

LAND REFORM AND THE CONSERVATIVE VOTER

In the *Sunday Times*, August 17, David Divine under the heading "Ten acres let to caravans can earn £6,000 a year," gave an unfavourable survey of the conditions of caravan sites and their ownership and rating. It appears that a particular site on the south coast consisting of three open fields, given over to three hundred caravan sites, brings an income to the owner of £6,000 a year, whereas the land is assessed for rates at £1,000 a year. Although the writer does not discuss any of the principles involved and calls only for very much more stringent control, he evidently thinks something is wrong when such high profits can be made by mere ownership of sites required by caravan users. This article in a Conservative newspaper prompts the reflection: if the average person of conservative disposition became fully aware of the principles and consequences of the land system which Conservative leaders always support, would he not be prepared, in his own interests, to modify the Party's policy in this respect?

Whether or not Conservative policies tend to consolidate the privileges of the rich, this is certainly not the motive of those millions who vote Conservative, and who cannot all belong to the really wealthy sections of society. These millions hope to protect their property and income from confiscation by the State, to regain some freedom to manage their own lives and businesses and to preserve traditional institutions and national prestige. Many of them must be wondering why a Conservative government continues to confiscate income and maintain restrictions to a degree virtually indistinguishable from that under a Socialist administration. They might also be wondering why the present government finds so much difficulty in formulating policy on those recent Socialist Acts which it proposes to modify, such as the Development Charges of the Planning Act and the Rating provisions of the 1948 Local Government Act. And there still remains the problem of the Rent Restriction Acts which all kinds of governments fail to solve.

Perhaps such questions as these helped to inspire those undergraduates of the "Radical wing" of the Conservative Party, at Oxford, to form "an action group" in order to "infuse a new spirit into Oxford conservatism." Their attention might usefully be drawn to the fact that the main difficulties which confront the present government all arise from the failure to work out clear principles under which land shall be occupied and taxes and rates collected. These principles emerge inevitably when social investigation goes deeper than mere partisan controversy, and they affect every political question of importance.

Conservatives have always laid stress on the sanctity of property and this emphasis is justified. To associate for the purpose of mutual defence of life and property is the first bond of society. Insofar as the rulers of society, whether king, republic or parliament, protect in its entirety the property of every citizen, the institutions and traditions will be respected and the nation acquire confidence in itself. And material prosperity will follow. As the principle logically involves removing every hindrance to production and exchange, production will reach its maximum, and the material interest of every citizen will coincide with that of society as a whole. No policy could be sounder than this truly conservative ideal.

But if the rulers fail in this duty until poverty, to a degree unknown among primitive people, afflicts large sections of the community, the masses grown desperate will lose confidence in the original constitution and demand an arbitrary redistribution of property. Other classes, inspired by fear and the greed which is its outcome, will form political groups designed to protect themselves by legal privilege rather than justice. Taxation, instead of being adapted to a just method of paying for public services will become an impost on producers and a weapon of class warfare, the cost of maintaining the stupendous machinery of restriction and redistribution far exceeding the normal requirements of government. The bureaucracy, "shortages," crushing taxation and national impoverishment which the Conservatives ascribe to Socialism are the inevitable results of such a situation. This cannot be relieved by any administrative readjustment, but only by restoring the sanctity of personal and public property.

The value of land obviously arises only from the presence and activities of the community as a whole, and as it is public property it should be paid into the public treasury whether or not the owner of the site chooses to put it to use. On the other hand, the right to property requires that those in possession of sites, whether rural or urban, should be relieved of taxation including rates which are at present levied upon them just *because* they put the site to use. On reflection it will be seen that this principle involves a complete reversal of the present system of taxation, but without any expropriation, summary legislation or other disruptive and vindictive measures with which Conservatives charge Socialist governments. Neither

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