

no mean source. The indictments were framed in language courteous, but of unmistakable severity. They exposed the inmost characters of the men with whom we have to deal—and who will shortly appeal to the voters of the country to be given a fresh lease of controlling power, which they will use for the purpose of exterminating the property owner.

## HOUSING AND DESTITUTION.

### II.—A PAPER THAT WAS NOT READ AT THE CONFERENCE.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—We are met here, it seems, to consider how we may provide houses, or get them provided, for the working classes, and especially for the destitute. It seems to be assumed, strangely enough, that the working classes, who by their labour create so much wealth, must necessarily be poor; that it is somehow in the nature of things that many members of the working classes are unable to get work, and are therefore very poor, because "unemployed"; and it is known and admitted that after a spell of unemployment they tend to become "unemployable" and destitute. We have resolutely refused to consider the causes of these things, and have spent a great deal of time and eloquence in discussing how we may "prevent" the extremest effects of destitution by inspecting the last traces of self-reliance and self-respect out of the unfortunate victims of those horrible social diseases, called poverty and destitution. The one solid outcome of our deliberations, so far as I can see, will be that, if the suggestions laid before us are carried out, unemployment among "inspectors" will be reduced to the vanishing point. But I did not understand that that was the object of this Conference, when I accepted an invitation to attend it.

I venture, therefore, to offer a few suggestions to you in the hope that they may reach the ears of those who convened this present Conference, and even have some effect upon the Agenda Paper of the next. If I am not very hopeful, it is perhaps because I have read your papers, and have listened to your discussions.

(1) I think I shall not be far wrong, Ladies and Gentlemen, if I assume that you and I are already fairly comfortably housed; that most of us obtained our houses without the aid of a municipal council, or even of the philanthropists who run Garden Cities and Co-operative Tenants' Estates—not always to the satisfaction of those who live in them. It is not primarily or mainly for our benefit that a Housing Act is passed every year or so. It is for the benefit of the men who built our houses for us, and of men like them. It is the bricklayer who builds the wall, and the carpenter who lays the floor, and the tiler who makes the roof, for whom we find it necessary to "provide" housing. Many of the men in the building trade are often out of work. They need houses; they know how to build houses; they want to build houses. Yet you will sometimes find "builders' labourers out of work" grinding a barrel-organ, and appealing to the charity of their fellows in the slums. Why do not these men, who have built good houses for us, build cottages for themselves? You will say, probably, it is because we have not organised and registered and inspected them sufficiently. *Is it not rather because we, and the laws we make, won't let them?*

(2) Before a house can be built we must get the materials. Workmen must make bricks—out of clay found in the land; or hew stone out of a quarry—on the land; saw into planks trees which grow on the land; split slate rock (with Lord Penrhyn's permission) which is part of the land; hew coal and ironstone out of land, and burn the one to smelt the other into the raw material of grates and locks and nails; and so on. But, even when the building materials are all assembled, the actual building cannot be begun till a site has been acquired; for the "bottom side" of the house, which this Conference apparently considers of least importance; probably because when the house is on it, you cannot see it; is economically of great importance, and is the only "side" of the house that cannot be constructed by labour. So first and last, the building of

a house is a question of access to land. There is no scarcity of labour: the army of unemployed is always largely recruited from the building trades. But there is a very real, though artificial, scarcity of land. It is in the hands of monopolists. Some of them will not allow us access to it at all. Others will only allow us to use it on their own hard terms. *Why then have we had no paper, and hardly any discussion, on the Land Question? It is the Housing Question and the Destitution Question—among other things.*

(3) It is said that when Mr. Joseph Chamberlain, then Colonial Minister, imposed a hut-tax on the simple dwellings of our West African subjects, the natives pulled down their huts and lived in the woods. Our local rates are an English hut-tax. It is true that, even under the pressure of local rates which sometimes run up, as at Poplar and West Ham, to 10s. or 12s. in the £, the East-End native does not pull down his house and camp out in Epping Forest. One reason is that the climate is unpropitious; another, that the police won't let him. But the economic effect, though different in the forms of its manifestation, is in either case exactly the same. Perhaps another illustration will make the matter quite clear. Our grandfathers lived in a time of taxed windows. The effect of the window tax was sometimes to cause existing windows to be boarded up. In the case of new houses, its effect was to lessen the number of windows, to prevent necessary windows from being made, to reduce the supply of light and air to the barest minimum. Workmen's cottages were built (*e.g.*) with one glazed and one "blind" window to a bedroom; sometimes without any windows at the back of the house. A great-uncle of mine built, early in last century, a row of cottages in the East-End with just such blind windows. I believe they remain blind to this day. A few months ago I saw some old cottages in a beautiful Wiltshire village, to which a new and "improving" owner had just supplied windows to admit light and air—quite abundant in that locality—from the back. The effect of the window tax was to make windows "fewer and dearer and worse." Now this is exactly the effect which the Royal Commission on Local Taxation ascribed to the existing rating system. It makes "houses fewer, and dearer, and worse." It acts, as Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman said, as a hostile tariff on building. The economic effect of our English hut-tax is to compel two families to share a house that is only comfortably large enough for one; to compel a large family in a small house to "take in a lodger"; to drive people to live, in St. Pancras and elsewhere, in underground cellars. How could we expect such a heavy local tax as we levy upon the occupancy of a house to have any other effect?

