

3 THE FERMENT OF IDEAS

A survey of the whole question of tenure leads to the conclusion that, wherever the land is of easy access and widely distributed among the inhabitants of the country, the soil is well cultivated and the people industrious, prosperous and contented. On the other hand, wherever the land is in the hands of a few large proprietors, cultivation is checked, and the mass of the people are idle, indigent and improvident.

“The Land Question in England”

Westminster Review, vol. 38 (1870), pp. 233-62

The first phase of the Irish “Land War” produced profound effects in Great Britain during the early and middle 1880s. These effects need to be considered at three quite separate and distinct levels: the reactions of the British rural classes; the economic and political ideas which were sparked off by the conflict on both sides of the Irish Sea; and the effect which it had upon the attitude of the governments and parties towards economic and political questions.

When Irish farmers were fighting for, and winning, the “Three Fs”, it was inevitable that some sort of parallel movement should appear in other parts of the British Isles. The peculiar problems of the Scottish Highlands and Wales will be dealt with later; but the effects in England and the South of Scotland were also important. As we have already seen, the agricultural classes were very different on the two sides of St George’s Channel. Irish agriculture was essentially a two-tier structure; English and lowland-Scots agriculture was usually a three-tier structure, with landlords, tenant-farmers and landless farm labourers. In certain parts, such as Cumberland, the farms usually had few or no labourers, and in some districts there was a substantial class of peasant-proprietors or “yeoman-farmers”; but, broadly, the triple division prevailed. Tenant-farmers were conscious not only that they had complaints against landlords, but also that labourers had complaints against them. Even labourers, however, were in a somewhat less depressed state than most Irish peasants, for the rise of industry meant competition for labour,

and in some districts (though by no means all) labour had a considerable scarcity-value. In most places, rural customs and religion, and in all places language, were shared by the social classes. Furthermore, the landlords were generally resident among those whom they ruled. Thus the relationships between the social classes were a great deal better than they were in Ireland. Neither tenant-farmers nor labourers could closely identify their own interests with those of the Irish peasants.

The agricultural depression of the late 1870s and early 1880s was a most uncomfortable time for all the British rural classes. Large numbers of farm labourers moved to the towns, or emigrated. Evidence was given to a Royal Commission in 1881 that 700,000 members of farm workers' families had emigrated in the previous nine years. The tenant-farmers at first suffered disaster. The 1881 census revealed a 10 per cent drop in numbers of farmers and graziers over the previous decade. In a few years, however, the worst shock was over and, though agriculture never recovered its old buoyancy, the numbers remained constant for the rest of the century. The influx of foreign food which we have already discussed led to a fall in market prices, and the long-term effect of this was an enormous and permanent decline in farm rents. Thus the social predominance of the great landlords was gradually undermined. Even the mightiest of them could no longer maintain the rôle of "kings in their counties". Not long before the First World War, Lloyd George was to speak of a "great slump in Dukes"; but that slump really began in the late 1870s.

Landlords, great and small, were affected in another way, perhaps more serious for their reputations. Traditionally, the English landlord had performed many of the functions which in modern times are discharged by public authorities. A good landlord provided both the money and the initiative for local improvements: housing, farm buildings, drainage, improvements of stock and so on. He encouraged good husbandry. He provided a sort of "welfare state" for folk who fell upon hard times, and gave financial support to a variety of local activities. In so doing, he was able to draw on personal knowledge. He could distinguish between the "deserving poor" and the scroungers; he knew which farmer was likely to set a capital grant to good use. As he was neither bound by past precedents nor fearful of establishing new ones — and the money he used was his own — it is likely that

the proportion of his income which was eventually devoted to the public good was often much higher than in the case of modern state or local authorities. When the farm rents suddenly fell, however, landlords were frequently unable or unwilling to engage in the useful activities they once performed. People who had once looked to the landlord as a guide and benefactor now came to see him as a man who took rent, but gave little or nothing in return.

As the landlords became less and less useful, and the tenants became more and more harassed by the agricultural depression, it was inevitable that some sort of pressure should be mounted for redress. Very soon after Gladstone's 1880 government was formed, the tenants were able to secure relief for one old grievance. Agricultural tenancies often reserved shooting rights to the landlord, and this produced a serious complaint that "ground game" — hares and rabbits — were fed on the tenants' crops, in order to provide sport and meat for the landlord. The Ground Game Act of 1880 gave a tenant the right to shoot these animals on his own land.¹

The closest English parallel with the Irish tenant movement was provided by a body called the Farmers' Alliance which was strong in the early 1880s, and whose declared aims were the "Three Fs". These objects, however, hardly fitted the English situation. Improvements were usually the creation of the landlord, and it was powerfully argued that the practical effect of conceding these demands would be to convert the landlord even more into a mere receiver of rent, with no interest in improvement.² It was also contended that the "real object" of the Farmers' Alliance was "to give tenants large borrowing powers for speculative expenditure, chargeable on the security of the landowner. It is manifest that the Alliance are thinking chiefly of large farmers, and that the legislation they advocate would be ruinous to small proprietors."³ Accepting these contentions, the Government was unwilling to legislate on the proposed lines, but instead considered amending the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1875.

