

ARTHUR HENDERSON

By the death of Arthur Henderson on 20th October the Labour movement has lost a great organizer and a wise counsellor, and the country and the world has lost a courageous statesman who combined in a marked degree idealism and practical ability.

He was born in Glasgow in 1863 and commenced life as an iron moulder in Newcastle, remaining a member of the Friendly Society of Ironfounders until the last. At an early age he became a member of Newcastle City Council and later of Darlington Borough Council. He was also an active member and Lay Preacher of the Wesleyan Methodist Church.

His early training in the Trade Union movement and his local government and political experience gave him an ideal background for the task to which the major part of his energies was devoted—the welding into one coherent whole of the diverse elements from which the Labour Party was constructed. He held the office either of Treasurer or Secretary from 1905.

In 1903 he was first elected to Parliament. In the first Labour Government he held the office of Home Secretary, in the second that of Foreign Secretary. His arduous and self-sacrificing efforts as President of the Disarmament Conference undermined his strength and hastened his death.

He was a sincere and consistent supporter of the policy of land value taxation. Out of his many public references to this subject it is fitting to recall the message of encouragement which he sent to the International Conference on Land Value Taxation at Oxford in 1923 and in which he said :

“The Taxation of Land Values has been a vital need ever since the private ownership of land formed an integral part of the social system, but the aftermath of a great war has brought us problems which have dragged its urgent necessity more into the light and indicated the essential truths of the doctrine taught by Henry George.

“It has often been said that an Englishman never invents, he only improves. We shall not be able to improve upon the Henry George plan, but the more we approximate to his simple tax the more shall we improve upon some of the schemes in operation elsewhere, and I observe with pleasure, therefore, that the resolution which the Conference will be called upon to adopt is drafted with this object in view. The tax, your resolution says, is to be levied ‘without exemption on the actual market value of all land at an equal rate per unit of value.’ Every owner will be called upon to pay the tax according to its true value, irrespective of the use to which it is put. The possessor of vacant land within an urban area will not be able to secure the assessment of building sites at an agricultural value. The owner of a great estate whose mansion is surrounded by some of the fairest and most productive land in the world will find that the pressure of the tax makes it imperative to release his grip and thereby enable the farmer to enlarge his holding and the agricultural labourer to secure an allotment; while the Scottish lord, whose ancestors cleared the mountains and glens of that beautiful country and sent the crofters overseas to create more land values for the monopolists of the Colonies, will be asked to pay the tax upon the capital value of his deer forests, without having the privilege of pleading that he is merely the owner of ‘bare hillside.’ But if the tax were now in operation it would, in addition to securing the existing values of land, bring within its scope the future values which are to be created by the Government plans for absorbing a part—a very small part—of the vast army of unemployed. Arterial roads are to be

built from point to point, by-pass roads are to make circuitous routes round great cities and join sections of existing highways in order that swift-running motor transport may not endanger the lives of the populace, while railways are to be encouraged to extend their mileage into undeveloped districts with a view to decreasing the congestion of the towns. Tramway companies will, of course, continue to thrust their lines into country areas, and omnibus routes spring up with a rapidity which astonishes the villagers. I need not point out that speculation in the areas covered by these developments prevails with an intensity which is surprising only to those who do not understand the laws which govern the rising values of land. Neither is it necessary for me to assert that economic and moral justice demand that the community shall share in the increased values which result.

“I wish, however, that the overburdened taxpayer of this country could be made to understand as clearly as do your friends that the cost of the construction of main roads for which he will be asked to pay could be met without taking one penny out of his pocket, by utilizing the land values to finance the schemes. The Taxation of Land Values with, of course, the exemption of improvements, does not receive my support merely as a plan for raising additional revenue. It is designed to achieve far greater results. It seeks to open the way to the natural resources from which all wealth springs. The labour is here, and with it the will to work, but the land still lies locked in the grip of a tenacious and unrelenting monopoly, while unemployment and poverty haunt us with a terrifying persistence. Is it to be wondered that the working classes of this country almost despair of better times? ‘Hope cometh with the morning,’ but ‘hope deferred maketh the heart sick,’ and the morning of the post-war period has not brought fulfilment of the promises given. There has been, unhappily, a slump in idealism, while the enervating influence of unfulfilled expectations has enveloped the people like a damp mist, and the more they strive in the direction of a new social order the darker and gloomier becomes the way. Is Labour never to achieve free access to nature’s bounteous storehouse? Must the toll of landlordism always absorb the benefits of the increasing wealth made possible by the inventive mind of man?

“These are the questions that must be answered before we can proceed in the direction of building up a society based upon universal brotherhood, and no answer will satisfy the moral sense of the people that does not contain an admission of the right of a community to throw open the land and to take for the community the economic values created by the community. With a society thus firmly established upon the basis of economic justice, the spiritual and intellectual ideals without which a nation cannot live will have greater freedom of development, for ‘the wisdom of a learned man cometh by opportunity of leisure,’ and I hold that every man has a right to sufficient leisure to enable him to seek ‘the things that are more excellent.’ To some of us the better days seem long in coming. We may never see the achievement of our ideals, but that is not a reason for despair or an excuse for the relaxation of our efforts. We must go forward strong in the faith that is within us and determined to bear down every obstacle with which we are confronted. Progress is slow, and evolution can only show achievements of small degree. The time when your policy may be in universal operation is perhaps nearer than you think. Never fail to give voice to it when the opportunity is present, and take courage despite the setbacks that produce disappointment.”

We tender our sincere sympathy to Mrs Henderson and her family.