

## RECONSTRUCTION AND THE LAND

Speech by Sir EDWARD PARROTT, M.A., LL.D., M.P., at the Annual Meeting of the English League, July 27.

As the latest and rawest recruit to the LAND VALUES Group in the House of Commons, I have great pleasure in seconding this resolution. I sincerely regret the absence of my friend and colleague Mr. Charles Price, who has been so long and so honourably associated with the LAND VALUES movement. I believe that, as far as my views on the land are concerned, I may claim Mr. Price as my "onlie and true begetter." He was chairman of the Liberal Party in South Edinburgh and I was a humble member of the Executive when, for the first time in history, the question of LAND VALUES was made the leading issue at a Parliamentary election. Most of us then—even the mandarins of Liberalism—were profoundly ignorant of the subject; but Mr. Price had sat at the feet of that Gamaliel of Land Reform—Mr. Edwin Adam—now unhappily withdrawn from public life and filling with conspicuous success the post formerly occupied by Sir Walter Scott. Thanks to the perspicacity and insistence of Mr. Price, our candidate, the late Lord Dewar, was persuaded to stake his political future on the question of LAND VALUES. I shall never forget the campaign that followed, twenty years ago. To our audiences it was a revelation almost as soul-stirring as that first vision of the Pacific which Cortez obtained from a silent peak in Darien. For the first time South Edinburgh people realised that the question of the land went down to the very roots of national and social life, and permeated it through and through in its every phase and aspect, like the hypothetical ether of science. They learnt for the first time that not only did the land-owner dominate their lives and keep them in a perpetual thrall, but that the system led to a monstrous auction in which men were forced to bid against their neighbours and pay through the nose for those very values which their presence and social and industrial activities created. Everywhere men seized the fundamentals of the problem, and the result was—as it must always be when the question of land is dealt with boldly and intelligently—a great victory.

Later on, we in Scotland had the inestimable privilege of giving to the LAND VALUES propaganda its most inspired Apostle of modern times, Mr. Alexander Ure, now also withdrawn from the political arena and camouflaged in public remembrance by a baronial title. Every member of this League recalls with gratitude his extraordinary gifts of exposition and his marvellous capacity for peregrination. It is not too much to say that the Land Clauses of Mr. Lloyd George's famous Budget of 1909 owed more to the advocacy of Mr. Ure than to any other living man. In that Budget we accomplished a legislative victory—not by any means a Trafalgar, but rather a Battle of Jutland. At all events we inscribed the principle of the Taxation of LAND VALUES on the Statute Book, and began the compilation of that new Domesday Book which is still a secret document, but, once it is made public, will assuredly open a new book of Revelations.

Now, Sir, perhaps I may be excused this little incursion into history because it shows clearly that the resolution before us is no mere essay in opportunism. We certainly do take occasion by the hand when we point out that the close of the war will be marked by a world-shortage of food-stuffs and by an enormous demand for raw materials, and that nothing can open up the Land to that labour which will supply us with our vital necessities but a drastic measure of Taxation and Rating of LAND VALUES. We do not advertise a new nostrum; our remedy had been on the market for a third of a century, and wherever it has been fully and boldly taken it has led to a remarkable restoration of public health.

"Once tried, always used," is our motto and boast. The basic principle of the medicine which we purvey is fully recognised by every member of the faculty. We have been combating the ignorance, indifference and selfishness which stand in the way of its full application for thirty years, and the moment has now arrived when we can claim that unless the nation subjects itself to our treatment, there can be no reconstruction worth the name.

To me, Sir, it is amazing that while we have a Ministry of Reconstruction and while schemes for setting the nation on its feet again after the war are "as thick as autumnal leaves that straw the brooks in Vallambrosa," no method of dealing with the fundamental question of the land has been so much as whispered by the Government. The Government has taken no single step to bring down the price of land; on the contrary, by means of the Corn Production Act, it has raised the cost of land by some 50 or 75 per cent. What sort of reconstruction is this? The Land still remains the Ark of the Covenant upon which the Government dare not lay hands without suffering the fate of the sacrilegious Uzziah. Yet, until they are ready with legislation which will open the land, and free industry, by transferring local and national imposts from buildings to the soil upon which they stand, they are simply playing at reconstruction. They are not qualified practitioners, but quacks and vendors of sham remedies. They resemble those credulous savages who hang charms round their necks and repeat vain shibboleths, hoping by this means to cure their palsies.

