

True and Peaceful Principles

HOLDING one of the principles of eternal justice to be the inalienable right of every man freely to exchange the result of his labour for the productions of other people, and maintaining the practice of protecting one part of the community at the expense of all other classes to be unsound and unjustifiable, your petitioners earnestly implore your honourable House to repeal all laws relating to the importation of foreign corn and other foreign articles of subsistence; and to carry out to the fullest extent, both as affects agriculture and manufactures, the true and peaceful principles of Free Trade by removing all existing obstacles to the unrestricted employment of industry and capital. — *Anti-Corn Law League*, 1838.

LONG BEFORE the Corn Laws were repealed in 1846, Richard Cobden was attacking the land owners, not only because they were the law-makers and they made the laws for their own benefit, but because he saw, if nothing more, the connection between high food prices and high land rents.

In 1843 Cobden declared: "The landlords have been revelling in prosperity — in a diseased and bloated prosperity at the very time when the people have been suffering the greatest privations and want of food." And again: "Let a copy of the statutes of this country be sent, if it were possible, to another planet without a word of comment and the inhabitants of that sphere would at once say: 'These laws were passed by landlords'."

After the repeal of the Corn Laws, which ushered in a growth of wealth production such as had not been experienced before in this country, Cobden still hammered away at the land owners. He pointed out how, through the centuries, right from the time of William the Conqueror, when the whole burden of taxation was borne by the land, the tax had gradually and by devious methods been shifted to the shoulders of labour, until, in 1845, only 5 per cent of the revenue was being paid by the land owners. This was at the rate of 4s. in the £ on a valuation made 150 years earlier.

If Cobden did not appreciate fully the communal nature of land values, there is no doubt that he clearly understood the implications of the land monopoly. In a letter, in 1857, he commented: "... When I was travelling on the Continent I found among thinking people in France, Italy and Germany a great feeling of surprise that men who had abolished the Corn Laws had not also abolished the monopoly in land."

It should be remembered that at the time of Cobden's death, Henry George was only just beginning to write, and that *Progress and Poverty* was not published until fifteen years later, and *Protection or Free Trade?* six years after that. But six months before he died, at the



Richard Cobden

By W

April 2, 1965, marked the centenary of the death of Richard Cobden, better known for his fight for free trade and land reform. Why this aspect

age of 65, Cobden said in his last speech at Rochdale: "If I were thirty instead of twice that number of years. I would take Adam Smith in hand and I would have a league for free trade in land just as we had a league for free trade in corn. If you can apply free trade to land and labour too, then I say the men who do that will have done for England more, probably, than we have been able to do by making free trade in corn."

To the day of his death, Cobden fought for the revaluation of the land and its equitable taxation, and it cannot be doubted that had he lived on he would not have been satisfied with an economy based only on the fiscal policy of free trade. His biographer (Gowing), one time secretary of the Cobden Club, tells us: "During almost the last moments of his life he was heard to repeat the quaint old land rhyme:—

'Tis a great sin for man or woman
To steal a goose from off the common:
But who shall plead that man's excuse
Who steals the common from the goose!"

But what of his successors, those standard-bearers who founded the Cobden Club to commemorate the names and to carry on the good work of those heroes of free trade, Cobden, Bright, Villiers and Peel? A perusal of some of the Club's annual reports down the years makes informative reading, not the least interesting part of which is the almost total absence of any reference to the land question in any department of the Club's activities. It had a committee comprised of Cabinet Ministers, members of both Houses of Parliament and a slight sprinkling of ordinary gentlemen. The names were necessarily those of good free traders, but in view of the strong landed element on the committee we cannot be surprised at the apparent blind spot in their political vision.

The Club published or distributed books and leaflets under a hundred different titles, treating, in the main, of different aspects of the tariff question, including one work by Henry George, *Protection or Free Trade?*

Whilst the recorded speeches delivered at the annual general meetings and Club dinners are redolent with interesting statistics and telling arguments in favour of free trade as opposed to protection, nothing, with one exception, ever appears to have been said or done to further land reform. Lip service in generous measure was paid to him whose name the Club bore, but the complacency of the speakers' utterances compares badly with the urgent tone of Cobden's speeches both before and after the repeal of the Corn Laws. This is perhaps

n—Land Reformer

AM E. BLAND

ry of the death of Richard Cobden. Though
ade, Cobden was also an ardent advocate of
Cobden's views became obscured is traced in this
article.

understandable when it is remembered that they were speaking at a time of relative prosperity as against the unremitting poverty of the "hungry forties."

