

LAND & LIBERTY

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THE CHANCE OF THE LABOUR PARTY

The fiat has gone forth! With steam and electricity, and the new powers born of progress, forces have entered the world that will either compel us to a higher plane or overwhelm us, as nation after nation, as civilization after civilization, have been overwhelmed before. It is the delusion which precedes destruction that sees in the popular unrest with which the civilized world is feverishly pulsing, only the passing effect of ephemeral causes. Between democratic ideas and the aristocratic adjustments of society there is an irreconcilable conflict. Here in the United States, as there in Europe, it may be seen arising. We cannot go on permitting men to vote and forcing them to tramp. We cannot go on educating boys and girls in our public schools and then refusing them the right to earn an honest living. We cannot go on prating of the inalienable rights of man and then denying the inalienable right to the bounty of the Creator. Even now, in old bottles the new wine begins to ferment, and elemental forces gather for the strife! But if, while there is yet time, we turn to Justice and obey her, if we trust Liberty and follow her, the dangers that now threaten must disappear, the forces that now menace will turn to agencies of elevation.—PROGRESS AND POVERTY, Book X., Chapter IV.

The Labour Government, as we predicted last month, has come into existence and things in general remain as they were before the event. Public opinion shows nothing but sympathy, interest and good will, and in progressive political circles there is high expectation. The seals of office were handed over at Buckingham Palace to the Labour Cabinet as calmly and unostentatiously as ever before to the representatives of the "capitalist system." It is verily a decided turning point in the history of the country, something akin to the birth of a new era in thought and action. It is all a glowing tribute, this "bloodless revolution," to the sanity of the British people, and shows, too, how the opinion manufactured and upheld by the Press is at variance with the real opinion of the country. The democratic spirit has triumphed and the new freedom is already finding expression in every department of social and political life. The Labour Party is in Downing Street; and the mischief-makers of the Press Trust are, presumably, on the search for another "stunt" designed to bring about the end of all things. The menace of a disastrous railway strike has been removed, and otherwise our Labour Premier is busy enough making friends for himself and for the country all round the globe. And this is as it should be.

The coming to office of Mr. Ramsay MacDonald and his Cabinet, composed of so many plain citizens from field, factory and workshop, vividly recalls to

a friend sojourning abroad an arresting passage by Henry George in *THE CONDITION OF LABOUR*: "To-day a wider, deeper, more beneficent revolution is brooding, not over one country, but over the world. God's truth impels it, and forces mightier than He has ever before given to man urge it on. It is no more in the power of vested wrongs to stay it than it is in man's power to stay the sun. The stars in their courses fight against Sisera, and in the ferment of to-day, to him who hath ears to hear, the doom of industrial slavery is sealed." The war fever has abated and the man standing for peace at home and abroad is now to be put to the test. Nor does the change end there. Its implications must be reckoned with by the other Parties in the State. There were, for example, Liberals, official and parliamentary, who yesterday held the view that perhaps the way out was for the Labour Party to take office; and experience would teach them that it was one thing to call for sweeping reforms and another thing to pass them into law. What these past-masters in the political art forgot was that, once a Labour Government became a realization and not a dream, the chances were that they would make good, and in so doing gain an influence and establish a reputation that no future Liberal Party could hope to surmount.

As Mr. Wheatley, the new Minister of Health, said the other day:—"If the other classes had been fit to govern there would have been no housing problem for him to solve." The truth of that indictment cannot very well be gainsaid, and if the Labour Government can even make a satisfactory beginning to solve the housing question they will earn the gratitude, the support and the affections of the badly-housed, no less than the respect and the esteem of all classes in the community. The Government has not a majority of the House at its call; but there is a majority in the House, and in the country as well, for the passing of certain measures and ripe and over-ripe for settlement.

In our relationships with other countries there lies a path to explore in almost every direction. What is most wanted and what has been promised in this sphere of influence is open diplomacy. A democracy that tolerates secret agreements, hitherto practised by the Foreign Office, is a democracy in leading strings to a few selected persons with no more capacity for judgment or reflection than the average citizen concerned with the progress of the race. To put an end to this anachronism is to better the political enfranchisement of the people. The Labour Government stands for this salutary change.

