

## IDLE SITES AND HOMELESS FAMILIES IN MANCHESTER

### A City That Should Rate Land Values

In mid-October, Mr. Harold Macmillan, the then Minister of Housing and Local Government, rejected the Manchester City Council's plan to build 22,500 houses at Lymm and Mobberley to accommodate its "overspill" population. The Council had based its case on the magnitude and urgency of their need for houses; on the difficulty of finding other land on which they could build on the scale and at the pace required; and on the fact that both places are, in their opinion, well suited to the development of satellite towns.

The Minister accepted that Manchester has great need for more houses and a serious difficulty in finding land on which to build them. He was anxious that they should make a drive on slum clearance and he recognized that not all families now living in slums could be re-housed on the sites to be cleared. But very strong objection was taken to the development of either Lymm or Mobberley where land is of very good agricultural quality, and it was argued that both places are too close to Manchester for the large-scale development contemplated. Mr. Macmillan considered that it would have been wrong to have made incursions into Manchester's natural green belt if that could be avoided. There were alternatives.

In a powerful leading article from which we quote, the *Manchester Evening News*, October 15, called for a campaign to build upwards instead of outwards. "We are back where we started eight years ago, when the planners first cast eyes on the Cheshire plain. Eight years of speculation and planning by the authorities has come to nothing; eight years of fluctuating hope among the homeless is extinguished. There can be no under-stating the problem that now faces Manchester. It demands a drastic, dynamic answer. With 20,000 homeless and ill-housed families on the waiting-lists, sites are available now for only 6,630 houses. Even if the present rate of building could be continued the unhappy folk on the waiting-lists face six, seven, eight years more waiting. But already land famine is grinding the machine to a stop. House completions at the present rate can be maintained only up to the end of 1955. And at the end of 1956 they will virtually cease. That in itself is a staggering prospect. Add to it the fact that 68,000 houses in Manchester are already condemned and falling down at the rate of two a day and the grim picture emerges of a city caught up in its own congestion, its slums increasing, its homeless without hope . . .

"We believe that decanting any population to new towns involves a serious loss of time, efficiency, and energy and is a danger to health, with long journeys to work, the shops, and entertainment—journeys already becoming more frustrating and expensive as more and more vehicles pour on to our archaic road system and traffic congestion grows. And new towns create problems . . . Briefly, we believe in building upwards instead of outwards. Flats are the only way to make full use of our most precious raw material—land. We cannot afford to squander it on two-storey development. The old in the city must come down quickly and in their place must rise new flats—large, modern, light and airy dwellings . . ."

Readers were invited to express their views and in succeeding issues the *Manchester Evening News* devoted considerable space to correspondence on this subject. Quick off the mark was Mr. C. S. Lees, B.A., a reader of *LAND & LIBERTY* and member of the Manchester

Branch of the Land-Value Taxation League. His letter, published October 19, read in part: "I am convinced that further building outside the City boundaries is absolutely unnecessary. A glance at any of the slum districts in and around Manchester reveals acres of idle land. The land adjoining Queen's Road on the city side between Cheetham Hill Road and Rochdale Road; that adjoining parts of Abbey Hey Lane; huge tracts in Hulme and Moss Side; hundreds of acres between Manchester and Oldham—all these and many more make absurd the contention that in and near Manchester there is insufficient land.

"May I suggest that the real reason why the Council has been so slow to make use of this land inside and near its boundaries lies in its high speculative price? An acre of rural land can be bought for a few hundred pounds. An acre of town land often costs several thousand pounds. It is certain that we cannot expect full development of our town land until we eliminate the speculative price of this land—and this means a drastic revision of our rating system.

"The rating system as it stands encourages speculation and tends to restrict building. The man who holds his land out of use pays no rates; instead the rate burden falls on buildings of all description and in proportion to their size and quality. In addition, building is further penalized by heavy taxes on all the materials necessary for the construction of houses. The remedy is clear—we must shift our rates and taxes off buildings and building materials and put them on to the value of the land."

Reference to idle sites and to poor, uneconomic development (mute testimony to the consequences of taxing improvements instead of land value) was made by many other correspondents, but none of them showed in their letters awareness of the *cause* of what they saw. Each of these writers is a potential advocate of land value rating. We have sent them suitable literature and Mr. Lees has offered to explain the policy more fully to any who may desire further explanation. Extracts from some of the first letters published are as follows:

"There are still some available sites in the City. Let flats be built on these, and people from unfit houses moved into the flats, the unfit houses being demolished, and further flats built in their place."—*Arthur England*. "On the Withington Estate, there are numerous odd corners, grassed over, where at least one more house or cottage flats could be built."—*Mother of Two*. "Why not build houses on the acres of land now available—for instance, on the plots in the Cambridge Street and City Road areas?"—*Mrs. Joan Mee*.

"What does puzzle me is the fact that while such strong objections were being raised against the overspill on the grounds that the agricultural land was of great value, there were very large detached houses being built in Lymm with gardens big enough to build a few prefabs on! Surely this is not fair play."—*A. S. M. Jackson*. "The City Council has attempted only to hide the City's blitz scars by a wholesale cleaning up of sites and reconditioning of slightly damaged buildings. I suggest: take stock of all remaining open sites in the old boundaries and build both skyscraper flats and houses."—*Fred J. Humphreys*.

