

## LAND & LIBERTY

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### THE GENERAL ELECTION

But yesterday there was a majority in the House of Commons for Land Values Taxation with a Chancellor of the Exchequer informed as to its merits and determined to make provision for the policy in next year's Budget. The scene changes and to-day there is a Parliament just elected with a clear majority of 215 against any such step being taken. Mr. Baldwin, the new Prime Minister, in his address to the electors set the proposal aside as "spoliation." That opinion represents the attitude of the official Tory Party, though there are countless thousands of Conservatives everywhere who on this question "lean to the left." The proof of this statement was given in 1909 when many attached to the party thought the day of judgment had come to relieve them, at least to some extent, from the burden of monopoly rents and high taxation. Hopes of a speedy change for the better were high in those days through the wide field of political adventure. As one of our gifted writers on the subject put the case at the time:—

"By our present revenue system the citizen is subject not only to the State, but to the landowners of the country. In some places this may be concealed by the multiplicity of landowners in town or district. But in agricultural parts, where one owner may rule a countryside, and even to towns and cities, the power of the landowner is patent at every turn. No man can touch the land till the landowner's price has been paid. Until his views are met, no local enterprise need be set on foot. He is a lord indeed, though he may not be summoned to sit among the Peers. Of what avail the right to vote, even under the ballot, if the owners of the land you live on disapprove? His rights are rights to tax industry, and by our present system he is free to exercise these at his will. He can ask such a price, or place such restrictions upon use, as to interfere and prohibit the growth of a town, or make half a county into a deer forest. A combination of land-owning corporations has the same despotic powers of life and death over a community."

This is the explanation and the sentiment that rallied the forces of land reform fifteen years ago and brought to the support of the Government of the day men of all parties and men without party attachments. How that strength was frittered away by hopeless incompetence and how the cause has suffered since by the abortive legislation that was carried and afterwards repealed (with the cash taken handed back to the landlords) is now part of the political history of the country and has been fully dealt with in these pages.

But the question of taxing Land Values and correspondingly relieving industry of the burden survived. The continued subjection of the citizen to the land monopolist and the tax gatherer saw to that; again there came the chance to carry this just and overdue reform and this time with more strength and better understanding of its purpose. What has happened? The General Election and the results can best explain.

In their Manifesto to the electors, the Labour party gave a passing nod to the question, making no attempt whatever to relate it to hard times, housing and unemployment. The Liberals, in their statement of policy signed by Mr. Asquith and Mr. Lloyd George, sought to confine the reform to towns and urban districts, only to destroy it with increment tax and land purchase. And to better this reactionary turn, the Liberal Publication Department, treating as a mere scrap of paper all it had ever said or done to enforce the clear principle, issued two statements on the land question, one entitled, "To all who live in towns and cities," and the second, "To all who live on the land."

In the past this Liberal Office has done something to teach the people that land has value whether in town or country. But in these precious papers we are told that this "community created" land value exists only in the towns, and is the creation of town people alone. The farmer who sends his produce to these market places, and helps thereby to keep the towns in existence, is told that the higher land values in towns is none of his concern; that his land problem is in a separate category. The latest Liberal remedy for the farmer's grievances is to introduce a new kind of land tenure that "will combine the advantages of ownership and tenancy without the disadvantages of either—a system of cultivating ownership." The State, we are informed, will do all this for farmers who are farming well, and those who are inefficient will be retired, after having been given a fair chance to amend. As to this, "competent experts" will separate the sheep from the goats. The ability to farm well, the farmer is reminded, will be the one qualification for holding farm land. An exception is made in the case of the farmers who now own the land they work; they will not be required to make any change whatever. And the farmers who bought their land at high prices will receive special treatment. The State will buy them out *on the basis of the price paid by them* (italics not ours), and accept an annual rent based on the rents paid in the locality for similar farms!

This is not a caricature, it is a considered statement of Liberal land policy issued by the Liberal Publication Department last month. It had a first-rate Liberal Press, the WESTMINSTER GAZETTE boasting in heavy type that over half a million copies had been circulated. The election revealed many things of a surprising and amazing character, but this Liberal attempt at land control and farming under the direction of local committees is indeed an item of surpassing interest. But we shall deal faithfully with it in a subsequent issue.

Apart from the bias of partizanship, there can be nothing but general contempt for the instigators of this unwanted Election with all its disastrous consequences. There was a clear majority in the

Commons for progressive measures. But the two parties, Labour and Liberal, who held the position, could not agree to carry on, they could not reconcile their petty differences. They risked their seats for the sake of their party, and they risked their party for the sake of a triumph that had no place outside their own conceit and heated imagination. They behaved as if the well-organized opposing forces were of no account, and as if the unattached voter and the public in general were on their side whatever the ferment of the moment might be. They derided, taunted and threatened each other over trivial matters that were at strange variance with the things of the spirit; and in these wayward and childish moods they hurriedly brought their tenure to a close on a point that was more in keeping with the fortunes of an open-air debate in some obscure corner of Hyde Park.