The 1875 Act had created a legal presumption that a tenant was entitled to compensation from his landlord for the unexhausted value of certain kinds of tenant's improvements at the end of the tenancy. The vital weakness of the Act had been that landowners were empowered to contract out of its provisions — and usually did so. A Royal Commission under the Duke of

Richmond was set up a few years later to consider the agricultural depression, and unanimously recommended that a tenant should receive the statutory and inalienable right to compensation at the end of the tenancy. A bill embodying this proposal was accordingly passed, and became the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1883.

Far more important than these legislative measures, and far more significant for the future, were the ideas about land which were germinating during the same period.

In a peasant country like Ireland, where relations between the social classes were often bad, no idea was more simple and attractive than that the landlords should get off the peasants' backs, and the peasants should be converted from tenants into owners. This idea of peasant proprietorship appears again and again in the speeches of the Irish leaders. By April 1879, Parnell had already decided that "the man who cultivates that soil (should become) the owner of the soil . . . when by purchasing the interests of the landlord it might be possible for every tenant to be the owner of the farm which he at present occupies. . . ."⁴

There was, of course, room for considerable argument as to the terms on which the transfer should occur: whether it should be voluntary or compulsory; whether there should be compensation; whether and to what extent public money should be used to facilitate the process; and what — if anything — should be done to help peasants who had no land, or whose land was quite inadequate for their needs. Most of Parnell's own utterances seem to accept the idea of full compensation: the State should buy out the landlord, and the peasants should then repay the State in the form of an annuity spread over a prolonged period. Even Davitt seems to have accepted the idea of a ten-year purchase, or something like half the value of the land, as a basis for compensation.⁵

Ideas which were a good deal more radical than peasant proprietorship began to appear about the same time. Often they were quite incompatible both with peasant proprietorship and with each other; but this point does not seem always to have been appreciated at the time. When Davitt was in America in the late 1870s, he contacted the American land reformer, Henry George. George was already a well-known figure in his own country, although his doctrines had not yet been developed to their full extent. His *magnum opus*, *Progress and Poverty*, had not yet

appeared; but George had already decided that land was fundamentally different from other forms of property, both from an economic and from a moral point of view. Land (so the argument ran) is the creation of no man, and therefore no man has a better title to a particular site than any other man. The sharpest distinction, however, must be drawn between the site and the various improvements (such as buildings, drainage or crops) which man has introduced upon that site. The site itself, and the improvements, each have a value; but these two kinds of value are fundamentally different. The value of the improvements is due to the exertions of some particular human being, and morally belongs to that person or his successor in title. The value of the site, however, has nothing to do with the exertions of the owner. George argued, with considerable persuasiveness, that the existing system of land ownership was the most demonstrable cause of human injustice and exploitation, and perhaps the principal cause. There has been a somewhat sterile discussion as to the extent to which Davitt had already developed these ideas himself before he met George;⁶ but the vital fact was that the two men were thinking on similar lines. Parnell could also be quoted in support of the same view. He was reported, for example, to have said: "The land of a country, the air of a country, the water of a country, belong to no man! They were made by no man! They belong to the human race."⁷

The doctrine that "land belongs to no man" and the doctrine of peasant-proprietorship are not developments from each other; they are based on utterly different and disparate social philosophies. Peasant-proprietorship offered nothing to the urban population, or to the landless labourer of the countryside. To the very small tenants of the West of Ireland, it offered a respite from the tiny rent which could be claimed from their miserable farms, and perhaps it represented an extra security of tenure; but it could offer no prospect of advancement, or even sufficiency, in the future.⁸

In 1881, all of this was blurred. Men like Parnell and Davitt made speeches in support of the disparate themes, and neither they, nor their supporters, nor their detractors, seemed for the most part to have noticed the difference. Henry George himself visited Ireland on a reporting tour sponsored by the *Irish World*. When *Progress and Poverty* appeared in 1880, its sales were promoted by the Land League; the figure of 100,000 copies has been

given for its circulation⁹ — which is astonishing for a quite sober textbook of economics. A companion volume, *The Irish Land Question* (later republished as *The Land Question*), appeared in 1881, and also made heavy sales.

By 1882, when the new Irish National League was formed, the differences between the doctrines had begun to be understood. Parnell had moved firmly towards peasant-proprietorship, while Davitt had moved equally firmly towards ideas much closer to those of George. Parnell's prestige in Ireland stood absolutely supreme at the moment, and without his support the National League was practically foredoomed to failure. He finally agreed to become President only on condition that Davitt would not press his own ideas about land — at least at the inaugural meeting. As Davitt's biographer wrote, the National League "represented, both in its programme and in its constitution, the counter-revolution to the movement started by Davitt."¹⁰ Davitt obviously intended to raise the matter later, although his devotion to the political cause of Home Rule, and the intense personal loyalty which formed so large an element in his character, prevented a clear confrontation between the two doctrines. By the time he felt himself free to expound his own ideas, the die was cast, and Ireland was set irrevocably upon a course which would lead to the Parnellite conclusion and not to his own.

