

THOUGH we may not speak it openly, the general faith in democratic institutions, where they have reached their fullest development, is narrowing and weakening; it is no longer the confident belief in democracy as the source of national blessings that it once was. Thoughtful men are beginning to see its dangers, without seeing how to escape them; they are beginning to accept the view of Macaulay and to distrust that of Jefferson. The people at large are becoming used to the growing corruption; the most ominous political sign is the growth of a sentiment which either doubts the existence of an honest man in public office or looks on him as a fool for not seizing his opportunities. That is to say, the people themselves are becoming corrupted.

Where this course leads is clear to whoever will think. As corruption becomes chronic; as public spirit is lost; as traditions of honour, virtue and patriotism are weakened; as law is brought into contempt and reforms become hopeless; then in the festering mass will be generated volcanic forces which will shatter and rend when seeming accidents give them vent. Strong unscrupulous men, rising up upon occasion, will become the exponents of blind popular desires or fierce popular passions, and dash aside forms that have lost their vitality. The sword will again be mightier than the pen, and in carnivals of destruction brute force and wild frenzy will alternate with the lethargy of a declining civilisation.

Whence shall come the new barbarians? Go through the squalid quarters of great cities, and you may see, even now, their gathering hordes. How shall learning perish? Men will cease to read, and books will kindle fires and be turned into cartridges!

It is startling to think how slight the traces that would be left of our civilisation did it pass through the throes that have accompanied the decline of every previous civilisation. Paper will not last like parchment, nor are our most massive buildings and monuments to be compared in solidity with the rock-hewn temples and titanic edifices of old civilisations. And invention has given us not merely the steam engine and the printing press, but petroleum, nitro-glycerine and dynamite.

Yet to hint today that our civilisation may possibly be tending to decline seems like the wildness of pessimism. The special tendencies to which I have alluded are obvious to thinking men, but with the majority of thinking men, as with the great masses, the belief in substantial progress is yet deep and strong - a fundamental belief that admits not the shadow of a doubt.

But anyone who will think over the matter will see that this must necessarily be the case where advance gradually passes into retrogression. For in social development, as in everything else, motion tends to persist in straight lines and therefore, where there has been a previous advance, it is extremely difficult to recognise decline, even when it has fully

A Menace and a Promise

by

“The Prophet of San Francisco”



commenced; there is an almost irresistible tendency to believe that the forward movement, which has been advance, and is still going on, is still advance. The web of beliefs, customs, laws, institutions and habits, constantly being spun by each community and producing, in the individual environed by it, all the differences of national character, is never unravelled. That is to say, in the decline of civilisation, communities do not go down by the same paths as those by which they came up.

And how the retrogression of civilisation, following a period of advance, may be so gradual as to attract no attention at the time; nay, how that decline must necessarily, by the great majority of men, be mistaken for advance, is easily seen. For instance, there is an enormous difference between Grecian art of the classic period and that of the lower empire; yet the change was accompanied, or rather was caused, by a change of taste. The artists who most quickly followed the change of taste were in their day regarded as the superior artists. And so of literature. As it became more vapid, puerile and stilted, it would be in obedience to an altered taste, which would regard its increasing weakness as increasing strength and beauty. The really good writer would not find readers; he would be regarded as rude, dry, or dull. And so would the drama decline; not because there was a lack of good plays, but because the prevailing taste became more and more that of a less cultured class, who, of course, would regard that which they most admire as the best of its kind. And so too of religion — the superstitions that a superstitious people will add to it will be regarded by them as improvements. As the decline goes on, the return to barbarism, where it is not in itself regarded as an advance, will seem necessary to meet the exigencies of the times.

Whether in the present drifts of opinion and taste there are as yet any indications of retrogression, it is not necessary to inquire; but there are many things about which there can be no dispute that go to show that our civilisation has reached a critical period and that, unless a new start is made in the direction of



Labour's Land Plan

OBJECTIONS SUMMARISED

- * It will get bogged down in a quagmire of bureaucracy since all future development must go through the Town Hall.
- * Short of printing the money, there is no source from which sufficient funds can be found to finance land and property purchases.
- * Even if money is raised by legitimate borrowing there will be no immediate income to offset interest payments which will become an additional financial burden on already near-bankrupt local authorities.
- * Private developers are not likely to apply for planning permission for any kind of improvement as this will invite compulsory purchase under the local authorities monopoly of development rights.
- * Increases in land value realised without redevelopment will not be subject to tax, thus land owners are not equally treated.
- * Favouritism and discrimination will be inevitable, and bribery a constant temptation.
- * Political doctrinaire decisions are likely to override economic and social considerations when development is monopolised by the local authorities.
- * Existing demand calls forth only a trickle of supply from local authorities.
- * There will be no price mechanism to discipline local authorities in their use of land. Existing use, where low, will invite a squandering of high potential-use sites, by putting them to inferior economic uses.
- * Local authority development has not been noted for its efficiency, fitness, economy or appearance, nor for its reflection of what the community wants, and this will be aggravated at the expense of individual enterprise.
- * Taxation on development gains will go to Central Government instead of to local communities who will bear all the costs.
- * There is no reward, inducement, or incentive for land owners to co-operate in any way (or to refrain from obstruction) in the Government's scheme.

social equality, the nineteenth century may to the future have marked its climax. . . .

This truth involves both a menace and a promise. The evils arising from the unjust and unequal distribution of wealth are not incidents of progress, but tendencies that must bring progress to a halt; they will not cure themselves, but on the contrary must, unless their cause is removed, grow greater and greater, until they sweep us back into barbarism by the road every previous civilisation has trod. But it also shows that these evils are not imposed by natural laws, that they spring solely from social maladjustments that ignore natural laws; and that in removing their cause we shall be giving an enormous impetus to progress.

In permitting the monopolization of the natural opportunities that nature freely offers to all, we have ignored the fundamental law of justice. But by sweeping away this injustice and asserting the rights of all men to natural opportunities, we shall conform ourselves to the law — we shall remove the great cause of unnatural inequality in the distribution of wealth and power. It is not enough that men should vote; it is not enough that they should be theoretically equal before the law. They must have liberty to avail themselves of the opportunities and means of life; they must stand on equal terms with reference to the bounty of nature. Either this, or Liberty withdraws her light! Either this, or darkness comes on, and the very forces that progress has evolved turn to powers that work destruction. This is the universal law. This is the lesson of the centuries. Unless its foundations be laid in justice the social structure cannot stand.

— Henry George 1897

THE MINERS — A SOLUTION

A RECENT editorial in *The Spectator* offers a solution to the protracted and still to be resolved battle between the miners and the elected representatives of the people over wages: break up the National Coal Board's and the National Union of Mineworkers' monopoly in coal both by lifting all restrictions on the import of coal and alternative energy sources and by offering the new coal seams to private enterprise.

Given that this course is not feasible in the near future, says *The Spectator*, "the only course now is to leave the NUM and the NCB severely alone in their negotiations, making it clear that no government subsidy will be available to keep coal prices artificially low, whatever the costliness of an eventual pay settlement.

More reliance on oil imports and dearer coal would be the unpalatable consequence says the editorial, "but it will hasten the day when coal will be priced off the market which, in the state of affairs that has been allowed to build up over a decade, is the best result that can be hoped for."