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Editorial Offices:

11, TOTHILL STREET, LONDON, S.W.1.

All communications to be addressed to the Editor.

Telegrams: "Eulav, Parl., London." Telephone: Victoria 7325.

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LIBERALISM AND THE LAND SCHEME

Liberals advanced in years who were accustomed to look to leaders for the exposition of a robust and inspiring policy, or younger Liberals steeped in the inner history of the old fights for freedom in which unconquerable minorities played a heroic part, feel strangely sad to-day at the plight of a once great party. The Liberal Party has not only fallen lower than ever it was, but, more ominous still, there is not even the minutest section of it devoted to the service of a liberal principle. What is called the Land Scheme has been put forward in a report by people who assume, and who wish it to be assumed, that they occupy the position in relation to liberal principles which was occupied by fighting reformers and opponents of privilege and oppression in the past. The tenour of this report illustrates the kind of intelligence, the attitude of mind, the spirit, which have gone so far to destroy the Liberal Party, and to place the forces of reaction in power. Its treatment of the land problem has produced confusion, resentment and even despair among men and women nurtured in Liberalism, and has given rise to little more than contempt among those of an opposite school.

The defects of the Land Scheme are due in greatest measure to an uncertainty, a want of clearness, in the minds of those who framed it as to the real character of landlordism. Historically, economically and morally they are hardly sure whether it is to be condemned or acquitted with honour. They suggest that there were times when landlordism was an institution which served the nation and agriculture with great merit, that now this beneficent system has broken down, the victim of recent developments, marked by vices of a negative kind, to be regretfully laid aside rather than resolutely destroyed. This tenderness of feeling is derived from a one-sided view of history. Landlords frequently turned themselves into improvers and farmers, men like the Bedfords, Townshends, Cokes, Kamises, Sinclairs, Althorps and many others, but at the very time when those great men were active in this capacity, landlordism was correspondingly active, checking the progress of agriculture, lying heavily on it and draining its strength. History's great difficulty always is to be sufficiently circumspect and rounded in its view. During the last ten years, when landlordism has been dealing its last and not least deadly blow to agriculture by exhausting the capital at its disposal through the sale of estates at inflated prices, landlords, perhaps

in unprecedented numbers, have played a handsome part as farmers and improvers. It is the first aspect, however, and not the second, which historians at present are apt to emphasise.

What is landlordism? Contemporary with Coke of Norfolk and with Sinclair landlordism was busy in quite the opposite direction from them. "There are many landlords, and among some of the most considerable in the district, who lay out no money on their farms, and whose management consists wholly in receiving their termly rents, leaving their tenants to carry on improvements by their own capital, or otherwise to provide themselves as they best can. The comparative poverty and bad cultivation of such estates, and the ultimate loss to their proprietors, must be fully apparent to every attentive observer." These words were written in 1810 by Rev. Samuel Smith, Borgue, Kirkcubrightshire, in his VIEW OF AGRICULTURE in the counties of Wigtown and Kirkcubright, written at the request of the Board of Agriculture. That is, was and always will be a distinctive mark of landlordism. Contemporary with Coke was the great demand for leases to secure the farmer in his tenure and in the fruits of his enterprise for a quarter or for a third of his lifetime against the tyrannous and predatory activities of landlordism. One would refrain from using offensive words, but there is the ugly fact—the essence of landlordism is that it makes one man the appropriator without any return of the labour and lives of others, and gives him a one-sided control over others, which if it is used at all is cruel and unjust. This element constitutes an essential part of the relationship which exists between every landlord and his tenants. If it appears and acts in naked form as it did in Galloway in Coke's and Sinclair's time, it is an unmitigated evil, and it has acted in this form long before that time, and every year since that time down to 1914, and every year since 1914 to the present day, and in every county in Great Britain. There are farms in some of the proudest agricultural counties of England which forbid men to pay any reasonable price for them, because rent has been drawn for generations from them and nothing returned to keep them in tenable condition. It has been the operation of sheer, ugly parasitism, of which man's higher nature makes him ashamed. We need not attempt to estimate to what extent landlords covered, obscured or cancelled the real nature of landlordism by their enterprise as estate improvers and farmers, whether twenty, twenty-five or thirty per cent of them do this. It is the inside kernel or essence which must be stripped and eliminated. No matter how much spirit and energy whole-time and part-time farmers may show in advancing agriculture and in enabling it to outstrip landlordism, the hunter inevitably and surely overtakes the hunted, and works its will on it.

Contemporary with Coke were the arrangements for enclosure some of which were just as ugly as the naked landlordism of Galloway, the arrangement by which the labour of the men who were displaced by enclosure was rewarded on the scale and on the basis of pauperism, while rents increased fivefold apart from the enterprise of landlords.

