

BATTLE WITH THE SLUM.

WHY GLASGOW WANTS TO RATE LAND VALUES.

OVERCROWDING.

104,000 PERSONS LIVE IN ONE-ROOMED HOUSES.

CITY'S HANDS TIED BY LAND MONOPOLY.

By R. L. OUTHWAITE

(In the "Daily News" of 9th April.)

On February 1st last, by 40 votes to 17, the following resolution was carried by the Corporation of the City of Glasgow:—

That, the Corporation having approved of the resolution contained in the Parliamentary Bills Committee's minute, of date 25th January, 1912, relative to the levying of a tax for local purposes on the valuation of land under the Finance (1909-10) Act, 1910, the Town Clerk be instructed to communicate the said resolution to all rating authorities in Great Britain, requesting them to petition the Government in favour of the same at the earliest possible date.

At the outset of an inquiry for THE DAILY NEWS into the motives underlying this action, I waited upon the Lord Provost, Mr. D. M. Stevenson, at the Municipal Buildings in Glasgow. What principle, I asked him, had the Corporation in view in seeking to establish a new basis for assessment?

"The argument is well known by now," he replied. "The difference between the value of the site on which this building (the City Chambers) stands and that of meadow land is due to the community. So it is held that land value provides the just basis of assessment. Under the present system the rates are apportioned according to the use to which land is put. A site worth £100 per annum may be let for £10; there may be a coal or wood yard on it. It would be rated on the actual rental—£10. It is held that the owner should pay on the true value, irrespective of the use to which he puts his land, and if he chooses to hold it up for an expected rise, he should meanwhile pay rates on the real value from time to time."

How it would act.

"Do you anticipate this would lead to the better use of land?"

The Lord Provost looked out of the window and indicated an out-of-date structure occupying one of the most valuable sites in the city.

"If the owner of that property opposite were rated on its site value it would induce him to put it to a better use."

"And has the Corporation been hampered by the present system in its endeavours to improve the city?"

The Lord Provost pointed out that the answer to that question was to be found in the history of the endeavours made by the Corporation to get powers to rate land values, and continued: "The 1909 Budget only touched future increment, with the exception of the undeveloped land tax. We want power to rate land values apart from Imperial taxation. We desire to use the new valuation for our purpose; it is in sight now, and the time has come to set our house in order, and so the Corporation has taken this step."

Following advice which the Lord Provost had given me when I first called upon him, I sought the views of Bailie Alston, on whose initiative the Glasgow Corporation is renewing its demand for powers to rate land values.

"I had long believed in the justice of this principle," said Bailie Alston, "but it was only when I became a member of a public body that I realised how urgent was the need for its application to remedy the evil of land monopoly. My first experience was as member of the Cathcart School Board, which had to build a new school every two years owing to a rapidly increasing population. We were forced to build a school at Mount Florida. It was then an agricultural district, the land being rented at £2 10s. an acre. But at this period the Glasgow Corpora-

tion was laying down water and gas mains, providing drainage, and a tram system. So when we approached the proprietor for one acre one pole, he demanded, and we had to pay, a perpetual feu duty of £100 per annum. He ceases to contribute anything to the local burdens. Later, within half a mile from this spot, the Board purchased another site, and the procedure was repeated.

£8,000 for a 30-Yard Strip.

"Take another case. During the past twelve months the City Council desired to effect an important improvement at the corner of Argyle Street and Union Street. The proprietor on the north side of Argyle Street proposed to erect new buildings, and the Council thought to take this opportunity to acquire a strip of frontage forty yards in length, 4 ft. 6 in. wide at one end, tapering to nine inches at the other. He demanded £19,000, or £130 per square yard. The Corporation refused to pay, and the improvement has not been carried out. Round the corner, in Buchanan Street, for a strip thirty-yards by 4 ft. 6 in. the city paid £8,000. The moral is that where values exist, created by the community, the community should have power to draw from that source all revenue required for municipal government."

"There is another more important aspect of the question. From my experience as councillor and magistrate I am convinced that land monopoly is the source of all other monopolies and their attendant evils. I recognise that when you relieve houses from taxation and force land into use, a better and cheaper class of house will take the place of the slums. I don't so much object to what the landlord takes, as what he prevents being done."

