

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BILL—EXTRACTS FROM THE DEBATES

SECOND READING

November 18-19

THE MINISTER OF HEALTH (Mr. Aneurin Bevan): Ever since the establishment of the county councils in 1888, it has been accepted that there should be central assistance for the purpose of enabling local burdens to be carried. This has been modified from time to time and the obligations of the central Government increased by virtue of a number of reforms, as for example, the partial derating of agricultural hereditaments in 1896. The most important of all the changes took place in 1929 by the derating of three-quarters of the industrial hereditaments and the complete abolition of the rating of agricultural land and buildings. Then, of course, also occurred the transfer of the Poor Law and rural highways to the county councils.

[Labour Minister approves, assimilates and develops the historic Tory policy of landlord doles and tax-exemption of real estate.]

DISTRIBUTING TAX-PAYERS' MONEY

The formula of distributing money, not merely on a percentage basis but in accordance with the relative needs and wealth of local authorities, was a very important departure in local government, and the devisors of it showed considerable ingenuity. But that principle is now dated. When the Bill becomes law and a further transfer takes place, many of the burdens now carried by local government will be transferred to central funds. There will be transferred on 5th July next year local financial responsibility for the hospital system. There will also be a number of other relatively small transfers. When the whole is transferred it would be impossible for any Minister of Health to-day to defend the continuation of the old block grant on the existing principles; there would have to be some modifications. In order to distribute the funds available from the centre, it has been decided to take rateable value per head of the weighted population. We have accepted two factors as being largely responsible for the difference in the distribution of local government burdens; that is, the number of children under 15 years of age and also the scarcity of population in rural areas. We take the weighted population and divide that into the total rateable value, and so discover the average rateable value per head of the population. All those below the average attract a share of the block grant. The Exchequer will step in and become a ratepayer to the extent that the local authority's rateable value is below the average. The Exchequer accepts responsibility for providing services which now in England and Wales cost the local authorities £63 million, but the amount out of the central fund given under the block grant is only £57 million. Therefore, the central fund has accepted a burden of £6 million more than the block grant. This £6 million is left with the local authorities and we propose to add the sum of £33 million in new grants. I would like to take advantage of the opportunity of expressing my appreciation to the late Chancellor of the Exchequer for his generosity and imagination in dealing with this problem. It means that we are able to find an additional sum of £39 million which can be used as an equalisation grant in the fashion I have described.

[Mr. Bevan's figures relate to England and Wales only. Including Scotland the total amount of Mr. Dalton's "generosity" at the expense of the general taxpayer is £45,500,000 a year.]

INLAND REVENUE TAKES OVER LOCAL ASSESSMENTS

It is obvious that if we are to redistribute central assistance to local authorities by means of rateable value per head of the population, there are certain weaknesses which immediately emerge. It happens now in county districts that because urban districts have different valuation authorities there is inequality within counties, inequalities which have given rise to a lot of heart-burning. If we are to allow local authorities themselves to value their own property, and if their valuation is going to be the basis for the distribution of central assistance, then they will be determining the size of the spoon with which they will be eating out of the national pool. We have come to the conclusion, not only on that basis but for other reasons which I think are almost equally good, that the time has come for the

central government to accept responsibility for the valuation of property throughout the country. [England and Wales. The existing valuation machinery under local assessors in Scotland is not affected.] It will be the duty of the Inland Revenue to carry out the valuation, but in doing this they will, of course, employ the local government valuation staffs so as to make use of the pool of experience and knowledge which exists at the present time.

