

MR ANDREW MACLAREN ON LAND PURCHASE

(House of Commons 28th March)

Speaking in the debate on Agriculture which was opened by Mr Walter Runciman in the discussion on the Consolidated Fund Bill, Third Reading, 28th March,

Mr ANDREW MACLAREN said :

You cannot hope to do anything for agriculture by entering the market as a purchaser of land—and I am sorry to say I see it sometimes advocated on these benches. I have here some figures that were given last week in reply to a question by a Member on this side of the House as to the prices asked for land for local authorities in 1925. This is how we encourage agriculture. I hope some of those who still believe in purchasing land for State control or peasant proprietors or anything else you like will endeavour to appreciate what the figures mean. I see it is stipulated here that Liverpool—I do not know when it became an agricultural centre—wanted land for small holdings—15 acres—for which they had to pay an average price of £200 per acre. Then we come to Blyth, where the average price chargeable for small holdings was £254 per acre, and Smethwick—a place of recent fame—£250 per acre. Then I come to Harrogate, where the amount charged per acre for agricultural land was £343.

Mr GUINNESS : I think the hon. Member is quoting from a list of small parcels of land bought for allotments and not for small holdings.

Mr MACLAREN : That makes it all the worse. It is true these were patches of land bought for allotments, but the right hon. Gentleman can visualize what would happen if these were the prices now chargeable not by the pressure of arbitration but in voluntary negotiations between the councils and the people who own the land. What will be the effect in the immediate future if we encourage this idea, which seems to me prevalent in the House, that the only way to solve the agricultural problem is by inflating more money into the purchase of land? What will happen in face of those facts? We are spending millions out of the Road Fund to make new roads. We are on the verge of developing a great electricity scheme. There are proposals on foot for deepening and widening canals. When all these national services are brought up to the point of efficiency the net result of all this will be just as has been referred to with regard to drainage, to increase the capital value of land, and if on the one hand the Government is spending millions on good services, roads, canals, electrification of railways, drainage, and so on, enhancing the value of the land, and on the other you are going out into the country and advertising the fact that you are coming forward to solve the agricultural problem as a buyer of land—with both those movements you are bound to enhance the price of land and make the solving of the problem utterly impossible.