



## LAND & LIBERTY

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### THE MEANING OF THE CONFERENCE

With the coming and going of important episodes there arrives the time for reflection. The message of Henry George was launched on an industrialized world fifty years ago. Material progress had overrun the civilized countries of the world; wealth was increasing by leaps and bounds; great fortunes had been accumulating; the millionaires were emerging; the muscles of iron and sinews of steel were supplanting human energies in production, but, unfortunately, were failing to satisfy human wants in the mass. Alongside of great wealth dire poverty marched forlorn and forsaken.

The people were dragging political privileges in the dust. Tyranny was being supplanted by conciliatory measures of political reform. New processes in industry had been supplemented by newer and better methods of trade. Currency and the mechanism of credit had shown their elasticity and their power to deal with peace time trade.

Out of all this seeming progress the spectacles of unemployment, low wages, insanitary housing, and—in short—poverty in all its forms kept pace with material progress. The problem had to be faced, and it did receive attention through the channels of alms-giving. The preachers began to notice it. Books were written about Darkest England from the emotional side. Other books were written from the business side, attempting to show that we spent more on useless alms and officialdom than would keep the idle members of the working class in remunerative employment.

The moral faculties were disturbed; ascetic religion developed a sense of proportion and began to recognize that there were duties to be regarded in so far as our neighbour was concerned, that said neighbour being of the derelict class who appeared to be suffering from undeserved want. The æsthetic sense was shocked by the ugliness and brutality of the whole picture.

These things all happened while the politician and the social reformer were marching apart. The

world began to be deafened with negative criticism. Denunciation of existing society varied not so much in kind as in degree. Visions of newer and better social systems shaped themselves in the brains of idealists. After all, "The Golden Age" lay before us and not behind us.

Henry George received some attention. He drew to his side men who were attracted not so much to his ideal as to the fearless analysis he had made of the primary wrong in existing society. People who value their reputation for sanity seldom experience any difficulty in admitting that the institution of private property in land was, to say the least of it, a complete mistake. Many are prepared to say more, but that can pass. We are more concerned with what we can remedy than with the dead past which is beyond our control.

Truth usually marches a long way behind error, for error has so many advantages and favours to offer; thus her army of defence and her standard bearers are fairly numerous. The desire to reach the favoured position is perhaps as firmly established in human nature as the desire to destroy privilege and establish equality. However that may be, we have reached the limits of democracy in Great Britain and other lands without having achieved much in the way of practical results. Political and religious liberty are established while economic liberty still awaits fulfilment.

These are the facts to be noted. Repining may and should cease. A glance backward will show us that all has not been mere movement, but that there has been some real progress. Twenty-one years after the publication of *Progress and Poverty* Britain was following the ideal of Empire. The denizens of streets on which the sun never rises were setting forth to add to the Empire on which the sun never sets. Battleships were being demanded by the rich and the poor in many districts showed their acquiescence, for to them battleships meant more employment. The wrongs of the people were given smaller headlines than the phrases of the diplomats. In Clubland and Parliament there were such problems as the Triple Alliance and the two keels to one standard for Britain.

Thirty-five years after the publication of *Progress and Poverty* comes the culmination of all the aforesaid sophistry. The diplomats have succeeded in bringing about a war to end war; the newspaper headlines have impressed the people in the countries in which they were not expected to circulate; the unemployed in each country has been taught to expect increased employment in proportion as his rulers can destroy trade in other countries.

Then the awakening. We may have more war, but it is safe to say that the peoples of all countries are desirous of avoiding it. How gladly will a war-broken world receive the news, fifty years after the publication of *Progress and Poverty*, that trade and employment are promoted by Peace; they thrive on Peace and in their widest ramifications consolidate and strengthen the Peace movement.

Many sops have fallen into our hands during these fifty years in which we have been doing everything but first things. We have marched rapidly in order to prevent ourselves from being carried downward or

backward. Attempts have been made to augment family incomes, to help to pay house rents, and to subsidize the building of newer, better and more commodious houses. While these things have not satisfied, it would be wrong to dismiss them with a mere shrug of the shoulders. At any rate they have been possible, which is evidence to us not only of the enormous facilities which the Creator has placed at our disposal, but of the effectiveness of modern modes of production, however stupidly we may have misused them.