In Great Britain, however, the course of events was profoundly different. As we shall later see, the idea of peasant-proprietorship was much in vogue during the 1880s, and most of the current land theories seem to have derived more or less inspiration from either the Irish Land War or the works of Henry George. Some of the movements of the time (like Stewart Headlam's Guild of St Matthew's, in Bethnal Green), had a strong religious flavour. Some, like Henry Broadhurst's Leasehold Enfranchisement Association, had rather limited objectives. The notion which gained particular currency in Britain was not peasant-proprietorship, but the idea that all land should belong to the community as a whole. This doctrine of a common and universal right to land was one which itself might develop along several different lines, and at an early date some quite distinct currents of thought began to appear — as different from each other as they all were from "peasant-proprietorship".

The first organisation which was committed to the idea of communal ownership of land was the Land Nationalisation

Society, which was set up in 1881, and produced many pamphlets over a long period. The leading spirit was Alfred Russel Wallace. Wallace's main claim to distinction lay in a completely different field, for he had arrived at the theory of organic evolution through natural selection independently of Charles Darwin, and it was a chance communication from Wallace which led to their famous joint paper to the Linnaean Society in 1858, and which spurred on the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in the following year.

The term "land nationalisation" was not always used in the same sense, either during the 1880s or afterwards, and an immense amount of confusion has derived from the widespread failure to appreciate this fact. In its narrowest sense, land nationalisation was little more than an extension of the principle which had long been applied in practice when canals or railways needed to be built, and one which within a couple of decades became accepted by most political thinkers. In this sense, land nationalisation meant no more than that public authorities should be empowered to acquire land compulsorily, as and when it was required, for smallholdings, crofts, allotments and other public purposes, with provision of compensation for the dispossessed landowner. Some land nationalists soon came to envisage a much broader application; that land should be compulsorily purchased by public authorities, not because they proposed an immediate new use for it, but in order gradually to extinguish private ownership of land altogether. As time went on, this notion became increasingly popular among the land nationalists. A few of them were also disposed to argue that compensation should not be granted at all; but that doctrine never became general in the movement. In its early days, the Land Nationalisation Society actively promoted the sales of *Progress and Poverty*, even though the Society's ideas were really quite different from those of George.¹¹

Another approach to the idea that land (or rather, land values) should belong to the community as a whole was developed through a body called the Land Reform Union, which was formally constituted on 5 June 1883, and changed its title a year later to the English Land Restoration League. While at first its members were not willing to commit themselves to George's doctrines *in toto*,¹² the movement soon became for practical purposes the vehicle for the propagation of "orthodox" Georgeist teachings.

Meetings were promoted which were addressed by such personalities as Michael Davitt, and the future Socialist luminary H. H. Champion. When George himself delivered a series of addresses in the British Isles in 1884, these also were organised through the Land Restoration League. It is evident that they were an enormous popular success, and exerted a massive influence upon "progressive" public opinion. One author has claimed, probably with justice, that in the early 1880s George was the most discussed man in England after Gladstone himself,¹³ and the Land Restoration League was therefore a body of considerable importance. An organisation with similar aims to the English body was formed in Glasgow on 25 February 1884 under the title of the Scottish Land Restoration League, and the statement which its Committee issued shortly afterwards made quite clear what the objects of the "orthodox" Georgeists were: "We propose to effect this restoration" — that is, restoration of the land — "by the simple and obvious expedient of shifting all taxation on to the value of the land, irrespective of its use or improvement, and finally *taking all Ground Rent for public purposes.*"¹⁴

Like its English counterpart, the Scottish League made considerable use of Davitt as a platform orator.¹⁵

Within a few years, the distinction between the various ideas of Socialism, peasant-proprietorship, land nationalisation and land value taxation became drawn more and more clearly by commentators. George's book on the *Irish Land Question* in 1881 drew a sharp contrast between his own opinions and the notion of peasant-proprietorship.¹⁶ That book was certainly very widely read in Ireland,¹⁷ and may have played some part in causing Parnell and Davitt to appreciate the nature of their differences at the inception of the National League in October 1882.

The monthly magazine, *The Christian Socialist*, which first appeared in the middle of 1883, served as a sounding-board for various kinds of land reformers and socialists, and within its pages one may trace the way in which the different movements moved apart. Wallace recognised the essential difference between his own views and those of George by 1883,¹⁸ and the first issue of 1884 contained an article which argued that: ". . . Up to the present time the social agitation can hardly be said to have taken definite shape. Land Nationalisers and Socialists have all been classed together in the mind of the public; hence Socialists have been willing to work in hand with the 'rent confiscators'. But if, as

seems likely, the agitation is about to take definite shape, probably materially assisted by Mr George's lecture tour, we warn Socialists to stand by their colours, and not to be moved by considerations of policy or anything else."¹⁹

This discovery was exceedingly important. Both groups came to realise that the difference between them was not merely that the immediate remedies which they proposed were different and perhaps conflicting; rather did they differ at the very root of their whole philosophy. The Georgeists sought a single reform which, they considered, would strike at the whole basis of poverty and human injustice; the Socialists, for the most part, drifted towards a "Stateist" view which required a constant and detailed intervention by the organs of government into the activities of the citizens. Some people who started from George's intellectual position were drawn towards socialism. The advocates of land nationalisation (in Wallace's sense of the term) provide an important example. The problem was further complicated by the fact that "men more often change their religion than the name of their faith", and people who had applied to themselves some particular designation were often unwilling to relinquish that label when their ideas underwent a fundamental change.

