

Land Reform in the British Isles

THIS paper by Dr. Roy Douglas traces the events after 1840, that precipitated the migration of country people from the land to the towns or to the colonies. The situation was at its worst in Ireland with real famine conditions prevailing, but it was here that a Land League was set up by Michael Davitt in a bid for "fair rent, fixity of tenure and free sale". This paved the way for Gladstone's Irish Land Act. At this time Charles Stewart Parnell was proclaiming that the Irish peasant should be enabled to acquire the land as freeholder, not as tenant, and in due course public money became available to buy out the landlords so that tenant-farmers might repay the State over a long period. But the landless Irishman was no better off.

Discontent spread to Skye and thence to Scotland. Henry George was a regular speaker at public meetings and in Glasgow the Liberals were instrumental in throwing up the urban aspects of the whole nationwide agitation. It was recognised that local rating was already based on the value of landed property, but, they said, assessments should be based on site values alone (without improvements).

By the end of the 1880s numerous local authority elections in London and in Glasgow were affected. The National Liberal Federation was sympathetic and the whole movement for the taxation of land values was spreading. Many local authorities were interested and by 1906 no less than 518 had petitioned for the right to levy rates on site values.

The General Election of 1906 gave the Liberals an overwhelming majority in the Commons and the way seemed clear. In Scotland even the Prime Minister was committed to the cause.

Campbell-Bannerman in London twice passed Bills dealing with Scottish land values through the Commons but the first was thrown out by the Lords and the second was mutilated. In 1909, David Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer, devised a complicated tax bill, slipping in a general valuation of land. This too was thrown out by the Lords and Parliament was dissolved. Two years later both Liberal and Labour MPs were pushing for a valuation and for land-value taxation. But although a Land Enquiry Committee reported favourably, the 1914 war intervened and the opportunity was lost.

By the time of the 1918 General Election land-taxers were scattered through the parties and disunited. Chaos grew until by the mid-20s leadership of the land reform cause was briefly taken up once more by

the Liberals. The 1929 election put Labour back in office, Snowden brought in a Budget proposing an immediate valuation of land and the collection of taxes based on this new valuation - but it was too late. Economic crisis loomed, the parties disintegrated on other issues and a so-called National Government grabbed the reins. This was virtually Conservative and land valuation was forgotten.

Since then there have been flashes of interest. London County Council produced a Bill to levy rates on site values, and in opposition to the post-war Development Charge a number of Labour MPs argued hotly for land-value taxation.

Yet all is not lost. The author of this paper points out that those Socialists who believe in social justice must see that the massive post-war fortunes have been made, not by capitalists exploiting their employees, but by land owners and speculators living on the nation. Surely those Conservatives, he says, who believe in private enterprise, must feel concern at the discredit which has reflected upon the system of the free market because of people who hold land out of use.

Revolutions, he suggests, have come about not so much from the effects of capitalism as from the rising of peasantry against landlordism. The land problem is still with us but we can - and must - learn from the past.