We refuse to take sides in this ill-natured and ill-omened quarrel. The blame lies with the party leaders in both camps. Had they been as concerned with the betterment of the lot of the common people as they were about their own over-wrought, ill-balanced dignity and selfish party ends there would have been no Election. They appeared to labour under the delusion that the result of the 1923 Election was a tribute to their own superior qualities, and that Free Trade, Housing and the Taxation of Land Values, the real issues at stake, were mere sound and fury signifying nothing. They were not equal to a great occasion and the Election was a sham fight all through. At the best neither Liberal nor Labour could hope for a clear majority, and had they not made it plain to the people who gave them their chance that they could not work in harness together for any good end? That was the true interpretation of the contest and the result followed as a natural sequence.

The leaders of the progressive forces and their servile followers in Parliament are they who have fallen short of the strength and conviction in the country for real reform. Years roll on and nothing is accomplished, nothing that alters the day's toil and reward of a single individual. Undeserved poverty becomes more aggravated, the great vested interests deeper entrenched; hope gives place to despair and revolutionary sentiment develops an ugly menace to Parliamentary institutions. This is the evolution that can be put on record and it goes to show that a democracy may rise to the fullest political enfranchisement and go to pieces through the pedantry, the stupidity and the vacillation of its elected persons. That in essence is the lesson of the Election of 1924. For sheer incapacity, even on the low ground of tactics, there has been nothing to compare with this experience within living memory. And as for the fight on the hustings, at the very outset the reactionaries stood to win. Tories were counselled to vote for Liberals and Liberals were urged to vote Tory and "keep the Socialist out." It was a fight with the gloves off—for personal and party ascendancy. The underlying issues of national strength and ordered society were forced into the background and in the mêlée, pride and prejudice made certain that fear should triumph at the poll.

The Liberals declare they will not have Socialism because it means State ownership and control;

yet they cannot accept the only principle that would bring freedom to individual enterprise. Mr. Asquith's two potent promoters of industry and progress, cheap land and lower taxes, have been turned down in favour of an all-in insurance scheme against the ills that are inherent in the present system of high-priced land and heavy taxation. The Liberal principle this time is not to throw off burdens at the expense of monopoly but to accept the burdens and make industry pay for their mischievous effects. But how to do this without State regulation and control is their problem. It cannot be done the Liberal way and so their ameliorative schemes are but pace-makers for the fuller application of the process they condemn. They cannot or will not understand the law of rent and what it has to say to all their pro-landlord plans for social and industrial development. Wrong in their superficial grasp of economic law their political posturing is by way of restriction and bureaucracy, a way that they themselves profess they do not seek to go.

The official Liberal party will not face this issue and the land reformers, no mean section in democratic circles, are driven perforce to try their luck in the Labour camp. The emasculated policy of the Liberal Publication Department on the land question will not win back the land reformers, nor will it bring the party new recruits. The million leaflets issued by the United Committee at the General Election did something to counteract the baneful influence of this latest Liberal explosion on the land question and there are more to follow. There are Liberals everywhere on whom we can depend for service in our publicity campaign and we hope to see them provided soon with some informing literature. The Taxation of Land Values is not a party question, but it has done more for the Liberal party than they ever knew or cared to admit. They will not be allowed to use it for party ends in any 1909 mutilated form, not at least without some effort being made in answer to their make-belief.

In his opening speech of the campaign Mr. Asquith said: "Our policy is by free co-operation of individual and communal effort to better the lot, brighten the lives, and to give the fullest possible play to the faculties and the possibilities of every subject of the King." This sounds very pleasing, but Mr. Asquith singularly failed to point to the Liberal policy that would bring these blessings to the poor and needy. Meanwhile what about the Liberal housing policy and how is it distinguished from the Tory or Labour brand? Does Liberalism mean taking taxes off houses and improvements, or does it mean an increment tax for money to buy out the land speculators in the outskirts of towns? Why not make the point clear when the talk is about the wisdom of giving the fullest possible play to the faculties and possibilities of the people? If Liberal policy does not mean economic freedom then it must mean guardianship by the State, the enrichment of the land monopolists, and the despair of every man and woman who takes Liberalism to mean the using of the State not to help the poor, but so to legislate that the people will obtain equality of opportunity, the chance to help themselves and to work out their own salvation.

