

J. H. WHITLEY, RADICAL

Many worthy and splendid tributes have been paid in the Press and in Parliament to the public work and the memory of the Right Hon. J. H. Whitley, who passed away in London on the 3rd February. Little has been said, however, of his earlier municipal and political activities as member of the Halifax Town Council and as a private Member of Parliament. We recall his warm-hearted and consistent advocacy of Land Value Taxation, his devotion to the teachings of Henry George, and the part he played as a Radical in the promotion of other causes for the betterment of social conditions. In Halifax he was the associate of Alfred Billson, who preceded him in the Parliamentary representation of that town, and he and Charles Smithson, also for a number of years a member of the Town Council, campaigned much together, cementing a friendship that lasted throughout life. The Halifax Town Council was one of the first to take action in petitioning Parliament for land value legislation, it being in February, 1898, that Councillor Whitley, as he then was, succeeded in getting a resolution adopted by 28 votes to 6 in favour of the policy. In this agitation the Glasgow Corporation had taken the lead, and Mr Whitley was present and spoke at many of the representative Conferences that were held under municipal auspices. It was he who introduced the famous deputation to Mr Asquith (then Chancellor of the Exchequer) when a petition signed in behalf of 518 local authorities urged the Government to take action. He made the propaganda at numerous public meetings, where he was accepted as a foremost authority on the subject, and frequently he contributed articles to the Press.

ON THE HOUSING QUESTION

At his adoption meeting as Parliamentary candidate for Halifax on 30th January, 1900, he spoke on the evil of overcrowding and said:—

Questions of municipal dwellings, admirable perhaps in themselves under certain circumstances, were but putting plasters over the sore. The evil of overcrowding was caused by a wrong system of taxation which had caused the price of land in the centres of their cities to go up to such a fabulous amount that it was impossible for decent housing to be had except at enormous rent. The one cure for this was the placing of taxation, where it ought to have been all these years, on land value. The chief burden of their taxation had been the one thing that had escaped it. Therefore there was no wonder that, with a false economic system of taxation, they had landed themselves in these evils that were crying aloud for remedy in the great cities of the country.

ON FREE TRADE

In July, 1904, he became President of the English League for the Taxation of Land Values, a position he held for three years, and he joined the United Committee when it was formed in 1907. On his acceptance speech as President of the League he referred to the revival of the Protectionist campaign and said:—

The old bogey of "Protection" has been trotted out again after 60 years' rest. This was a great help, for the country had been compelled to turn its attention from war to the study of economic truth. Nothing but good could come of this, for the truth for which we stand is the bedrock of economics. "One-sided Free Trade": yes, we have as yet only won freedom of exchange; we want freedom for labour and production. "After sixty years of 'Free Trade' there are still poverty and unemployment." True; and thus we come at once to the Land Question. What is rent but the dictation of the small number who own the surface of the earth as to the terms upon which they will permit the rest to live?

One may get buried, perhaps, without the permission of the landlord, but one cannot live without it. Thus the benefits of Free Trade have been mainly absorbed in rent. Our reform is the fundamental one. Every other reform is secondary, and must fail unless we attack the fundamental question of land values. The power of a few is balanced against the necessities of the rest, when some hold that which is necessary to the existence of all. So let us take advantage even of the present evil phase of political history in order to press home the economic truth about the Land Question.

Addressing his constituents on 11th September, 1903, he stated clearly the alternative to Tariffs in the declaration that

The product of a man's labour had to pay a toll on every hand to monopolies of every kind that only a portion of what he earned entered his own pockets. There, he thought, they would find the keynote of this discussion. It ought to stir up and inspire them to carry out the real Free Trade of Cobden, which was to strike, not only at the monopoly of the Customs tariff, but to strike all other monopolies which tended to an unjust distribution of the wealth which was created by an exchange of products. The land monopoly was, perhaps, the chief root of them all.

ON HENRY GEORGE

At the Henry George Commemoration Dinner in London, September, 1905, Mr Whitley was the orator on the occasion, and in the course of his tribute to a great memory he said:—

The ordinary political economists had taken the present conditions, in many respects, evil conditions, for granted, and had thought they must make rules to fit them. But George had asked, are these conditions—evil or producing evils—God-made or man-made? His answer was that they were not inevitable, but had been brought into existence by man's ignorance or carelessness. He wrote in beautiful, simple, and sincere language, such as can only come from a man who has a real message to give. Never more than at the present time was that message needed. After a period of war men's minds were turning to find alleviation of pressing problems—of housing, of poverty, of the distress caused by the want of employment. In the reform which Henry George advocated they had the key to all these problems. There was going to be a great opening of men's minds in sympathy with distress and poverty, and there was a danger that many foolish and uneconomic experiments might be made, and more harm than good result from sympathy without knowledge. They did not expect to undo in a year, or even in a generation, the evil that had grown up during centuries, but they believed that by a just dealing with taxation they would set free the springs and restore to men the lost opportunities of industry. Let us, then, keep that ideal before us, and do all we can to work up to it.

These are only a few extracts from our pages in which there is very much on record of the services Mr Whitley gave to the Henry George movement. He maintained his interest to the end, that we know; but his public position for 10 years as Chairman of Ways and Means and Deputy Speaker, and subsequently as Speaker, of the House of Commons, with the posts he filled since of a public nature, debarred him from being an active protagonist in the causes he held dear. What he did in effectively influencing public opinion will ever be remembered by those who see the solution of our vexing social and industrial problems in the application of the teachings of Henry George.

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