Yet they could justify the fiscal policy of free trade only by comparison with the conditions of other countries under protection. They pointed to the obvious advantage of the free importation of wheat which gave the people bread at 2d. for a 4 lb. loaf, but they could not deny the distress amongst parts of the farming community. They could compare favourably the high wages of our industrial workers with the low wages of those on the Continent, but they could only deplore the periodic slumps that were hitting the country with ever increasing frequency. They could not see the writing on the wall when trade unions, previously staunchly free trade, turned to protection in the search for higher wages, or when the electorate put in a government that converted a Liberal majority of forty into a Unionist majority of 152, although all Unionists were not necessarily protectionists.

Far from recognising the warning, in the following year, 1896, at the Cobden Banquet to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the repeal of the Corn Laws, Charles Pelham Villiers, M.P., then 94 years of age and the sole survivor of the four statesmen to whom the repeal of the Corn Laws was mainly due, said in a letter to the chairman, after drawing attention to the prosperity they had been enjoying for fifty years, that during that time free trade had become a living force of incalculable energy; and it was his consolation that *never* would such a Corn Law be re-enacted in England.

The Chairman, the Rt. Hon. Leonard Courtenay, M.P., although expressing equal satisfaction with the present state of affairs, must have appeared unduly pessimistic to his audience when he uttered the prophetic words: "The time may come when, although we have adopted and shall continue to maintain the principles of free trade, our population may have to undergo a decline, our commercial position in the world may indicate some falling off. But when that happens, if it is to happen, it will not be in consequence of free trade. We have to confess that the hopes of those who preceded us fifty years ago have not been realised. Our workhouses have not fallen into decay. They are still too full; they are still needed. We have abolished the Corn Laws, established free trade, but half a century has not abolished pauperism."

Two years before this, in 1894, what must have been one of the earliest appeals for the taxation of land values was made at the annual general meeting of the

Club when a committee member, Mr. J. A. M. Macdonald, M.P., asked a question which he said he thought was consistent with the policy of free trade, and that was the taxing of ground values. He said that Cobden, in his last speech, associated the principle of free trade with the reform of our land system. They knew that the increased prosperity of a town increased the demand for land and enhanced its value. They knew that the community was continually creating fixed capital in the shape of streets, sewers, bridges, etc., the whole benefit of which ultimately passed to the owners of the land upon which the town was built. If that were true it seemed to him that burdens were imposed on industry of which they should be justly freed. He believed it would be a popular thing for the Club to agitate in favour of the taxation of ground values and he was convinced that the opinion of the country was in favour of the proposal.

His suggestion was summarily dealt with by another member of the Club committee, Mr. A. D. Provand, M.P., who said that to take up a question of that kind would be to turn the Club into a debating society. Land was already taxed, and no doubt the Club unanimously held the opinion that it was proper to do so, but when they came to deal with amounts to be raised by taxation, and the methods of doing so, they would be in hopeless disagreement, and, therefore, no beneficial result could follow from their taking up such a thorny subject. The same speaker, taking part in a debate on armaments a year later, warned the committee to take up with no question outside the Club's original purpose, as to do so would assuredly produce a disintegrating effect.

From that time on, the history of the free trade movement is within the living memory of a few, and the situation has gone from bad to worse. Today we are one of the most highly protected countries in the world. There is hardly a trade transaction into or out of the country that is not subject to supervision by some official or other. Controlled currency exchange successfully ensures that the even flow of our international trade is impeded and hampered at every stage, with the consequence that we are for ever faced with balance of payments crises.

There is not a political party that stands four square for free trade, but how different might have been the case if those who inherited the torch from Cobden had been imbued with a fraction of his vision and reforming zeal.

FREE TRADE AND TAX THE LAND

I HOPE I shall see petitions calling upon the Legislature to revalue the land, and that the agitation will go on collaterally with the agitation for the total and immediate repeal of the corn laws, and I shall contribute my mite for such a purpose. There must be a total abolition of all taxes upon food, and we should raise at least £20,000,000 a year upon the land, and then the owners would be richer than any landed proprietary in the world.

—Richard Cobden