NEW AND ARBITRARY ASSESSMENT OF DWELLING HOUSES

When we come to valuation of property, there is a great difficulty which was recognised by the Government before the war. I refer to the difficulty of valuing cottage property. So long as we have got rating [of houses!] and so long as the ratepayer remains the basis of local government finance—and no one has yet suggested any other method which would still preserve the vitality of local government—it is necessary to tackle this problem of cottage valuation. If the existing laws apply, all cottage property at once goes up in value and far greater burdens will be carried by cottage property than are carried at the moment. Cottages fall roughly into four groups. There are the cottages built before 1918. If one takes their general rents in 1938 into consideration one deals equitably with that class of property. The class of small cottage property which, built after 1918, falls into two classes—the local authority houses and the owner-occupied houses. The proposal is that the Minister shall be responsible for identifying a block of local authority houses in a district, taking the 1938 cost of construction. Then he will take the cost of the sites but disregard the excess costs of the site where special subsidy had to be paid for specially expensive land. He will take 5½ per cent. of that, which will give an economic rental, and that will be the gross value. In the case of the owner-occupied house—so many of which were built between the wars—I am talking about a small cottage now, not about a big house—we have decided in that case to take what it would have cost a local authority to build that house in 1938, with a contemporary and not the 1938 site value as the additional basis. When we come to large house, it would be perfectly proper to take into account any rent paid in 1938, and we think that is the best way of dealing with the matter. In the case where there is no comparable dwelling-house the only basis is what the perfectly willing tenant was able to pay for the occupancy.

Summing up, Mr. Bevan said that under the financial scheme of the Bill, the ratepayer gets more genuine assistance under these proposals than that he gets under any Measure provided by any Government in the last 30 years.

WHO BENEFITS?

SIR H. WEBBE (Conservative—Abbey): Would the right hon. Gentleman explain how, if a local authority gets no assistance whatever under the equalisation grants, the ratepayers in its area are going to get any benefits whatever?

MR. BEVAN: If the ratepayer belongs to a local authority above the line he will get no share of the Exchequer assistance, but the very fact that he belongs to an authority above the line is evidence of the fact that he is a reasonably prosperous person. I hope that that is clear.

COLONEL WHEATLEY ((Conservative—Dorset, E.): It would be quite clear if all ratepayers were of the same prosperity.

OBJECTION TO "DERATING" ACT

MR. BINNS (Labour—Gillingham): In the capacity of chairman of the Metropolitan Boroughs' Standing Joint Committee, I have taken part in very many discussions upon this matter with the Minister and his officers. One thing that probably every party represented in the negotiations was disturbed about when they came to see the Minister of Health—Labour and Tory alike—was why we still carry on with derating.

COLONEL WHEATLEY: Rateable value is not a real indication of the financial resources of an area. In Bournemouth, which is often quoted as an example of a rich borough that ought to help other areas, one-quarter of the rateable value there comes from properties valued at £40 and under per annum. This

means there are many people living there who will have to bear the increased cost that will fall on the borough as the result of this Bill.

METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

MR. OLIVER POOLE (Conservative—Oswestry): I would agree that there is a very urgent need for rating revaluation. The valuation lists are in some confusion, since some have not been revised since 1928 or 1929 and none, I understand, has been revised since 1934. Many of us hoped that revaluation would have been announced at the end of last year in time to come into effect in April, 1949. It is a serious defect in the Bill that the revaluation will take four years. The quickest and most economical method would have been to use the existing machinery available to the local authorities, at the same time strengthening the supervision of the county valuation committees and also to give wider powers to the Central Valuation Committee.

WHY NOT RATE LAND VALUES?

MR. BERRY (Labour—Woolwich, W.): I was hoping that this Bill would deal with the question of rating of site values. The present Leader of the House once had the temerity to introduce a Bill on the subject, but it was ruled out of Order by Mr. Speaker. He had no luck in introducing it as a Private Member's Bill, which has probably coloured his views in regard to private Bills ever since, although I do not know that for sure. It is a question which should receive attention. It will give an additional source of income, which is badly wanted by local authorities.

NEW SOURCE OF REVENUE WANTED

MR. A. J. P. HOWARD (Conservative—Westminster, St. George's): No Government and no Chancellor of the Exchequer has ever yet faced the difficulty of allocating a really elastic and useful source of revenue to the purpose of providing local authorities with new income. What we want if we can get it is a source of revenue which bears a greater relation to the actual wealth produced in the local area. I do not think it right to say that there are no alternative sources of revenue available for local authorities, because that is simply not true.