Landlordism is the same thing, it has the same instincts and appetites, in the country and in the town. There is no institution so powerful. It is the citadel of privilege from which attacks on the community are launched. Ten thousand farmers have lost their capital through its operation in the last ten years. They have been made owners of land, and with the instinct bred by their new position they are not only opposed to the dissolution of the system which has injured them, they are insatiable in their demands to be compensated by being allowed to prey on the community by means of tariffs, subsidies, remissions of rates and taxes. The Land Scheme misjudges the character of landlordism, gives a wrong verdict on its deserts and under-estimates its power. Railway companies, municipalities, county councils and governments have met it a thousand times and have been worsted and crippled. The proposals in the scheme seem to offer it the finest opportunity it has ever had.

Liberalism has always had the duty of defending the community and its weaker members against the exactions and oppression of unduly powerful sections. In 1910 the country affirmed and re-affirmed its wish that landlordism should be weakened and subdued. That was its mandate, its expectation and hope. It was mocked and deceived. The taxes were framed to meet the views of landlordism and not of Liberalism. They were whittled down to futility and ridiculousness. There was the taking of the future increment which would always be a fraction of what admittedly belonged to the community. There was an apology for taking a fraction of this fraction. If the whole of this increment fraction had been taken, the problem with which the Land Report professes to be chiefly concerned would not have arisen. There would have been little incentive to sell estates if the war increase in land values had been diverted to the Exchequer. The resumption of its proper functions and rights by the State even to this extent would have averted a disastrous result; the steady and progressive resumption of such rights and functions will make easy the solution of many baffling problems. The Tories and their privileged friends attach importance to the rating question in agriculture. They vote repeated remissions of rates and taxes on agricultural land on no principle. The new Liberals treat it as of no importance, and refuse to put forward the only form of rating which will give relief where relief is due. We trust the judgment and sense of those who thus buttress and fortify privilege.

The community expects more from Liberalism than it received in 1910, much more than apologetic reports, so careful of the interests of landlordism and so ready to give away the uncontested rights of the community, which ignores the existence of a valuation made for the community, and the machinery by which a valuation alone can be made. The Liberal leaders can play the timid part again; they can shrink from facing and destroying this vicious principle of landlordism; they may give way before the threats of privileged men who say that they will not perform any of the legitimate and generous functions associated with their position,

if they are deprived of powers which ought never to have belonged to them; they can propose to flood away opposition by endless sums of money which will cripple the country; they can erect elaborate bureaucratic machinery in the counties instead of using the valuation department to give full expression to local knowledge and local feeling. If they do these things they will betray Liberalism once more and fall once more.

BETA.

DEPRESSED AGRICULTURE AND THE REMEDY

Let me repeat, the vampire which sucks all the blood left in farming after everything has been done for it which can be done is the high and rising price of land. . . . What will cure agriculture of its diseases, therefore, is a state of things in which good land will be once more cheap, so that a poor man can own it, and in which everything done by or for the farmers will not at once curse them with high land values and increased rents.

The first necessary of life is land. It comes before even such things as food and shelter, for we can not have either of these without access to land. The grossest error of mankind is the thought that high land values mean good to man. We fall into that destructive mistake, because with land monopolized, all good to man is reflected in increasing land values. The high price of our land, however, comes from the good to humanity, and not the good to humanity from the land values. This is a fundamental distinction.

We shall go on from bad to worse if we can not make land cheap once more. Our good cheap land is gone. Our problem is to get it back again, in city and country. We shall get it back if society is destroyed, but it will do nobody any good in that case.

The land can be made available to all in but two ways: by land nationalization, and by the State thus becoming the universal landlord, or by taxation so levied as to relieve of taxation every form of property except land values.

I do not believe in land nationalization. Yet that is just the scheme which is easiest put across by bungling politicians, and faint-hearted or corrupt ones, struggling with mere poultices on the ulcer they are called upon to treat. . . . Land nationalization, as it would have to be carried out under American institutions, would not work. For the land would have to be paid for in taxation, and the resultant burden of taxation would be as hard to bear as the burden of rent it would replace. The mere proposal to buy all the land and place it in the hands of users of land would excite just ridicule.

On the other hand, the imposition of all taxation on the value of the bare land exclusive of improvements is something which could be done without any basic changes in our institutions.

It would cheapen land and make it a thing which the workers could afford to use; for it would make the value of the improvements the measure of the purchase price. It would make no change in titles. Land would be sold, inherited and passed from hand to hand just as now.

This latter method would relieve from taxation the buildings of the farmer, his machinery, his money in bank, his fences, his crops, his orchards, his income, his improvements through drainage, his fertilization, everything which he has, except the value of his bare land. This value would be absorbed year by year