Let me give you some idea of the character of reconstruction which is being carried on in Scotland. We have always had a real land hunger north of the Tweed, and the demand for small holdings has always exceeded the supply. Our Small Holdings Act of 1911 has proved a lamentable failure because of the high cost of land, the heavy compensation demanded, and the crushing legal charges involved. The Secretary of Scotland is now engaged in acquiring land for the settlement of discharged soldiers and sailors, and he is going to and fro, cap in hand, to the great landlords beseeching them to let him have land for the purpose. They are doing so, and he is getting it at what is called market price—that is, at a price which includes the socially created value. At the same time, he is bespattering the sellers with praise for their striking patriotism. Two gifts of land which have been received call for a word of remark. One of them came from a patriotic trawl-owner. It was a free and genuine gift of highly valuable land; the other came from a duke; it has been described as the lean and scraggy end of the huge joint of his estate, yet the gift, such as it was, was coupled with conditions, one of which was that the Government was to spend £20,000 in two years upon the estate. In order to make the place accessible, postal and telegraph facilities will have to be installed, and a railway will have to be built—at State expense. You know what the result will be—a new accession of value to the rest of the estate. The Duke has sacrificed a sprat to catch a mackerel. That is the sort of land reform upon which the Government are engaged to-day.

Here is an instance which has come to my notice recently. Away on the north coast of Sutherlandshire, on the bleak shores of a loch, there is a hamlet of twenty-five houses. The residents endeavour to till miserable patches of ground among rocks and bogs. There is an island in the loch occupied by a large sheep farm. Last season the inhabitants of the hamlet appealed for a portion of the island to produce oats and potatoes. After considerable trouble, eight acres of the island were secured, potatoes were planted and corn was sown; the latter was eaten by the sheep, but the potatoes proved an excellent crop. Now comes the cruel and unreasonable part of the story. In November last the people cut the grass that grew between their half-acre allotments.

They were immediately threatened with pains and penalties if they removed a single blade from the ground, because, forsooth, they had only paid rent for the soil on which they grew corn and potatoes. And this plea was sustained by the Board of Agriculture on the ground that the Board was applying for the whole island, and the action of the small holders would prejudice the application. Oh! these sacred rights of property! When are we going to establish the sacred rights of men and women?

We shall close this war with a public debt exceeding 8,000 millions, and our only hope of restoring our pre-war standard of living is to increase production enormously. You cannot possibly do this unless you open the land to the fullest possible economic use. Every scrap of land that by the application of labour can produce wealth must be made freely accessible; every restriction must be removed if we are to pay our way and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. A League of Nations, such as we all hope for, implies a fiercer rivalry than ever in the industrial competition of the world. We shall enter upon this competition with our hands bound and our energies crippled and hampered, unless we are prepared to make the land, more fully than it has ever been before, the "treasure house of the nation."

You have an Emigration Bill in Select Committee at the present moment. Its object is to facilitate the expatriation of those who have fought and bled for England on French and Flemish fields. They are to be encouraged to sail to the ends of the earth and to settle on unoccupied lands in the Colonies. By this means it is hoped that there will be no loud outcry for land reform on the part of those whose services have made them the perpetual debtors of the nation. Some time ago I travelled with a Canadian friend from Edinburgh to Oban, and as we passed through stretches of country tenanted only by deer and grouse, he remarked, "Why, the country is more sparsely populated than parts of Canada!" What we want is not a Bill to send our gallant men overseas, but a Colonising Bill for the homeland. Surely those who have fought for Britain are entitled to land in Britain and not at the ends of the earth.

