have to be repudiated if there is to

be any health in the future economic reconstruction. But it is not enough to condemn these legislative sins committed when the people's interests are at the mercy of an all-powerful directorate entrusted with a quite different task. The reconstruction cannot take us back simply to where we were in August, 1914, fighting with such weapons as unworkable Acts for Town Planning, Housing, Small Holdings, Unemployment, Insurance, and the rest—all fashioned in the Fabian workshop and so purposely blunted that they could carve no way for economic freedom. With these the Liberal Administration has armed us, and it thought they were a generous equipment when it became afraid to use the one weapon it had its mandate from the people to employ. It was put in their hand by the late Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman in his many speeches of which that at Leeds on 19th March, 1903, may be quoted as typical:—

It may accurately be said that there is practically but one great impediment in the way of a sweeping improvement which would elevate the physical and moral welfare of the people. What is this? It is the interest and the overdue regard to the interest of the landowner and the political and social influence that he and his class can exercise, whether it be the slum owner extorting a preposterous compensation for tenements that ought to be indicted as public nuisances and removed at his expense, or whether it be the possessor of open land holding it up that he may gain the increment which the industry and energy of our people create. In these cases and all the cases, and in gradations of cases between them you have the public interest, and in antagonism with it the interest of the individual. You and I side with the public interest. Let the value of the land be assessed independently of the buildings upon it and upon such value let contribution be made to the public services which create the value.

Here is the weapon which in eight years of office the Liberal Party displayed but never used and not even the Valuation was perfected, so great was their timidity in face of the enemy. The weapon that would have destroyed "the interest and the overdue regard to the interest of the landowner" was discarded and all the enthusiasm was shown for schemes that attempted to consort with land monopoly and sought amelioration in public charity. There was a great programme of these schemes before the country when the war broke out and they still hold the first place on the platform of the party, to judge by the statements of its representative spokesmen when the charmed words "economic reconstruction" are discussed. They spell them in terms of regulation, control, organisation, and inspection which will attempt in vain to build on the foundation of landlord privilege and exaction. And safely under these foundations they would bury, if they have not already buried, the pledges of the past. Is this to be the final act of those on whom so many hopes that they would rescue the people from economic oppression and give freedom a chance have been placed?

If so, they can be ignored in the work for real reconstruction that is coming, the reconstruction that will make it clear that the land shall be treated as common property, that land monopoly shall no longer stand in the way. Once more, in an official document the obstacles imposed by the high price of land have been affirmed with startling emphasis. The Report of the Royal Commission on Housing in Scotland was published on the day of the Scottish Conference and its revelation of the revolting conditions under which the mass of the people are forced by land monopoly to live confirmed everything that the Conference stood for. It only stopped short at the advocacy of the remedy the Conference pronounced, but it is implicit in the Report throughout. We have again the admission that "the question of the land is fundamental," that "the requirements of the community become so urgent that the owner of the ground is able to exact his own price for land." Yet what are the remedies proposed? All vague and intangible. It is the official mind again at work devising schemes, by-laws, and machinery for a housing policy that will take "fourteen years" to effect, and all embodied in 418 separate recommendations. This Report will be duly reviewed in this journal. In its revelations, at least, it is "Social dynamite," as one Scottish paper has called it: but in its recommendations it is a pop-gun. Such is the tragedy of the official mind.

Popular opinion is fortunately more heroic, if such a Conference as that at Edinburgh is any guide. Declaring the cause of the evil conditions in the land-locked areas that keep men bent at the machine, bowed before the plough, condemned to a bothy or a slum, and always under tribute except when, begging for a job, they have no tribute to render, the Conference demanded the radical remedy that alone would make reconstruction possible and put the labourer in possession of his own.

A. W. M.

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