

MR BALDWIN AND THE MINERS

By D. J. J. OWEN

SIR,—It is a pity that the public opinion which has proved itself so effective in controlling the foreign policy of the country should be so helpless in the matter of a fair deal for the miners. There is abundant evidence that the conscience of the general public is as sensitive to the unjust conditions of the miners as it was to the iniquity of the proposed partition of Abyssinia. But we are unable to make Mr Baldwin budge in this case. The seat of the Secretary for Mines seems more safe than that of the late Foreign Secretary.

I suppose the reason is that the public responded to the educational efforts of the League of Nations Union and similar bodies. But who can make the issues simple and clear with regard to what seems a complicated subject of coal-getting? We seem to forget that a Royal Commission on the Coal Industry reported in 1926 (Cmd. 2600), the Chairman being Sir Herbert Samuel. In that report the Commissioners say :—

We concur in the general conclusion that the system of private ownership of this great natural resource is open to grave objection. . . . A system which vests the ownership of minerals under the surface in the owner of the surface means that the planning of the mines is influenced continually by surface boundaries and surface rights. . . . Many of the present defects of the industry in this country are largely due to the fact that the miners have had to adapt themselves to surface ownership. It is found that on the average each mine has had to obtain leases from no fewer than five mineral owners. Nevertheless, the areas of coal worked from any particular pit have not necessarily been those areas which could most economically be worked from that pit, but those for which the mineowner has succeeded in obtaining leases. The consequences have been an undue expense in development and a waste of time for the miners in travelling underground to and from their work. These defects of the past are continuing in the present, and will prejudice the future. There is still no proper control over the disposition of the new pits that are continually being sunk. . . . Nor is there any remedy if an owner, refusing for any reason to lease his coal, withholds this national asset from development.

There could be no clearer demonstration that the mining problem cannot be separated from the general question of the private ownership of all land. There was no remedy for the withholding of coal or other land from use when the Coal Commission reported. Since then, in the Budget of 1931, an attempt was made through the tax on the value of land to begin to control the hitherto unrestricted monopoly in natural resources. Had this land-value tax been allowed to operate it would by now have been exercising its effects in making it harder for owners of mineral resources, as well as other owners of land, to impose crippling conditions on would-be users.

When the public of this country vents its indignation so justifiably regarding the lot of the miner it should be reminded that the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer who consented to the "raw deal" for Abyssinia are the same men who wantonly and without any mandate repealed the 1931 Land Value Tax, thus leaving their friends in undisputed control of their monopolistic powers over the lives, not only of the miners, but of all of us who must have access to land for our livelihood.—In the "*Manchester Guardian*," 10th January.