"With the already outsized area and its numerous possible sites for conversion, the present population, and more, could easily be accommodated in the delightful

multi-storeyed flats of the Continent and the Americas.”—*D. B. Chadwick*. “Manchester is dotted with small plots of waste ground. They are all shapes and sizes, but all told present a big acreage. Up to now they have apparently been ignored, but if future building land is to be so scarce then the time may soon come when these small sites will have to be developed.”—*Helpful*. “Build now on the bombed and cleared sites available.”—*J. A. Dunning*.

“One has only to look around certain areas within ten minutes of the City centre to see the crying need for redevelopment. In certain parts of North Manchester there are acres of land which could be utilized for housing and which, properly developed, give accommodation to hundreds of working class families.”—*F. E. Wilce*. “In

the ‘clearance’ areas there are miles of roads and streets, with drainage and all services laid on, ready to be developed.”—*C. R. Greenwood*.

“There is plenty of land that has been labelled ‘clearance area’ since before the war. I say build there. Working people don’t want to go out of the city—they can’t afford cars or the 3s. 5d. a day to and from work.”—*Still Hoping*. “What about all these plots of land standing idle? In our street, for instance, on both sides there are vacant spaces where there used to be houses. There is at least enough room for three houses.”—*Mrs. E. Kirkland*.

Resolutions in favour of the Rating of Land Values have been adopted by the Manchester City Council both before and since the last war.—Ed., L. & L.

## MAU MAU IS VIOLENCE OF DESPAIR—By Victor Saldji\*

Dr. L. S. B. Leakey in his book, *Mau Mau and the Kikuyu*, tells us that, “by the closing decades of the nineteenth century the early travellers and explorers of Kenya, describing Kikuyu land as they saw it, used such terms as ‘as far as the eye could see it was one vast garden.’ The Kikuyu district of Kiambu also became known as the granary of the caravans that were moving up and down the country to Uganda, since it was the source of vast quantities of grain, beans, etc. There can be no doubt at all that the Kikuyu population of the Kiambu district of that time was very considerable and that cultivation was very extensive indeed.”

This does not suggest “soil destroying agricultural methods.” Kikuyu land was known to be good because of what the Kikuyu had produced.

Even after the reduction of the population by the ravages of smallpox, rinderpest, drought and locusts the Kikuyu were very much in evidence. Sir Charles Eliot (who was Governor from 1901-4) wrote: “The district where the land question is likely to present real difficulties is Kikuyu, as here we have the combination of a climate and country suitable to Europeans and a numerous native population . . . No one can doubt that the rich and exceptionally fertile district of Kikuyu is destined to be one of the chief centres of European cultivation” . . . (*The East African Protectorate*, 1905).

Despite the gaps with no African population the picture is hardly one of a “wilderness.”

One may broadly agree that the conditions for Mau Mau were bred by “pressure of population” the “impact of so-called civilization” and “the uncompromising missionaries.” But let us be quite clear that it is the pressure of population *within the African reserves* that is being referred to. I have seen how this contrasts with the sparsity of population in the wide acres of the White Highlands. This pressure within the reserves is not a result of the work of those European social and medical workers who gave of their best, and all honour to them, but a product of the relentless policy pursued by those men who, with that basic assumption of superiority, *knew* that the African was *meant* to do the menial work, and do it for low wages.

How to secure “native labour” was the main concern of the hardcore of these early settlers. Their leader, Lord Delamere, owner of 150,000 acres, giving evidence before the Native Labour Commission of 1912-13, said: “If the policy was to be continued that every native was to be a landholder of a sufficient area on which to establish himself, then the question of obtaining a satisfactory labour

supply would never be settled . . .” He considered the soundest policy would be to curtail the reserves and although it might take a few years before the effect on the labour supply was apparent “the results would be permanent.”

Land alienation had a two-fold object: to supply land for European settlement and to force the Africans on to the labour market. But it was not the only method of securing labour. Lord Hailey in his Survey tells us that the poll tax was “deliberately used” in order to produce a supply of labour. Just how deliberately we may judge from the brutal frankness of a leading article in the *East African Standard* of February 8, 1913, which is at least commendable for its lack of hypocrisy: “We consider that taxation is the only possible method of compelling the native to leave his reserve for the purpose of seeking work. Only in this way can the cost of living be increased for the native, and it is on this that the supply of labour and the cost of labour depends.”

This “civilization” certainly hit traditional tribal customs with an impact. The concentrated land, taxation and compulsory labour legislation disintegrated the strict inter-social relations and turned man against man.

We are told that “Kenya needs teachers to raise the standard of education of the blacks to the level of the whites.” Let us pause in our pride, we educated whites, to consider what the education of these “near savages” consisted of before we assume such superiority. Although they did not have the three R’s, Dr. L. S. B. Leakey tells us: “Education consisted of an organized series or stages of preparation for the responsibilities of life in the community to which the individual belonged. As such, it was fundamental education which made good citizens, honest men and women, and wise parents and leaders of the community, in which a sense of responsibility to those in lower grades and to the tribe as a whole was very strongly developed.” Dr. Leakey tells us also that in the days of his boyhood among the Kikuyu thieving was almost unknown—“it was not done.”

As regards a solution to the problem, I agree that ignorance is the first obstruction that must be cleared away. It is because I am convinced that there can be no hope of solving Kenya’s many problems until the prevailing ignorance regarding the background to the present tragedy is cleared away, and replaced by knowledge, that I offer this criticism.

Mau Mau is no mystery when the background is known. We can only wonder that it did not come sooner. While no sane man will support the methods of Mau Mau we must recognize it for what it is—the violence of despair. It will only end when despair is replaced by hope.

\* Slightly abridged and reprinted with acknowledgments from *Peace News*, November 19.