"I signed to-day fifty ejection orders. The poor people will go to crowd with others, and if they go to "ticketed" houses the occupiers may be fined for overcrowding. It is a horrible business. A magistrate recently sent 78 men to gaol in one batch for sleeping in a brickfield. Contrast this with the wealth of a city where the owner of land worth £130 per square yard pays nothing. In the slums the people pay twice as much for a given area of floor space as is paid by tenants in the fashionable suburb of Pollokshields."

From official sources one learns that in its endeavour to improve the housing of the poor and the amenities of the city the Improvement Department incurred under special Acts an expenditure of £2,439,725 15s. 1d., giving a net cost after realisation of certain properties of £1,586,786 5s. 10d., and showing a probable deficiency on realisation at a present valuation of £322,584 0s. 4d. For these transactions there was borrowed £1,215,558 17s. 4d. and raised by special assessments £597,003 0s. 11d. The cost of new tenements, model tenements, family house, and labourers' dwellings totalled £347,652 8s. 7d. On seven lodging-houses, with sites, there was spent a further £109,342 19s. 5d. These latter sheltered during 1911 nightly lodgers to the number of 693,328, including 89,105 females, the payment per night ranging from 3d. to 6d. As against the sum of £597,003 0s. 11d. raised by special assessment, the ratepayers have free assets valued at £32,753 17s. 9d., and Alexandra Park, costing £40,000; the balance has gone in the main to the formation of streets and to confer a special benefit on adjacent land-owners.

In view of such tremendous expenditures to remedy conditions due to land monopoly, the main result of which has been to put millions of increased land values into the

pockets of ground landlords and leave the evil unremedied, it is not surprising that the ratepayers of Glasgow should continue to make an insistent demand for power to levy upon the communal land value fund. All the more reasonable seems the demand in view of the extent to which land benefited by municipal expenditure escapes from contribution.

From the Assessor's office I gleaned the following significant facts. The area of the city is 12,975 acres, from which was collected for 1910-11 the sum of £1,044,600. Of this area 1,360 acres appears in the valuation roll as unoccupied land, and contributes £275. There is a further unoccupied area of 1,320, but as it is attached to other subjects, such as farms, it is rated through them, and the amount it contributes cannot be estimated. The Corporation owns 320 acres of unoccupied land which is not included in the above. Consequently 2,680 acres, over one-fifth of the area of the city, is unoccupied in the hands of private individuals, and contributes a few hundred pounds to a total contribution of over a million. When to this area is added that which, whilst being technically occupied, escapes through the structures on it not being in conformity with the value of the site the need for a land value basis of assessment is obvious.

The Death Roll.

I waited upon Dr. Chalmers, the Medical Officer of Health for the City, and told him the object of my mission. He said: "I have no politics, but you may say the need for reform is as great as ever, there has been no improvement as regards the evils due to overcrowding." I went to view a typical corner under the guidance of an official of the department. A few minutes' walk from the municipal buildings brought us to a place of Doom, where huge tenements towered aloft around a narrow courtyard. We entered one through the low archway and began to climb the stone stairs. It was midday outside, it was night within. The stairs were greasy with damp, the stench was as if we were ascending an inverted sewer, nauseating, utterly horrible. On one landing a few feet square, lit by a glint of light from a window over against which stood the wall of another tenement, there were huddled eight little children—this was their playground. We knocked at a door, and, getting no answer, opened and entered. It was a dark, musty smelling den. In the middle of a room was a cradle with a baby in it, two little children were sitting on the floor by it, and a child of about five was in bed and in charge of the family. There was an unguarded fire in the room. Opening from this room there was another small crib. We closed the door and left the children to their fate, and ascended to the fifth and topmost storey, looking in on the way at similar homes. This tenement was one of two-roomed houses; in homes of such dimensions live 348,731 people, 47 per cent. of the population of Glasgow. In these the death-rate is 21.3 per thousand comparable with a rate of 11.2 per thousand for houses of four apartments and up.

Where Children Perish.

Then we visited another tenement comprised of residences of one apartment. The homes we entered at each flight were about ten feet square. In one we found a little pale-faced boy and two women who were trying to sew in the dim light, one of whom said she came from Inverness. I asked her if she preferred Glasgow. "If you ask me, there is no place in the world worse than Glasgow," she replied sadly.

