

HOUSING, PLANNING AND LAND

OF ALL the problems which will face us after the war none will be more pressing than housing. Added to five years cessation of building, and to the natural decay and wear and tear of that period, will be the destruction of buildings by enemy action in all those places which have been attacked.

The labour will be there to build the houses, but the sites are the monopoly of a few and the materials must be got from land which is also the monopoly of a few. Pharaoh imposed on the children of Israel the task of making bricks without straw, but they did apparently have the use of the brick-fields to get the clay. The people of Britain can only get the use of brick-fields, as of all land, upon the terms which the owners exact. And if the owners cannot get the price or rent which they require, our laws allow and indeed encourage them to keep the land out of use.

How does this come about? Because our laws originally were mainly made by landowners, and because from laziness or ignorance we do not take the trouble to alter them.

Take for example our method of rating or local taxation. It came into existence in the reign of Queen Elizabeth as a means of paying for poor relief, and the need of relieving the poor at public expense arose because the people were being deprived of the land on which they could have worked and got a living. The local rates fall upon land as it is used, and according to the degree of use made of it. If a piece of land is well used, has a modern well-built house upon it for example, it is heavily rated. But if an adjoining and equally valuable plot is poorly used and has a dilapidated out-of-date building on it, it is rated at much less. And if another plot, equally valuable, is held out of use, it is not rated at all.

So we discourage people from building houses, and help the landowner who holds up land for a speculative price. We make houses scarcer and dearer, and oblige the occupiers to pay high rents or be overcrowded.

Is it not time that we altered all this? And we can alter it quite easily. All that is needed is to pass a simple law providing that the rates shall be levied upon the value of the land alone, whether the land is used or not, and exempting the buildings and improvements from rating. There is nothing difficult in this. In New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and elsewhere it is already being done to varying degrees. In Queensland and New South Wales, for instance, practically all local rates are levied on the value of land only, and have been so for many years past.

But, it may be said, will not the owners of land pass on the land-value rate to their tenants in higher rents? The answer to this is, No. Landowners already get as high rents as they can. There is nothing in this proposal which will enable them to get

more. On the contrary, as the land-value rate will fall on valuable unused land which now pays no rates, the owners of that land will be driven either to use it themselves or to sell or let it to those who are willing to use it. This additional offer of land will bring down the price of land all round, and so make it impossible for the owners to get higher rents or pass on the land-value rate to tenants.

A hundred years ago we decided that it was silly to tax bread and so make people starve. Is it not equally silly to tax houses and condemn people to overcrowding?

We are looking forward to replanning our towns and cities. The great obstacle to that is the high price which

MANCHESTER CITY COUNCIL

THE SPECIAL committee appointed by the Manchester City Council to consider the Uthwatt and Scott Reports and the advisability of acquiring powers to rate Land Values (see *Land & Liberty*, October) has been elected. It consists of Councillors O. Heggs and S. Needoff (Liberals); Councillors T. Nally, J. Sutton and Mrs. M. Tylecote (Labour); and Councillors H. Bentley, W. J. Pegge, W. H. Scholfield and W. White (Conservative). The committee, which is now proceeding with its enquiries, has elected Mr. T. Nally as chairman and Mr. O. Heggs as deputy chairman.

Discussion on a land purchase case arose at the Council's November meeting. In the opinion of some members Councillor Needoff had the "effrontery" to criticise the acquisition of Hazel Hurst Farm, Wythenshawe, as recorded in the minutes of the Finance Committee. It is a farm of 69 acres, for which the price was £7,500 plus £100 legal charges. Mr. Needoff observed that from the information given, the existing tenant had been paying £150 in rent for the past twenty years. The capital value of the farm, therefore, on a 5 per cent. basis, should be £3,000, and the transaction meant a handsome bonus of £4,500 to the landowner, who had spent neither money nor initiative upon improving the property. He could not understand the satisfaction others had expressed that the ground had been secured at a "gift price." It was no doubt true that the price of £110 per acre was low in comparison with prices that had to be paid for agricultural land elsewhere in the country, £200, £300, £400 per acre being not uncommon. It was an unsubstantial and harmful satisfaction condoning (because they appeared to be lucky this time) the conditions which were leading to inflated prices and obstructing the provision of suitable houses. He hoped this purchase would be the swan-song in Manchester to a land system that has brought more wretchedness to the people of this country than anything else. Councillor Ryan (Labour) pointedly asked what the land would have been worth if the Council had not built the bridge over the river.

has to be paid for land for street widening, for open spaces, and for the clearance of slum areas. And if we do succeed in making our towns better places to live in, will not the owners of land reap the benefit in higher rents and the occupiers have to pay these rents and higher rates to meet the cost of planning? Why should not the cost of replanning be paid out of a rate on land values?

Local electors and their representatives on local authorities, if they want something constructive done in housing and replanning, will have to see to it that legislation is passed dealing with this basic question of land values and ensuring that the value which the community has given to land shall be used for the benefit of the community. Now is the time for action.

It is a typical case to put before the Enquiry Committee which is sitting: agricultural land for which £7,500 had to be paid out of public funds although for rating purposes it was treated as of no value whatever, and nothing in local rates was being contributed to the public services that helped to make it valuable.

SCOTTISH LAND RACKET

IN REPLY to a question by Mr. NEIL MACLEAN (Labour, Govan) in the House of Commons, 26th October, Mr. T. JOHNSTON, Secretary of State for Scotland, said:—

"According to information obtained from the Register of Sasines the trustees of the Dowager Countess of Seaford sold the estates of Balmacaan and Urquhart and Abriachen with entry at Whitsunday, 1942, for £88,000 to George Coldham Knight, Estate Agent, of Beechen Grove House, Chorley Wood, Hertfordshire. On 31st August, 1942, the estates were sold by George Coldham Knight for £120,000 to Panton Investments, Ltd., 22, Park Street, London, W. 1. They were sold on 7th September, 1942, by Panton Investments, Ltd., for the same sum to Princes Investments, Ltd., 22 Park Street, London, W. 1, and on 10th November, 1942, by Princes Investments, Ltd., again for the same sum, to Gillett Stephen and Company, Ltd., Atlas Works, Great Bookham, Surrey. On 6th November, 1942, Princes Investments, Ltd., had agreed to sell a portion of the estate, extending to 540.7 acres, to Montague L. Meyer, Ltd., Melbourne House, Aldwych, London. This portion was transferred to Montague L. Meyer, Ltd., for a sum of £30,300 by a disposition granted by Gillett Stephen and Company, Ltd., and registered in the Register of Sasines on 18th January, 1943."

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