Consider the inconsistency of the law which you in your Conference take for granted. If a man neglects to provide a house for his family and tries to live in the street, you hale him before a magistrate, and he is fined, and, in default of paying the fine, imprisoned. I do not complain. He has no right to compel his children to lead this sort of "simple life" in a city, and in a climate like ours. But what if, having now good reason to know what the law is, he endeavours henceforth to obey it? As soon as he finds a house, he is haled before another bench of magistrates. They disguise their functions somewhat by calling themselves an "assessment committee." When he has been convicted, probably on his own confession, of having gone to live in a house, he is fined for *that*. He is sentenced to pay 8s. or 10s. or 12s. in the £ on the net letting value of the house, so that, the better he has provided his family with a shelter, in accordance with one law, the more he is fined for it under another. In the case of a "continuing offence," the fine becomes an annual one; and, always, behind the fine, is the sanction of imprisonment in default of payment. If it is so grave a crime to live in a house, why are we all here fussing about the Housing Question? Why not refer it to a Criminological Section? If the present rating "system" is, as cannot be denied, mainly responsible for our housing difficulties, *why has there been no paper at this Conference on Rating?*

(4) And this brings us back again to the Land Question. Horrified by the discovery of slums in London, with their predatory rents and their murderous death-rates, you tried to get rid of them by buying the owners out. I was one of a very few who protested, more than 20 years ago, against rewarding thieves and murderers with large grants out of the public purse. Years afterwards some of those who

denounced me as the champion of the slum-owner (!), discovered the existence of a syndicate of financiers who were buying up slums in the expectation of earning the reward offered by the London County Council to the owner of the worst slum in London. As the houses were grievously overcrowded with tenants, you had to buy them at a scandalous price; as they were, *ex hypothesi*, unfit for human habitation, you had to pull them down. You paid for worthless houses and the land upon which they stood; but you had nothing but the land for the money. The houses were worth a *minus* sum, equal to the cost of pulling them down. As the site had been grievously overcrowded with houses, you had to make wider streets and an open space. On the land that was left, you built good houses, to which the slum-dwellers did *not* return, because, as you would not permit overcrowding, although the rent *per room* was less, the rent *per inmate* was higher than they had paid in the slum. You know that your schemes under Part I. of the Housing Act (1890) have failed. That is perhaps why the "Moderates" on the London County Council are reviving them.

Then you tried Part III. of the Act. You told us that you would go into the outskirts and buy cheap agricultural land. You would build cottages on the fields six or eight miles from the river, and make them accessible by electric trams with workmen's fares. The crop of new Housing Bills shows that this policy, too, is a self-confessed failure. The fact is, there is *no* "cheap agricultural land" within reach of your trams—unless the rate-assessor goes to look for it. It is then agricultural land of very low annual value, entitled to be assessed at half-rates under Mr. Balfour's beneficent legislation for the encouragement of agriculture. But if a builder goes to look for it, he can find nothing but "valuable building land," and your cheap workmen's fares are quoted as one of many ways in which the municipality has made it so valuable. If the municipality itself wants to buy it, say for a housing scheme, it becomes at once far more "valuable" than ever. When the Council, taking a lesson from the proverbial wisdom of the ostrich, *publicly* announces that it will in future (in order to escape being swindled) buy through some unknown third person, the owner of every building estate suspects the Council's agent in every applicant, and, giving himself the benefit of the doubt, puts up the price all round. So in the process of providing some new houses by municipal action, you set up conditions which prevent an unknown and undiscoverable number of houses being built by private enterprise. As the provision of municipal houses has not yet even begun to overtake the ordinary increase of population, you cannot afford to discourage ordinary commercial enterprise, however much some of you may profess to despise it. There is no proof that the houses built by the L.C.C. are a net addition to the housing accommodation of London, but it is quite impossible to say what the proper off-set is; how many other houses would have been built by "Jerry" and Co. but for your schemes for enhancing the value of land.

