

The British Land Wars – Conclusion

The battle ebbs and dies

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The sensational liberal victory of 1906 made land reformers believe that at least site value rating, and perhaps much more besides, was just round the corner. The movement was nowhere stronger than in Scotland. Five-sixths of the Scottish M.P.s were pledged to the proposal. Government Bills to value the land in Scotland, preparatory to taxation, passed the Commons and were then wrecked by the House of Lords in 1906 and 1908.

In 1909, Lloyd George, Chancellor of the Exchequer, was faced with a most unpleasant problem. The Government had embarked on a great policy of social reform, and was also engaging in a considerable "naval race" with Germany. Lloyd George proposed that a small proportion of the extra money required should come from taxes which fell on land.

People will argue for ever about what Lloyd George was trying to do; but I shall give my own interpretation, based on a study of the Cabinet papers and others. I don't think he was a single-taxer; in fact, he categorically denied that he was one. He did, however, desire to see land both valued and taxed.

Unfortunately, he could not get a valuation Bill through Parliament, because he realised that such a bill would meet the same trouble as the Scottish Bills had already encountered from the Lords. He had some reason for thinking, however, that if he introduced certain rather odd and exotic land taxes into his Budget, he might be able to slip in a general valuation of land (which would then form a basis for future taxation) and get the whole thing through.

In fact, things didn't work that way at all. So far from circumventing the Lords, he found himself in a most bitter constitutional struggle against them; which didn't end until there had been two General Elections within a year, the Budget had been pushed through, and the constitutional powers of the House of Lords had been drastically curtailed.

By 1911, the land reformers were becoming more and more eager, and more and more radical. The Government had a

And in 1979?

British farmland has paid no local taxes for 50 years. Services are paid for by other property owners. But, landowners are watchful. Said the Scottish Landowners' Federation recently, "It will be natural for the urban majority to look with longing eyes at the largest and most efficient industries in the country – agriculture and forestry. They will wish to devise ways and means of raising money, possibly by rating (taxing) agricultural land and thus putting our farmers at a disadvantage."

great many other problems on its hands beside the land question, but the land reformers were determined to push their own proposals to the top of the list.

They lobbied Asquith, the Prime Minister, and they lobbied Lloyd George. When they thought that the Government was dragging its feet, they took the campaign into the country. Liberal Associations were prevailed upon to adopt advanced land taxing candidates in by-elections, and the results were often spectacular.

Eventually, the Government was constrained to set up its Land Enquiry, which reported in stages in 1913 and 1914. The campaign was taken up more or less officially by the Government, and reports from Ministers made it absolutely clear that the land question was really stirring the country. The Government's proposals were most certainly not pure Henry George; but they were also not proposals which would stand in the way of an eventual solution on Henry George lines; and Georgists seemed, on the whole, pretty satisfied with the way things were developing.

Then, with great suddenness, came the 1914 war. Some of the keenest land taxers, like C.P. Trevelyan and R.L. Outhwaite, opposed the war altogether. Others, like Josiah Wedgwood, went out and fought. Issues partly, but not entirely, related to the conduct of the war led to

Asquith and Lloyd George drifting apart; and each of them took with him some of the land taxers. Above all, for four years all public interest centered on the war itself, and long-range economic questions were swept aside.

By the end of the war in 1918, Lloyd George was heading a coalition whose main support came from Conservatives. A general Election gave that coalition a huge majority. Most of the Liberal celebrities, headed by Asquith himself, were defeated.

The Liberal Party soon lapsed into a state of civil war. A large proportion of the leading land taxers left its ranks, hoping to influence the rising Labor Party in their own direction. Others, obsessed with fear of socialism, moved towards the Conservatives.

On several occasions, in the years that followed, land came back into the forefront of political attention, and then slipped back into obscurity. The real point is this. Divisions which derived essentially from the war itself led to the scattering of land taxers in all directions.

By 1925, Asquith and Lloyd George, with their respective and quarrelling followers, were uneasily together again in the Liberal Party; yet Wedgwood and Trevelyan had recently served as Ministers in a brief and unhappy Labour Government.

Winston Churchill, who – in his day – had been as keen a land reformer as most, was Chancellor of the Exchequer in a Conservative Government. Outhwaite had gone off on a frolic of his own.

In other words, human relations at the top had broken down, and the rank-and-file had allowed themselves to be side-tracked from the problem which they had come so near to solving. That problem is still as important as it has ever been; the immediate question for radicals* is how to bring it to public attention in a way which will provoke the solution we want.

*The words 'Liberal' and 'radical' are used in their English sense, which is markedly different from current American usage.