A principal feature of the recent bloodless battle at the polls was the downfall of Protection. But as to this let the enemy speak for himself. Commenting on the change in the fortunes of the Tory Party, the *SPECTATOR*, 26th January, says:—"The present position of the Unionist (what a name to bear in the teeth of Irish freedom from the Union!) Party is amazing—when we consider their immediate past. . . . In home affairs, even the Labour Party were not bitterly or violently opposed to them, while the greater part of the Liberal Party was beginning to look upon Mr. Baldwin's administration as fulfilling the functions of that Centre Party which so large a part of the community

desires. And then the curse fell upon the Party." And thus the SUNDAY TIMES of the day following:—"The starting point of recovery, as we have repeatedly urged, must be the dropping of Protection. At any cost, Unionism has got to rid itself of this fatal entanglement. Until it does so its usefulness for all purposes of construction or defence is as good as wasted. So long as it fights under the most-riddled flag in the whole armoury of British politics, the country will distrust it, and will automatically vote against it. The first condition of any real unity, therefore, in the Unionist ranks is the abandonment of Protection or its silent burial." The Chamberlain group and the Chamberlain influence will take a lot of silent burying; in any case, so long as the "curse" falls only on the Tory Party and not upon the country, no great harm will be done. Meanwhile, the people who sent the instigators and supporters of the proposed curse into well-merited retirement, if not into oblivion, have rendered a great and timely service to the cause of human progress, a service which no man nor combination of men may hope to recall or undermine in our day or generation.

The passing of the Protectionist curse opens the door, as in 1906, to the solution of industrial and social problems, and this time something to account should be carried into legislative achievement. The deplorable condition of the country cannot be wholly attributed to the war. From 1906 to 1914, from the standpoint of getting down to the bed-rock of industrial and social distress, we might just as well have been labouring under a reactionary Government. There has been enough marching and counter-marching up and down the hills and dales of vested interests; the time has come for political action, at the point of least resistance. Inquiry and experience alike indicate where this opening lies. In his speech at the Labour Party Albert Hall Victory Meeting, 15th January, Mr. MacDonald cried in a dramatic manner for "Houses, Houses, Houses," and emphatically declared that if they were held up by monopolies and trusts in building materials he would break them.

A great crusade is promised, but how far can it go before it is brought to a halt by the monopoly that is responsible for the withholding of the natural resources from which the building materials are taken? Unless the land monopoly is first tackled, the rings and trusts in building materials are certain to baffle, if not break, the Labour Government.

The wages question is the major part of the housing question, as it ever was. The man at the gate fixes the wages of those inside and landlordism keeps him at this post. Idle land means idle men and low-paid labour. As the late Charles Booth said, our present industrial system "could not be carried on without a margin of unemployment." It is that margin that must be wiped out if the wages of labour are to rise above subsistence level. In a communication to the WESTMINSTER GAZETTE, 31st January, Sir Daniel Stevenson, a representative Liberal and a Glasgow housing reformer of over thirty years' standing, says the whole question of housing has been getting into a deeper and deeper bog, and points out the relation of wages to any housing scheme. He goes on to lament the case that there is no likelihood of wages being sufficiently raised to enable tenants to pay economic rents, and

complacently infers that it is almost incredible that any other than subsidized housing will be in operation in our time. It is the expression of a political economy that, alas for fundamental democracy, is held by its votaries in all circles of society. But why stop at housing? Is it not equally true that wages are insufficient to provide clothing and food? Are there not millions on the verge of starvation? Has Mr. Seebohm Rowntree not proved by careful investigation that there is a large mass of working people who, if they never wasted a penny of their wages, are yet doomed to go through life in want and misery? Is the next step in this "rake's progress" to subsidize clothing and food as well as houses?

These are questions that are calculated to take us back to first principles or forward to a fuller realization of the slave state, where the producer of wealth, denied the fruits of his daily toil, must eke out an existence on the charity of those who are placed above the starvation line. But why not give first principles a hearing? Wealth can only be had by labour applied to natural opportunities, and that being so, the labouring classes should be the possessing classes, everywhere.

In the Labour and Liberal representation in the new House of Commons there are 394 members who are publicly pledged to get to the heart of these problems through the Taxation of Land Values. The Government can pass legislation at once to give effect to that policy. The position is no longer obscure. What was dark and mysterious to the politicians in the far-off days of the 1909 Budget has given place to a clear perception of the right line of advance, namely, a national tax on the value of all land apart from improvements, a tax levied on the true market value of land in town and country without exemption, gradation or invidious abatements of any kind or character. The local rating of land values and the required legislation to that end, operative over the whole country, can be placed later. The basis must be a national and systematic valuation, and as a Budget tax will establish such a valuation, it will at the same time advance the cause of land value rating as nothing else can. The Budget tax is as it were the path-finder to valuation. On that ground alone, the many local authorities that have urged Parliament to legislate for the rating of land values would be well advised to give their approval and support to this method of procedure.