The one-room house is let for 2s. 9d. a week, sometimes by the night for 1s., with a blanket branded with the word "Stolen," to prevent theft, and a stick or two of furniture. In such houses in Glasgow there dwell 104,128 people, 14 per cent. of the population. In these the death-rate is 32.7 per thousand, comparable with 11.2 per thousand in homes of four apartments and up. In such homes of one and two compartments still dwell, after all Glasgow's noble endeavours, 61 out of every 100 of her population. The density of population in Glasgow is at the rate of 60 to the acre, in the area I visited it is 567, in the particular locality described it is 973. And over one-fifth of the area of the city is unoccupied land! It is for power to bring the people out of the black holes of Glasgow, to save the children who are perishing in battalions that the Corporation is appealing to Parliament.

The "Ticketed" Houses.

In such localities as these are the "ticketed" houses, of which there are 20,344 in the city. They are subject to visitation by a sanitary inspector at any hour of the night or early morning in defiance of the "sanctity of the home." In 1909 such inspections resulted in the detection of 3,846 cases of overcrowding, and the infliction of fines in 472 cases. Here is an illuminating Press report of such a prosecution:—

Among the overcrowding cases dealt with at the Eastern Police Court yesterday, that of Hugh Logue, a labourer, aged 22, was one of an extraordinary nature. Logue pleaded guilty of overcrowding the single apartment he rented at Marlborough Street to the extent of three persons more than were allowed by Statute. Two inspectors stated that on June 10th, while in search of overcrowded apartments, they heard suspicious sounds proceeding from Logue's house, and on looking in through a chink in the shutter, one of the officers caught glimpses of the members of the family scurrying about apparently in a state of excitement. Having demanded admission, they found Logue's wife, the father and mother of the accused with two children in bed. Suspecting there were other members of the family in the house, a search was made, in the course of which the bed was closely examined, and the missing members, accused, and his two sisters, aged 20 and 16 respectively, were found secreted between the bedboards and the mattress. The three were somewhat exhausted when relieved from their uncomfortable place of refuge. A fine of 7s. 6d. was imposed.

I called upon Mr. Fyfe, Chief Sanitary Inspector of the city, and he put the problem of the overcrowded tenement in the true perspective. Speaking of the prosecutions, he remarked: "It is only stirring the pot; the poor creatures just shift from place to place. There are plenty of better houses standing empty, but they cannot afford to rent them."

It is thus no question of securing closing orders; as a matter of fact, many of the ticketed tenements are those in best structural condition. Then Mr. Fyfe gave instructions, and sent me into another room to see ocular demonstrations of this point—and here in passing let me bear testimony to the great courtesy shown by the officers of the Corporation to me when introduced by Bailie Alston. We went into a room on the walls of which were hung great canvas sheets covered with figures prepared by Mr. Fyfe. They were the results of his investigations as to the wage status of the occupants of one, two, three, and four room houses in selected areas. At a glance one saw that the tenement problem is a wage problem, a poverty problem. In a street, the tenements of which I have described, live fifty labourers, four artisans, one professional man, and eleven men of various occupations. Their average weekly wage is 14s. 6d. In one street the weekly wage is 10s., in another 13s. The one-room houses are almost entirely occupied by people getting less than £1 a week, and each rise in the wage status goes with occupancy of a better dwelling.

The citizens of Glasgow know that they have created a vast fund that now goes into the pockets of those who render no service in return, and that any endeavour on past and discredited lines would only swell that fund and leave present evils untouched. They hold that the rating of land values will make this fund available for social benefit, and also make available to private enterprise the land withheld from use. By taking this socially created fund to remove the taxation that now falls on buildings, and land being forced by the process into beneficial use, they anticipate that the slums and tenements would disappear, and that in their place more desirable accommodation would be provided for those whose need is greatest.

All too inadequately have the reasons been indicated which have led Glasgow to make once again this appeal, but they should suffice to ensure the support of a democratic Parliament. A Free Trade Government may be expected to listen to an appeal from the business men of the Clyde, the Clyde that last year turned out a greater tonnage of shipping than all the German Empire. Moreover, the example of Glasgow should inspire such endeavour as will assure that London, after the County Council elections next March, will take her rightful place in the life and death struggle to free civic life from the incubus of land monopoly.