"The cure for unemployment is not yet" cried Mr. Ramsay MacDonald at the Labour party Conference held on the eve of the election campaign. Later, on October 21st, when challenged with his failure even to mitigate unemployment he said: "The only way was by a national experiment through the House of Commons, local councils, co-operative societies, churches and through every organisation interested in human well-being. That," he added, "was what we meant when we said last year that the Labour party alone had a practical remedy for unemployment." What an abject confession of futility and failure! It is worse than the usual statement of some labour men when they openly declare there is no cure for the malady short of a turn-over from private enterprise to State ownership and control of industry. In either case the Labour reply to the unemployed is that you must knock at some other door than ours, or wait for a decade or two till something in the nature of a miracle takes place. The reply is, in effect, the Labour party have a cure but that it remains with the people of the country to find the men in sufficient numbers to put it into operation. In plain English it means that the unemployed of our time have nothing to hope for from the Labour party.

It is almost impossible to do anything to better the lot or brighten the lives of the people with a million unemployed at the factory gates, and it is this hard fact that both the Labour and Liberal party has to meet and cope with. If the worker is ever to find employment it must be in new opportunities and a uniform tax on land values for this chief end has yet to be tried. All other schemes are tried failures. They do not add to employment but merely redistribute the amount now limited by the restrictions of land monopoly. The failures work in a two-fold manner to add to the trouble: first by limiting the purchasing power of the taxpayer and secondly by increasing the value of the land, thereby encouraging the owner to keep it out of use at ransom prices.

But there were other voices heard on the subject. Speaking at Sheffield, October 24th, Mr. Snowden advocated a drastic measure for the Taxation of Land Values, and continued: "We (the Labour party) have a positive remedy for unemployment, but whoever said we could apply it in eight months?" The Taxation of Land Values is surely a "rational experiment" and it is one that does not require to wait on the conversion of local councils, churches and all other organisation. It can be put through the House of Commons and would have been offered there in less than eight months but for the wanton action of the Parliamentarians last month that has, *inter alia*, driven Mr. Snowden from his appointed task.

The Labour party have yet to realise the vital importance of the Taxation of Land Values as a weapon to cut at once into the root cause of unemployment. But they will stay lost until it is understood and placed, with Mr. Snowden's emphasis, in the forefront of the programme. The unemployed do not require to wait on the architects with plans for the building of a new heaven on earth. That ideal, common to all forward-looking people, can take care of itself once the way is opened up to its

evolution. It is the new State, however visualised, that must wait on the solution of the unemployed problem. Talk as we like about the promised land of peace and progress, until the fundamental obstacles to employment housing and all industrial expansion are removed, the various and varying plans for social redemption, be they never so admirably sketched, will remain at the paper stage. The unemployed citizen is master of the situation; his presence keeps wages low, and low wages means poverty, despair and reaction.

But what can be said for our own line of advance? A General Election affords a telling opportunity for enlightenment, and in our Election literature we made the most of it. But our work and progress are not limited by Election contests. This Election has brought us a number of new friends and adherents, some equipped and ready to help on the work; others keen to understand the case with a view to having it accepted in their field of endeavour. We are grateful to all who at short notice helped us to issue the campaign literature and to those who saw to its distribution. We can claim that there is more support for our policy at home and abroad than at any other time. Let the work go forward is the order of the day; let it be maintained and extended as it has been in recent years and the future is ours. J.P.

I stand as a Liberal for the transference of the burden of rates from houses and improvements to the site value of the land, and the Taxation of Land Values instead of the necessaries of life.—*A. J. Blue, Liberal Candidate for Hendon.*

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Labour's pledges. . . . To tax land values to prevent the automatic enrichment of landowners by the growth of the community which makes it possible for them to demand extortionate prices for land, which means high rents.—*Mark Starr, Labour Candidate for Wimbledon.*

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As to the future, we propose to tax Land Values in order to secure its best use in the interests of the community.—*H. C. Charleton, Labour M.P. for S. Leeds.*

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The Labour Party stands for the Taxation of Land Values and the restoration to the people of their lost rights in the land.—*W. C. Robinson, M.P. for Elland, Yorks.*

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The Labour Party wanted to get it back and they proposed doing it by the taxation of land values—taxing the land according to its value. By doing that they would not have huge tracts of land lying idle when houses could be built upon it and machinery also placed on it.—*Dr. Somerville Hastings, Labour candidate, at Reading, 25th October.*

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Idle Land and Idle Men tell of our stupid system that permits one man to hold land against the needs of the community. This can be stopped by a tax on land values, which would bring the land and what it contains into the market. Even now our citizens desire land belonging to the Blythwood family. It is not the price of the land they ask, but the value that has been created by the citizens. This is robbery.—*Geo. D. Hardie, Labour M.P. for Springburn, Glasgow.*