The fact is, Ladies and Gentlemen, that the question of the Valuation and Rating of Land lies at the very root of all the questions you have been discussing in this Conference. The landlords of your "cheap agricultural land" have shown themselves lamentably incapable of estimating its value. They have one value (a very small one) for rating purposes; another (a large one) for the purpose of selling or letting to a builder; a third value (usually much larger still) when a public body wants it for a public purpose. There must be some true value, either identical with one of these, or differing from all of them, which should be the value for all purposes. As the landlords cannot find out what this is, Mr. Lloyd George has kindly provided them, through his Budget of 1909-10, with much-needed skilled assistance. We shall some day have an official valuation. One of the uses we propose to make of it is to use it as a basis for rating reform. We propose that the rates should be levied upon the ascertained value of land, and upon that alone; that houses and other useful erections and improvements should no longer be rated at all. The "valuable building land" will no longer escape the rates because it is not used at all; or nearly escape them because the milkman's cows graze on it. The man or the council that builds on it will no longer have to meet a heavy demand for rates on the value of land *plus* building. We have more windows and better windows now that we no longer tax them. When we cease to rate houses, we shall have more houses and

better houses. We shall no longer "pull down our huts and go to live in the woods."

Even your own tinkering schemes will be made easier and more useful. You will get your land cheaper to start with, when it no longer "pays" the landlord to hold up land in face of the regular demands of the rate-collector. You will get your building materials cheaper when clay-bearing lands, and slate-bearing lands, and coal lands are forced into use by the gentle pressure of taxes and rates on their value. The occupancy of a house will be cheaper when it is no longer made a pretext for levying heavy rates, and when the unbuilt-on land in the same municipal area is paying its fair share. The London County Council will no longer be forced to make a heavy payment of rates in respect of its good building to Tottenham or Croydon, when it builds outside its borders; or to the Metropolitan Boroughs when it builds inside.

Some of you, despairing of municipal action, are trying to solve your own personal housing problems by co-operative action. I have nothing to say against it, except that it usually does little more than house somewhat better those who, in any case, would be able to house themselves fairly well. But when I lectured a while ago at the Ealing Garden Suburb I was told that the building of this Co-operative Tenants' Colony had sent up the price of adjacent land, and that desired extensions were thus rendered difficult, and threatened to become impossible—until the rating system is altered. The Urban District Council of Hendon were enabled, some time ago, to reduce the general rate by 2d. in the £, owing to the development of Hampstead Garden Suburb. The expenditure of the garden suburbans on their good houses was thus penalised, partly to the benefit of the men who are holding up the fields upon which other garden suburbs might be built. I am sure Alderman Thompson could tell you a good deal about the effect of the rating of buildings on housing schemes, and what he does not yet know he is sure to learn before he is through with his Ruislip Town Planning. What I cannot understand is *why you did not ask him to open a discussion on the Rating of Land Values.*

(5) I do not forget that this is the Housing Section of a Conference on the Prevention of Destitution. Why are some destitute? If they are destitute because they *won't* work, I think they are a problem not for us, but for the criminologist. They must be disciplined, like other dishonest people who prey upon their fellows. If it is because they *can't* work, we must take care of them, as we do of the sick in body and mind, till they are "fit," if that be possible. That leaves us with the problem of the man who is willing to work and cannot get the work to do. He is out of a "job." In the last analysis, every "job" comes down to the exercise of labour upon land—such as tilling the soil, quarrying for stone, mining for iron, coal, &c., building houses; or to the transporting or working up of the materials obtained by labour from land—the workers in the transport trades, factories and mills, shops and stores, &c. It is clear that if the first category is satisfactorily employed, the second will need little looking after. Everything, therefore, depends upon access to land. The same reform—the taxation and rating of land values—which will open up land for building purposes will, if universally applied, open up land to all the primary industries, and also for the use of the secondary industries, so far as they require it for their workshops, factories, mills, shops, and stores. There is no need for any elaborate organisation to deal with the unemployed question. I know this is a hard saying for those who believe they have a call to "organise" their fellows. But I am not after an inspector's job, and can afford to tell the plain truth, which is, Ladies and Gentlemen, that the "working classes" will get on quite well without the fussy interferences you are so fond of planning for them, if you will only stop the injustice of denying them access to the very means of life. Open up the land to labour and the unemployed will cease to trouble you. You will have cut off the tap-root of destitution. You may then disband your Committee for the Prevention of Destitution and your Distress Committees, and light your pipes with your Housing Bills, while you meditate on the wonderful discovery that the very cleverest "schemes" for the benefit of the "lower orders" are really, after all, not so good a cure for social ills as the old-fashioned prescription of Justice and Freedom.

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