Throughout the 1880s, it was the land reformers who had most of the energy, initiative and publicity at their command. Henry George was incomparably better known to the British public than any avowed Socialist. When Karl Marx died in 1883, there must have been dozens of Englishmen who had argued about Henry George for every one who had even heard of the Prussian Socialist.

The first major political figure to propose land reforms related to the idea that land ought to belong to the community as a whole was Joseph Chamberlain, who served in Gladstone's Cabinets of 1880-5 and 1886, and was the cynosure of the most radical Liberals. We have already seen that he was preaching "freeing the land" (in the old sense of the term) as far back as 1873. Not yet forty-four when Gladstone's government of 1880 was formed, Chamberlain had already been Mayor of Birmingham, and had acquired a great reputation as chief architect of the National Liberal Federation — indeed, he was the political "machine man" *par excellence*. His mind was still exceedingly receptive of new ideas, and he gave serious attention to the views of both George and Wallace.²⁰ Chamberlain's eventual conclusions were different

from both, but many contemporaries did not really notice this. What impressed them much more was the similarity of tone between the attacks which all three men made upon the existing land system.²¹

Many of Chamberlain's views, both on land and on other topics, were set out in a series of articles which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* from 1883-5, and were later published as a book entitled *The Radical Programme*. Chamberlain did not commit himself to all aspects of the *Programme*,²² and it was never in any sense an official statement of Liberal policy — indeed, it was a Liberal critic who first described it as the “Unauthorised Programme”. Nevertheless, Chamberlain, as a member of the Cabinet, obviously had some *locus standi*, and his colleagues often showed visible signs of embarrassment. In the very free political atmosphere of the time, these disagreements were frequently aired in public, without either side considering it necessary to resign ministerial office, or to try to force the resignation of the other.

The interest of the *Radical Programme* does not lie so much in the actual proposals which were advanced as in the effect which it had in further exciting men's minds about the land problem, and in bringing ideas home to people whom George and Wallace were not likely to influence. The authors repeated the old radical cry against entails and strict settlements, and also the familiar proposal that succession duties should fall more heavily on landed property.²³ These reforms had long been more or less common ground to all who called themselves “radicals”. Beyond that the land proposals of the *Radical Programme* look very half-baked. Although its authors had been influenced by George and Wallace, they demonstrably misunderstood the teachings of the former, and probably those of the latter as well. The authors were more conspicuously impressed by the idea of peasant-proprietorship, although they were very far from clear how a peasant-proprietary was to be created, and were willing to try out a variety of different methods. The most famous proposal of the whole *Radical Programme* was related to this question: the so-called “three acres and a cow” doctrine: “Besides the creation of smallholdings, local authorities should have compulsory powers to purchase land where necessary at a fair market price . . . for the purpose of garden and field allotments, to be let at fair rents to all labourers who might desire them, in plots up to one acre of arable and three or four acres of pasture.”²⁴ This proved of immense political

importance at the ensuing General Election. Oddly enough, Chamberlain seems to have had little personal acquaintance with conditions of agricultural workers at the time when the *Radical Programme* was being drafted, and apparently did not consult their great trade union organiser, Joseph Arch. He even discouraged fellow Radicals from seeking nomination in agricultural constituencies.²⁵

The Land Question was not only producing a great ferment of ideas; it was also changing the character and outlook of all the political parties. The Liberals, however, were particularly vulnerable — partly because there was a Liberal government in office; partly because the Liberal Party was already generally regarded as the “party of change”, and partly because of its profoundly mixed composition. Of all Liberals, those whose position was most uncomfortable were those landed aristocrats and their acolytes whom we designate by the very loose term “Whigs”.