It is only necessary that the land value be simply defined, and be ascertained by a Valuation Department fully equipped and adequately staffed for the purpose, aided by all the past experience and all the accumulated data that is at command. The work can be expedited if the defects of the 1909 Valuation are not forgotten—its secrecy; the hopeless task of valuing improvements; the faulty drafting that led to adverse decisions in the courts; the employment of valuers on all sorts of odd jobs that had nothing to do with valuation; and much else that was avoidable, if the Administration of the day had not surrendered to landlord pressure. The way to secure a universal, sound and agreed valuation, and as quickly as may be, is to value the land only; and in doing so, to ensure the willing co-operation of all parties interested in any piece of land, *and in the land of the neighbourhood.* by

making it clear that this time the facts will not be hidden away from public view and treated as "landlord property," but will be published in all detail in the open light of day for general information both before and after the final figures are settled. There should be a map of every townward and every country district with the value of each piece of land inscribed thereon. That is the atlas that will be the real "Domesday Book" of this country; a Domesday Book that the landowners themselves will have effectively helped to make reliable and accurate. Publicity in the matter of Land Valuation is the right way and the only feasible way of recruiting the undoubtedly useful and necessary assistance of the landowners and their agents.

The preliminary and indispensable step is to re-equip the Valuation Department with the power of which it was deprived last session to obtain the particulars of transactions in land, to ascertain the prices and rents paid for land that changes hands, to note the alterations in boundaries and put other relevant information on record. That evidence, and the ability to secure it without question, is the key to valuation. The Labour Government and Members of Parliament are fully aware of the importance of these functions of the Valuation Department, as was amply revealed in the Debates on the Finance Act of last year. And through all the time when, the Coalition Government being in power, the work of the Department was being crippled, its staff diminished and its purpose all but defeated, our supporters in Parliament and outside were agitating to keep the structure intact for the day that was coming. That day has arrived and nothing should be permitted to stand in the way of the Parliamentary recognition and status of Land Valuation. What has been won already is in the main stream of achievement and "with the current we can go fast and far; against is hard pulling and slow progress."

If our settled fiscal policy could have solved social problems, the triumph of Liberalism for all time was confirmed when Richard Cobden destroyed the Corn Laws and opened our ports to the produce of the world. At the close of his life he saw plainly enough that land monopoly was reaping, and would continue to reap, the benefits he had planned for the community as a whole; and he boldly declared: "You who shall liberate the land will do more for your country than we have done in the liberation of its trade."

The policy of free imports has maintained its ground. It was a good beginning towards complete economic freedom; and the failure to advance in this direction lies at the door of the politicians who refused to listen to Cobden's voice on the need for radical land legislation. The working classes were caught between land monopoly and material progress, and the successors of Cobden, abandoning the true Liberal principle he had handed over to them, sought refuge in so much State charity. The undeserved poverty of the workers was accepted as in the nature of things, and money for social reform, money for housing, for enforced idleness, and all the rest, became the principal economic plank, next to the doctrine of free imports, in the Liberal programme. But the endowment of poverty means the strengthening of land monopoly and so it comes about that the more money spent on the worker,

the more he remains the same. The hope of democracy is to be found in the opening of new opportunities.

J. P.

THE VOICE OF THE ACRES

I am the voice of the acres,
From my lands all riches rise,
Vast from its deep resources,
Abundance for all supplies.

My mapled forests are singing
Of the glory that waits for man,
Of labour and skill united,
With the source of all wealth—the land.

Of temples that rise in their glory,
The cottage with climbing rose,
Of they that build and shall enter,
No fine on their thrift imposed.

Of peace, goodwill, of Earth reborn,
Giving labour and skill full pay,
Of freedom from tax on needful things,
Of Industrial Empire's sway.

But sad is the plight of the landless,
Their heritage gold must buy,
Grief's clouds brood o'er my acres,
As they fertile but empty lie.

For my rich lands are yearning
For the touch of the hand of man,
From Atlantic's shores of sunrise
To Pacific's sunset strand.

My lands came virgin in richness,
Their harvest for labour of man,
Broad acres are for the needy,
The homeless and seekers of land.

My urban acres are groaning
With the toll that rents command,
That man from man is grasping
For the use and right to my land.

My acres are food of the nation,
Through my land the revenues rise,
Rich of the people's creation,
The hope for which ages cry.

As field responding to labour
Supplies to man his food,
So values reflected by mankind
Shall nourish the nationhood.

For Truth in its revelation
Unfolds His all-wise plan,
The fiat for all creation,
The right of all to His land.

—W. J. INGRAM, Toronto, Canada.

A NEW HOUSING POLICY FOR THE NEW PREMIER.—From a leading article in the DAILY MAIL of 25th January: "There should also be power to levy adequate rates on eligible building sites, especially where these are in close proximity to land that is already built upon. The yield of such special rates on the land would be yet another means of meeting the cost of housing."

In this case the italics are not ours. Sixteen years ago the DAILY MAIL said to our office the time had not yet come for their support of our policy. It moves.

* * *

On 9th January ex-Mayor F. C. R. Douglas attended a meeting of the North Battersea section of the Women's Labour Party and delivered an address on the Taxation of Land Values. The same group was addressed by Mr. Andrew MacLaren on 16th January.

Can you enroll at least one new subscriber to "Land & Liberty" in 1924? 4s. a Year, post free.