Experiments in the arts of government have been tried in this and many other countries; regulation of hours, trade boards, unemployment insurance, pensions, nationalization, with care and attention to the citizen in fortuitous circumstances, have passed into practice and beyond the region of comment.

We met in Edinburgh in this Year of Grace 1929; assembled on Monday, 29th July, to mingle with friends from other lands, and to know them better as they will now know us. It was our Fourth International Conference, held under dignified surroundings in an ancient capital city of the world—a city that had witnessed many a stirring event in the history of mankind—and which is justly proud of its traditions. The time has again arrived for introspection and retrospection.

We met after the British nation had given its verdict on the question of the hour. Much as we may doubt the coherency of that decision, doubtful as we may be of its consistency or unanimity, there is yet in broad outlines little scope for incredulity as to the main issues.

Away with the glamour of Empire. Forts and customs houses are alike an abomination. So-called Protection, Subsidies and Safeguarding are the preliminaries of war. We want Peace in our time. Give us a similar liberty to work to that which we enjoy in thinking, voting, and worshipping. Not doles but wages, not alms but opportunity to expend profitably our own energies. Do not preach Peace when there can be no Peace. Support the League of Nations logically by withdrawing the causes of war.

We have coveted the raw materials of our neighbours while neglecting to utilize our own opportunities. To him that hath has been given of the resources of other nations. This has resulted in imports for which there is no corresponding export, notwithstanding the theories of orthodox Free Trade. If Peace is to be put on an enduring foundation such policies must needs have "finis" written against them.

Our Government is committed to Peace and doubtless will pursue it earnestly. It can pursue no other policy for the simple reason that there is no temptation in any other direction. It holds no brief for the trusts or financial magnates; it may not escape the wiles of emigration, or the temptation to help the poor by other methods than justice. We are entitled to look for more than lip service from those who are sent to oppose and not to bolster vested interests.

That there are difficulties in the path cannot be doubted. There are the long years of feudal control and the enthronement of privilege in the constitution of our country. Habits persist in proportion to

the years over which they have existed. Vain copying of predecessors will avail not at all.

We are witnessing the uprising of all nations, and the development of mutual understanding as to problems in our own and other countries. The cause of poverty is a world-wide phenomenon. Unrecognized it has set people against people, and the individual against his neighbour. All this Henry George visualized with the eye of the prophet fifty years ago. He probed to the depths and discovered the bottom wrong. Man is a land animal and the land question is the bottom question.

We may be given votes; we may promote education; we can invent and improve our modes of production. Trade can be extended and enlarged; great numbers of commodities can now be exchanged with ease where formerly a few commodities were exchanged with difficulty.

"We toil and we toil, but we enter not in;  
Like the tribes in the desert, devoured in  
their sin."

Our Conference brought greetings from other lands; and from Denmark, an old country like our own, came the tidings of a renewed attempt to elect a Government with reforming zeal. Anticipations are awakened and much is expected. Hopes are centred on coming Budgets in Britain since our new Government has promised to give effect to the aspirations of the people along a line that should prove the line of least resistance. There is a consensus of opinion on land reform, that is not to be found for any other question, and those who have carried the torch in this crusade should not yet despair of the outcome. As Henry George held, the politicians will accommodate themselves to the wishes of the people if only the people will make their wishes known.

Whatever differences may divide the people there can be little doubt that the taxation of land values is long since ripe for settlement. The rating of land values has been too long delayed, and the attempts to substitute other measures for this long-delayed reform are proving, and will prove, abortive. Heavy drains are made on restricted production to meet the needs of government, not only for social services, but in liquidation of the cost of past wars, and preparations for future defence against defenceless peoples. The individual and community alike have a right to enjoy their own earnings and to utilize the resources of their country. There should be wages for the worker and rent for the State. In the utilization of land there should be that increased production which will yield the taxation for the upkeep of government at less sacrifice to the general well-being.

That is the message of the International Conference; that is the thought for to-day, for to-morrow and all the days between now and the fulfilment of the hopes based on the pronouncements of our new Ministers. We have the written assurance of over one hundred Members of Parliament that they are with us. We can count those who are against and more who are for us. With the experience of the past to guide it, the Government should be able to avert further disaster, and to make the will of the people prevail.

W. R.