The Whigs had been the most important of the groups which contributed to the establishment of the Liberal Party in the middle of the century. Half or more of the 1880 Cabinet might be called Whigs. They included such formidable figures as the Marquis of Hartington (who had nearly become Prime Minister in 1880) and the Duke of Argyll. Many Whigs found the policies which were forced upon Gladstone’s government by the exigencies of the Irish Land War increasingly unwelcome. Gladstone’s administration of 1880 had hardly been formed when the trouble started. The ill-fated Compensation for Disturbance Bill of 1880, which was considered in the previous Chapter, proved sufficient to dislodge the Marquis of Lansdowne, a junior Minister and an Irish landlord. Intimating his intention to resign, he told Gladstone that the Bill would “produce an immense amount of mischief, while its remoter consequences extending as they will to the whole country and beyond the present time, will be most unfortunate.”²⁶ Gladstone tried to dissuade Lansdowne, but eventually concluded that “No limitation of the Bill would satisfy him; only its withdrawal.”²⁷

This Gladstone would not concede, and so Lansdowne went. The Whig discomfort, however, was fairly general. One future Conservative Prime Minister, A. J. Balfour, wrote to another, Lord Salisbury: “The position of the Whigs is more amusing even than usual. Great pressure has been put on them: and they have been

told that to defeat the Bill would be to break up the Government. In these trying circumstances the compromise they adopt is that of violently abusing the Bill and everybody connected with the Bill both in public and private — and of going out of the House whenever there seems a chance of practically stopping it.”²⁸

The Irish Land Bill of 1881 was a far more important measure, and produced a far more important secession: the Duke of Argyll, the Lord Privy Seal. Argyll was a man of impressive intellectual calibre, and the most effective of all the defenders of traditional landlordism. He baulked particularly at the “free sale” clauses, even though he had been a member of the administration which made concessions in that direction in the much less compelling circumstances of 1870. Free sale, in the Duke’s view, would “destroy all the virtue of ownership — and render impossible the only operations which have hitherto produced improvement among the cottier tenantry of the West.”²⁹

Although the Whigs did not like the government’s actions, it would be wrong to think that they necessarily advocated some alternative course of behaviour. Even Lansdowne and Argyll did not suggest that the government should resist the demands for those proposals which they disliked; still less did they analyse what the likely consequences of such resistance would have been. Yet there was no doubt that many Whigs were profoundly disturbed and politically disaffected by what was being done. The fact that their disaffection was hard to set down in logical terms did not mean that it was any less deep. Whig landlords came to feel more and more affinity with Conservative landlords; less and less affinity with other Liberals — especially those members of the rank-and-file who were receiving with glee and enthusiasm the disparate doctrines of Chamberlain, George and Wallace.

Although the Irish land problem had a divisive effect upon the Liberals, it also produced another effect which contemporaries do not seem to have observed so keenly. A large measure of agreement began to appear between the leaderships of the three Parties. Once the 1881 Land Act had been passed, nobody would dare suggest repealing it; while by about 1883 or 1884, most politicians agreed that the solution of the Irish land problem should come by developing a peasant-proprietary under some kind of land purchase system. Most tenants evidently wished to own their land; landlords were finding Irish land a wasting asset. There was every prospect that a country whose people had a stake in its land would

be a good deal less prone to crime and civil disturbance than one populated by an aggrieved and desperate peasantry.

The 1881 Land Act did much less than had been hoped in fostering peasant proprietorship. By the beginning of 1887, only 731 tenants were purchasing their holdings under its provisions.³⁰ Drafts of other possible measures to promote land purchase by Irish tenants came under active and sympathetic discussion in the Liberal Cabinet;³¹ and in March 1885 Lord Spencer was able to write that: "There is every reason to believe that the Conservatives would accept and support such a measure, and Mr Parnell is on good authority said to be himself desirous of a settlement."³²

Soon after this was written, Parnell decided for tactical reasons to bring down the government. He was helped in this object by the abstention of many disaffected Liberals on a Budget division. The administration was defeated, and in June 1885 Lord Salisbury (who had now "emerged" as the overall Conservative leader) formed his first government. The so-called "Third Reform Act" of 1884 had greatly increased the electorate, but the new registers were not yet ready. Accordingly, an agreement was made between the Front Benches to the effect that the Liberals would not harass the new government unduly, while Salisbury would go to the country as soon as it was possible to face the wider electorate.

The Conservative administration carried — with Liberal support — the Irish Land Purchase Act which is associated with the name of Lord Ashbourne, the new Lord Chancellor of Ireland. The Act differed from the earlier Land Purchase measures in that the peasant was not required to put down any part of the purchase price. The repayment period was forty-nine years, and by returning a four per cent annuity he could repay the principal and pay a reasonable commercial interest at a total cost to himself which was not more than his original rent. A sum of £5 millions was set aside to assist land purchase. Lord Ashbourne himself freely admitted that this measure was essentially an experiment. Whether that particular experiment worked or not, however, there could be little doubt that future governments, Liberal or Conservative, would continue to legislate in the same general direction, and that the political issues involved would probably be questions of detail and administration rather than matters of principle.

