

After the Land Commission

Exhortation Not Enough

A "FIVE-POINT ACTION PROGRAMME" for local authorities to step up the availability of land for house building has been urged by Mr. Peter Walker, Secretary of State for the Environment.

In a circular to all planning and housing authorities in England he calls for:

- (a) generous and immediate releases of land by local planning authorities wherever this is necessary and can be done without detriment to other planning objectives such as safe-guarding green belts.
- (b) a reassessment by authorities of land availability and housing needs in their areas to ensure that releases of land should be sufficient to meet housing needs already existing and foreseeable for at least the next five years.
- (c) the sale by local authorities of land for private development wherever existing land stocks are surplus to the authorities' foreseeable requirements.
- (d) continuous monitoring of the balance between house-building rates and planning permissions granted.
- (e) wider consultations between authorities and the building industry, at local or regional level, particularly in areas where builders are running into difficulties in developing land because, for example, of the inadequacy of main services.

Any relaxation of controls over land use must be welcomed; but even so-called green belt land should not be regarded as sacrosanct, for decisions on its boundaries were made many years ago and in different circumstances from many of those existing today. The suggestion that "surplus" lands in the hands of local authorities be offered up for sale to private developers has the merit that the land would not lie undeveloped for an indefinite period. But why sell? It would be better to lease on a regular rent-revision basis so that increases in land value are firmly secured for the rising generation.

Sheffield corporation's proposal to sell seventy-four acres of Council owned "white" land for private house-building was the subject of a recent local enquiry in Sheffield. The corporation had brought the land in two lots in 1940 and 1942 for £12,000 and it was now worth £1 million for building purposes.

The allegation made by a number of local inhabitants

and certain preservation societies, was that the Council's motive was one of making a large capital profit rather than any concern for private builders. The objectors seem to have failed to see that this "profit" will help keep the rates down. But once the land is sold, future increases in value, due to increasing population and the expenditure of public money on local amenities and services, will no longer accrue to the rate-payers.

Mr. Walker asks for more co-operation between planning and housing authorities to ensure a steady supply of suitable building land and to keep the supply ahead of demand.

Nothing is said about the price of land except that it should be stabilised. The non-lamented Land Commission did not stabilise land prices, it is true, but nor will the mere repealing of this Act. It has simply put us back to square one. It is true however, that whatever measures are adopted to increase the supply of land on the market will help to keep land prices down to some extent.

But good intentioned exhortations to local authorities to make more land available are not enough; a positive incentive to both local authorities and private land owners is required; and that could take no better form than the taxation of all land values which would make it unprofitable to keep land out of use where no planning restriction exists. If local authorities had to pay an annual charge on all the idle land they hold they would be much quicker in releasing it, or using it forthwith as too would the private land-holder.

J. R. FIRTH

WITH the death of John Robert Firth at the age of 93, the movement for land-value taxation and free trade loses an outstanding character who has contributed to its advancement and in many other fields of service to the community. He was one of the few still living who heard Henry George speak when he visited Australia.

In 1894 Mr. Firth was helping in campaigns to abolish tariffs in N.S.W. and to introduce a State Tax on unimproved land values. The campaigns were successful in each case. Around the turn of the century, Federation for the Australian States was a lively issue. Mr. Firth opposed it because he saw that under the Federal laws, N.S.W. would be unable to continue its enlightened free trade and land tax policies.

In 1930 the Government appointed him to the Metropolitan Transport Trust, and in 1932 to its successor, the Transport Advisory Committee, of which he served as Chairman for a period. The Government also appointed him to the Electricity Commission where he served from 1935 to 1964. Many dramatic changes occurred in his lifetime covering almost half the recorded history of New South Wales. In many ways he had a hand in shaping that history.

—From a notice in *Progress*, Melbourne.