

"A Casino For Speculators"

IN his presidential address to the Royal Institute of British Architects Mr. Basil Spence said:

"Our cities are the heart of our civilisation. Our historic and architectural treasures bear witness to our ability to create towns and cities as beautiful and civilised as any in the world—Bath, Edinburgh, York, Chester, the Georgian terraces, our finest parks and streets continue to draw tourists from all over the world. But the greater part of our towns and cities are grim deserts of bricks and mortar, great areas of dereliction and subtopian wastes of semi-detached houses and bungalowoid growths left by the industrialists of the 19th and the spec. builders of the 20th centuries.

"Our precious land, so beautiful and so small, has become a casino for the speculators, who are now clamouring to build in the green belts that surround our cities—less, one suspects, because they really want to solve the housing problem, than because there is a fortune to be made if the Minister of Housing and Local Government can be persuaded (and I hope he never will be) to relax his defences. Like the profiteers who corner the bread supply in a besieged city, the speculators are cornering the limited supply of building land in town and country and holding the community up to ransom. The money that should be going into better architecture and higher standards is being taken by people who have contributed nothing to the building process. This has grown to the dimensions of a public scandal, and threatens to make good planning and city reconstruction prohibitively expensive.

"I sympathise with builders who find it increasingly difficult to build, but we must harness their skill and resources to the building of new towns and the renewal of old ones, and prevent the continued outward sprawl over the country side.

"The problem of rebuilding our cities bristles with difficulties. We need new powers and new sources of money. We need to raise our own standard of proficiency, and to apply some of our greatest talents to the task. But, if the nation decides that the job be done, I am sure that we in all the professions concerned can do it. But, I must add, if the opportunity is not taken now, it will not recur in our time."

Despite its truth and power, this attack is open to criticism. It was wrongly directed. We are bitterly and consistently opposed to the speculative withholding of land from use. But we blame measures, not men. Land speculators are neither better nor worse than other men. In seeking the highest possible price for the land in their possession they are conforming to a natural instinct. It is axiomatic that people seek to satisfy their unlimited desires with the least exertion: to buy cheap and sell dear

is natural, sensible and respectable. What is wrong are the laws which treat land as a commodity to be bought and sold. They are comparable to those which permitted human beings to be traded as chattels—and economically far more harmful. The blameworthy are those who through ignorance, indifference or selfishness leave them on the Statute Book.

IN ALL DIRECTIONS

MR. GAITSKELL is stamping round the country boldly deploring the high price of land and throwing out suggestions as to what should or might be done. At Nottingham, February 13, he remarked cagily: "we may even have to go back to some of our old ideas about the ownership of urban land." Carefully non-committal at Oxford, June 10 ("I will not plump for any one solution") he mentioned only two: a single tax or increased public ownership of land for development.

At Durham, June 19, he spoke of the intolerable position in which land speculators were making great fortunes while local councils could not plan the development of our cities as they wanted because the cost of compensating the landowners was too great. There were only two alternatives to this deplorable state of affairs. It might be possible to find some new and simple way of diverting to the community the rise in land values, but he himself believed that both equity and the need for good planning now required the extension of public ownership over the freeholds of urban land—developed or undeveloped.

"The case for this was always powerful. It was first advanced nearly 100 years ago. Would that it had been accepted then! How enormously we should have benefited today if the local councils had all these years been reaping the benefit of community development. The time has come when the community must assert itself. We have a right to ensure that the rise in land values, due to the development of the community, comes back to the community."

In his fifth speech, at Cannock on July 2, Mr. Gaitskell marginally improved his performance. He did actually mention the taxation of land values, but in such non-committal terms and in such poor company that silence might have been preferable. Press and radio gave his passing reference a prominence which it did not deserve. He said:

"There is undoubtedly a powerful case for the local authorities acquiring the freeholds in the land of any area which is to be developed. There is also much to be said for other fiscal measures, such as a tax on site values, a tax on capital gains, or the imposition of a development charge."

Local authorities are already burdened with heavy debt and faced with rising costs and expenditure: to saddle