The Ashbourne Act was the one important piece of legislation

which the minority Conservative government set upon the statute book before they went to the country at the end of 1885. This was the first election at which the bulk of the rural labourers had the vote, and their views would be likely to prove decisive in many places. The election had another remarkable feature, for Parnell issued clear instructions to the Irish voters in British constituencies to support the Conservatives. Presumably he considered that a measure of Home Rule, and further land purchase legislation on the lines of the Ashbourne Act could be elicited from Salisbury. Davitt, however, saw very clearly the logic of Parnell's new associations: "Parnell and his crowd are going in for a new form of toryism. They fear the democracy. Priests, parsons, Parnellites and peers appear to be on the one platform now, and the programme is: keep the democracy out of Westminster."³³

The results of the election were no less remarkable than the circumstances in which it had been held. The Liberal representation almost exactly balanced the Conservatives and 86 Nationalists combined. The Liberals retained a majority of seats in all three parts of Great Britain; but while these were overwhelming both in Scotland and in Wales — well over 85 per cent — yet in England the overall preponderance was slight. The English towns — hitherto Liberal — showed a small Conservative majority; while the traditionally Conservative English counties returned mainly Liberals. Not long before the election, there had been considerable signs of a Liberal resurgence in Ulster. This proved illusory, and the whole Liberal representation in Ireland was wiped out.

By common consent, one of the factors which had contributed to the striking Liberal success in the British rural areas was the appeal which radical land policies possessed for the newly-enfranchised agricultural labourers — and particularly the appeal of Chamberlain's demand for "three acres and a cow". What the Liberals lacked was — in Labouchère's words — "an urban cow". A few people saw how ideas of radical land reform could be translated into urban terms; most did not. The Liberals (as we shall see) eventually acquired their urban cow, which lactated very freely indeed; while the rural cow, grazing on her three acres, was a good deal less productive.

The Cabinet decided "after much discussion", not to resign, but to meet the new Parliament.³⁴ On the other hand, they had no intention of preserving the alliance with the Irish Party. As Salisbury told the Queen, the Government "have nothing in common"³⁵

with the Parnellites. After considerable argument, the Cabinet even decided to introduce legislation aimed to curb the National League.³⁶

While the brief and disreputable flirtation between the Conservatives and the Irish was being broken, some moves hardly less remarkable were taking place in the Liberal Party. On 18 December 1885, it was reported in the Press that Gladstone had "definitely adopted the policy of Home Rule for Ireland". This was certainly a recent and startling conversion.³⁷

Contemporaries saw the Home Rule issue as very closely linked to the land question. Irish land was no longer a matter which was of direct concern only to Irish peasants and Irish landlords. The various pieces of land purchase legislation had given the British electorate a powerful interest in security for the money which had been advanced. Nor was this the only financial interest. The *Free-man's Journal*, which was generally regarded as the most authoritative Nationalist newspaper, stated (perhaps with exaggeration), that "more than half the land — two thirds we believe — is out of the hands of the landlords, and is the property of London usurers and money-lenders."³⁸

As *The Times* asked (in a slightly different context), if an Irish Parliament later repudiated its obligations, "how is it to be coerced, except by war?"³⁹ Even if the current Irish leaders were fully determined to carry out existing arrangements, there was no certainty that these leaders would not later be thrust aside.

The Times in particular played on these fears in no uncertain manner, and emphasised the central importance of land in the Home Rule question: "Whatever else may be doubtful, this at least is certain, that the leading Irish idea at the present time is to transfer the land from the landlords to the tenants. Hence the concession of an Irish Parliament would unmistakably mean the concurrence of this country in an act of general spoliation."⁴⁰ This fear of "general spoliation", whether realistic or not, must have acted powerfully on the minds of the more Whiggish Liberals. Nationalist Irishmen had long been conscious of the existence of such fears. Two and a half years earlier, John Redmond — a Catholic landowner, and the future leader of the Nationalist Party — had written that "no system of Home Rule would succeed in Ireland unless (the land) question were first settled."⁴¹

Davitt wrote scathingly of "apprehensions . . . about 'confisca-

tion', 'separation' and the other hobgoblin fears conjured up by *The Times* and the alarmists in general", but he also was conscious that it was necessary, as a preliminary to Home Rule, "to work at once to get the *land* question out of the way."⁴²

When the new Parliament met in January 1886, J. W. Barclay moved an Opposition amendment to the Address, which sought to extend the principle of the Irish Land Act to England. Ten Liberals, including three very important ex-Ministers — Lord Hartington, Sir Henry James and George Goschen — voted with the Government. On the following day, Jesse Collings (author of the agricultural section of the *Radical Programme*, and sometimes characterised as Chamberlain's Sancho Panza) moved a further amendment, regretting that no measures were proposed benefiting the agricultural labourer. This time eighteen Liberals — again including Hartington, James and Goschen — broke ranks. The decision to impose the official Opposition Whip in favour of Collings's amendment had been Gladstone's own, and was deeply resented by some of the Whigs.⁴³ The Irish voted with the Liberals, the amendment was carried and the Government resigned.

On 29 January, Gladstone received the Queen's commission to form his third government. The auguries for the new administration were not good. The Premier noted that "a full half of the former ministers declined to march with me".⁴⁴ The Whigs were particularly disinclined to "march with" Gladstone. Men like the Lords Hartington, Derby, Selborne, Morley⁴⁵ and Roxburghe; Sir Henry James and George Goschen, who all still ranked as Liberals, refused to serve. Chamberlain, although apprehensive about Gladstone's Irish policy, was prepared to join the Government. Apparently Chamberlain was persuaded that his leader was "squeezable", and in any case unlikely to remain long at the head.⁴⁶ Sir Charles Dilke, whose views on land and many other topics were close to those of Chamberlain, was excluded from the Government because the scandal which eventually led to his divorce had just commenced.