One word on the Housing Question and I have done. In Scotland a Royal Commission on Housing has recently reported, and has drawn a lamentable picture of the state of things which exists north of the border. Perhaps the most striking paragraph of the whole report is that in which the Commissioners declare that the question of the land is fundamental, and that without drastic reforms any schemes for providing houses at reasonable rents must fail. Several of the worst instances of land monopoly and profiteering mentioned in that report are drawn from my own constituency. Out of a hundred specially examined cases of land feued for working-class dwellings in Edinburgh, we find the cost varying from £65 to £656 per annum per acre, a capitalised value, at twenty years' purchase, of £1,300 per acre in the first case, and £13,120 per acre in the second case. In the new constituency which I hope to represent occurs the classical case of 110 acres of land needed for gas-works. It was mainly agricultural in character, and was let at £5 10s. per acre. The ducal owner extracted from the city of Edinburgh £124,000 for this land, which was equivalent to a feu duty of £56 per acre or 1,000 per cent. increase on the agricultural value which he formerly received. The consequence of this unconscionable profiteering is congestion and overcrowding, a deficiency of light and air, workers' efficiency prejudiced, the children's health and strength impaired. You cannot take the first step in a rational system of housing without a drastic scheme of land reform such as we advocate.

Look at the question from any angle you will, from the point of view of food-production, the extraction of minerals and metals, housing, the burdens on industry, everywhere

you see as the result of the present system a restricted production and a cumulative injustice, which enriches the few at the expense of the many. This war has ruled a broad black line across the ledger of the world, and we must open all our accounts anew. For the first time the landlord party has to reckon with millions of men who have faced death and mutilation to save their land from foreign domination. They have saved it, and they look forward to a new era in which every man may sit under his own vine and fig-tree, none daring to make him afraid. Before that happy day can arrive, the incubus of the present land system must be removed, and it can only be done fairly and without violent revolution by a frank and full adoption of the principles for which this League stands. With the heartiest goodwill I second the resolution.

### A LABOUR HOUSING CONFERENCE

The Labour Housing Association held their Annual Conference in London on June 29, and there was present a good attendance of delegates.

The usual resolution calling on the Government to grant loans to public bodies free of interest was carried unanimously, and thereafter a resolution in the following terms was submitted to the Conference:

That, in the opinion of this Conference, rateable value as a basis of local taxation is an obstacle to the erection of dwellings to let at a reasonable rent, and should be replaced by (a) a tax on site values, and (b) a tax levied in proportion to the income of the tenant.

This resolution was down in the name of the Association itself, and we may be permitted to congratulate it on adopting a policy which, as we believe, is fraught with immense possibilities for good. In doing so, we refer to the first part of this resolution only, and fail altogether to see where any benefit can accrue from levying a tax on the tenant in proportion to his income.

The following amendment in the name of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values was on the agenda:

Delete all words after (b) and substitute "A corresponding remission of Taxation of Houses."

An amendment in the name of the Portsmouth and District LAND VALUES League was also entered:

That, in the opinion of this Conference, all local rates should be levied on a Land Values basis, and all improvements—such as shops, factories, &c.—should be exempt from any contributions to rates or taxes.

To prevent overlapping and to facilitate the business, this amendment was withdrawn by the Portsmouth League.

A further amendment stood in the name of the National Union of Clerks, as follows:

Delete all words after "Values."

And here comes the mystery which till now is unexplained. Though the United Committee's amendment stood on the agenda before that of the Union of Clerks, it was moved from the chair that the order be reversed, and, in reply to a question from Mr. F. Verinder, the Chairman announced that this change would in no way prejudice the United Committee's amendment.

The Union of Clerks' amendment was then put to the meeting and, by a majority, rejected. So the words of the resolution, "a tax levied in proportion to the income of the tenant," stood. To the surprise of many present the Chairman then stated that the United Committee's amendment could not be taken, as the Conference had decided in favour of the tax on the tenant. In view of his previous assurance, we are utterly at a loss to understand such a ruling. In any case, the Conference ought to have had a