Gladstone accepted the view that Home Rule must form part of an arrangement which should also include a settlement of the land problem on the basis of peasant proprietorship. Accordingly he brought forward two Bills: a Home Rule Bill and a Land Purchase Bill.

Each of these proposals entailed much trouble in the Cabinet. The Land Bill represented a vast extension of the Ashbourne

principle. All owners of Irish agricultural land would be allowed to sell to the State if they wished. In order to finance this, a sum originally proposed at £113 millions but later reduced to £50 millions, would be raised in three per cent stock. Tenants would receive the opportunity of purchasing their land on an annuity basis. There were also special proposals for the "Congested Districts" where holdings were too small for the tenants' needs. As security for the money, a Receiver-General would be appointed, under the British authority, and all rents and Irish revenues would be paid in the first instance to him.

The Land Purchase Bill was set on its progress through the House of Commons a few weeks after the Home Rule Bill, and it was on the question of political separation and not land that the crisis came to a head, although the land question provided important overtones to the Home Rule Bill. When the Home Rule proposals were revealed, Chamberlain resigned in dissent; and when the Bill came to its second reading in June, the Government found itself in a minority, with no fewer than ninety-three Liberals voting against it. These dissident Liberals received the designation "Liberal Unionists".⁴⁷

The Home Rule split did not correspond with the differences in the Liberal Party upon other matters. Lord Hartington and Joseph Chamberlain had long been thought to represent the opposite poles of the Liberal leadership; yet they now emerged as the Dioscuri of Liberal Unionism. Most, but by no means all, of the Whigs moved into the Liberal Unionist camp; but so also did some of the men who stood at the other end of the Party. Jesse Colclings went the same way as Chamberlain; other friends and political associates of Chamberlain, such as Dilke and Morley, remained with Gladstone. A man whose main interest was land reform could be excused for doubting, in 1886, which section of the Liberal Party was more likely to give him what he wanted.

In the General Election of 1886, which followed the Government's defeat, the issue of Irish Home Rule was completely dominant. No Party received an overall majority. The Conservatives won 125 seats more than the Gladstonians, but 85 Irish Nationalists and 78 Liberal Unionists could between them determine the Government. In the circumstances, the Irish could scarcely return to the Conservative alliance, and so it was the dissident Liberals who really had to decide.

Salisbury tried to persuade Hartington to form a government,

but the great Whig decided against it, concluding that: "I am convinced that I could not obtain the support of the whole or nearly the whole of (the Liberal Unionists) for a Government the main strength of which must be Conservative. They have represented themselves to their constituencies as Liberals, and nothing will induce many of them to act with Conservatives in general opposition to Liberals."⁴⁸ So Salisbury formed the Government after all, and was not able to include Liberal Unionists within its ranks.

Although Hartington's attitude was of real importance, the remaining Whig Unionists — "mere waifs and strays from the Whig wreck", in Balfour's delightful words — were of less use to the Conservatives. Balfour's view, which seems to have been endorsed by his uncle, the Prime Minister, was that "They are much more usefully employed as nominal Liberals in (?) the Liberal tactics, than they ever could be if they called themselves Tories, and brought us nothing but their eloquence and the reputation of turn-coats."⁴⁹

Although no one could have foreseen it at the time, the formation of Salisbury's second government in 1886 was the beginning of a period of nearly twenty years in which the Conservatives were to dominate the House of Commons, save for a short and rather discouraging Liberal interlude. The position of the Liberal Unionists was still far from clear, but several vital considerations had already emerged. A very large section of the Whigs had at last detached itself from the Liberal Party. It was a fairly safe guess that most of them would never return, and therefore that the Liberal Party would come increasingly under the influence of the radicals, among whom were to be numbered many enthusiastic land reformers of various kinds. On the other hand, the Conservative government would fall if ever a substantial majority of the Liberal Unionists should decide to return to the place from whence they came. At the beginning of 1887, a "Round Table Conference" of Liberals was held, and for a moment it seemed likely that this would result in Chamberlain's reunion with the main body of the Liberal Party. In fact Chamberlain stayed where he was; but for a long time he and his closest associates considered themselves still to be as good radicals as they had been in the brave days of 1885. Besides, it must have been obvious to many of them that they could scarcely hope to hold their places in Parliament unless they appeared to their constituents to be act-

ing on the radical side. They were therefore compelled, both by inclination and by self-interest, to exert every pressure upon the Government to ensure that it should adopt radical land policies. Hence the unexpected result of the division of the radicals was considerably to strengthen the cause of land reform on both sides of the House.

Notes-3

- 1 See discussion in F. M. L. Thompson, "Land and Politics in England in the 19th Century", *Trans. Royal Historical Society*, 5s, vol. 15 (1965), at pp. 41-2.
- 2 G. S. Lefevre's memorandum to Cabinet, 1 February 1883. CAB 37/10/14.
- 3 Memorandum to Cabinet on Tenant's Compensation by T. D. Acland, 20 February 1883. CAB 37/10/23.
- 4 F. S. L. Lyons, "The economic ideas of Parnell", *Historical Studies*, ii (1959), at p. 64, quoting *Freeman's Journal*, 15 April 1879.
- 5 Joseph Biggar to John Mishelly, 7 November 1882. Ulster Record Office T1160.
- 6 F. Sheehy-Skeffington, *Michael Davitt* (see bibliog.), pp. 75-6.
- 7 *Irish World*, 3 December 1881.
- 8 For a discussion of Davitt's views, see T. W. Moody, "Michael Davitt and the British Labour Movement", *Trans. Royal Historical Society*, 5s (1952-3), at pp. 58-60.
- 9 Max Beer, *History of British Socialism*, ii (see bibliog.), pp. 242-3.
- 10 F. Sheehy-Skeffington, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
- 11 George used the term "nationalisation of the land" for his own views in *The (Irish) Land Question*, 1965 edition, p. 64, but demonstrably in a very different sense from that of the LNS. It was also used in the appeal of the Council of the Land Reform Union, quoted in *Christian Socialist*, June 1883, p. 4.
- 12 *Christian Socialist*, June-July 1883.
- 13 Elwood P. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles* (see bibliog.), p. 34.
- 14 *Christian Socialist*, July 1884, p. 23.
- 15 Moody, *op. cit.*, at p. 64.
- 16 *The (Irish) Land Question*, p. 53.
- 17 Compare the use of the same analogy by George in *The (Irish) Land Question*, p. 36 and by the Rev. J. Brennan at Carlow, 20 March 1881: see *Annual Register*, 1881, p. 207.
- 18 *Christian Socialist*, August 1883, p. 38.
- 19 *Christian Socialist*, January 1884, p. 114.

- 20 See memorandum "Nationalisation of Land", n.d., JC 6/5/10/1.
- 21 Lawrence, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-106.
- 22 See C. H. D. Howard, "Joseph Chamberlain and the 'Unauthorised Programme'", *English Historical Review*, 65 (1950), pp. 477-91.
- 23 *The Radical Programme*, p. 66.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 146. For examples of the influence of George and Wallace, see pp. 19, 67-9.
- 25 Michael Barker, *Gladstone and Radicalism* (see bibliog.), pp. 37-8.
- 26 Lansdowne to Gladstone, 2 July 1880. WEG 44,465 fos. 49-50.
- 27 Gladstone to Rosebery, 10 July 1880. R. 10,022 fos. 60-1.
- 28 A. J. Balfour to Salisbury, 9 July 1880. S.E.
- 29 Argyll to Gladstone, 28 March 1881. WEG 44,105 fo. 18.
- 30 Report of Royal Commission on the Land Law (Ireland) Act 1881 and the Purchase of Land (Ireland) Act 1885 . . . 1887 c. 5015 xxvi ("Cowper Commission"), p. 7.
- 31 CAB 37/12/17, 19 & 20.
- 32 Spencer's memorandum, 23 March 1885. CAB 37/14/13.
- 33 Davitt to Richard McGhee, 23 November 1885, quoted in Moody, *op. cit.*, p. 64.
- 34 Salisbury to Queen Victoria, 14 December 1885 (copy), S. D/87/295.
- 35 Salisbury to Queen Victoria, 4 December 1885 (copy), S. D/87/287.
- 36 Salisbury to Queen Victoria 15, 17, 24 January 1886 (copies), S. D/87/317 ff.
- 37 Compare letter of his son, Herbert Gladstone, to William Haley, 20 February 1883. Haley 3905 fo. 36.
- 38 Quoted in *The Times*, 24 December 1885.
- 39 *The Times*, 18 December 1885.
- 40 *The Times*, 30 December 1885.
- 41 J. E. Redmond to Marquis of Lorne, 18 June 1883. Redmond papers, 15,237 (1).
- 42 Davitt to Labouchère, 29 January 1886 (copy). WEG 44,494 fos. 89-90.
- 43 Barker, *op. cit.*, pp. 37, 44.
- 44 John (Viscount) Morley, *Life of Gladstone*, ii (see bibliog.), p. 398.
- 45 That is, Earl Morley, not John (later Viscount) Morley.
- 46 Chamberlain to Jesse Collings, 26 September 1885 (copy). JC 5/16 fo. 108.
- 47 The tern "Unionists", *simpliciter*, was sometimes used in the late 1880s to mean "Liberal Unionist". Later it was used to comprehend both Conservative and Liberal Unionists.
- 48 Hartington to Salisbury, 24 July 1886. S. E.; Salisbury to Queen Victoria, 31 December 1886. S. D/87 fo. 425.
- 49 Balfour to Salisbury, 24 July 1886. S. E.