[These thoughts come appropriately from a Westminster representative. What this Conservative M.P. wants he can get—by the rating and taxation of land values.]

WHO BENEFITS?

MR. MEDLAND (Labour—Drake, Plymouth): High rateable value does not necessarily mean a rich community, yet high rateable value is the weighting factor which is keeping my county borough and many others from getting a fair crack of the whip in respect of the £33 million which is to be distributed. High rents are the cause of high rateable value. In my city the average number of families in each house is 1.84, and that means that there are two, three, and, in some cases, four families in one house. The arbitrary method of fixing how the equalisation fund is to be distributed by taking the rateable value and dividing it by the population plus children, does not give a fair or equal distribution all over the country. There are bound to be inequalities.

INDEFENSIBLE DISCRIMINATION

MR. J. H. HARE (Conservative—Woodbridge): We have dwelt on our extreme disquietude about the discrimination which we feel is being given in favour of the council house dweller against the owner-occupier. We are also extremely concerned about the effect on those who live in flats. It is quite clear that, on the basis of valuation now proposed, flats will probably be valued twice as high as they are now, and that will mean that an intolerable burden will be placed on the people who live in flats, and who are not all the privileged millionaires the right hon. Gentleman likes to think flat dwellers are.

EFFECT ON INDIVIDUAL RATEPAYERS

COMMANDER GALBRAITH (Conservative—Pollok): The disparity of the rate burden per head of the population is every bit as great under the system proposed by this Bill as it has ever been. It ranges from over £5 per head of the population in Peebles to 12s. per head in Orkney. Is it really suggested that the people who live in the remote part of Peebles, where conditions approximate to those of the Western Highlands, are able

to bear a rating burden eight times as great as the people in Orkney, and more than three times as great as the ratepayers in Wigtown are asked to bear?

MR. WOODBURN: Peebles has some of the wealthiest industries in this country, whereas Orkney, while a prosperous community, cannot compare with Peebles as an industrial centre.

COMMANDER GALBRAITH: That is just where the right hon. Gentleman falls into the trap. I am not concerned with whether it is a wealthy authority or not, but with what the individual ratepayer has to pay. The effect of the Bill in the case of Peebles, apart from the transitional grant, would be to raise the rates by no less than 2s. 1d. in the £.

MR. MCKINLAY (Labour—Dumbartonshire): The Scottish rating system is so bristling with difficulties, and it has been permitted to grow to such appalling proportions, that no party opposite—nor, if I may say so without offence, the party on this side—seems to be enthusiastic about tackling those problems. It would have very grave political implications.

WHY NOT RATE LAND VALUES?

MR. ERIC FLETCHER (Labour—Islington, E.): I would not regard rating as we know it as the ideal basis of local revenue or adjustment of local tax burdens. I would hope that when the central valuation procedure gets going and when we have nationally operating valuation machinery, the Valuation Officers will be encouraged to consider the proposals which have been put forward from time to time for a more equitable basis of raising local revenue. I hope that the Government will not lose sight, for example, of the promise which was made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer about a year ago that local authorities would be given discretionary powers for the rating of site values.

THE FINAL WORD

THE PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY TO THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH (Mr. John Edwards): Rating authorities must be assured of a firm and stable income and must, I think, in any event raise a substantial part of it from local resources. So far as we can see, that must, in the main, continue to be done by the rate, the most venerable demand we have in Britain. It was suggested by several of our hon. Friends during the Debate that income could be derived from the rating of site values. I shall not argue that to-night, for it is the intention of my right hon. Friends the Minister of Health and the Secretary of State for Scotland to appoint a committee to inquire into this whole subject. The terms of reference and the membership of the committee will be announced shortly. There is no denying the general under-valuation throughout the whole country. There is no denying the widespread lack of uniformity. We propose to try to get uniformity by using one valuation instrument for our purpose. I do not think there is any need to complain of taking away powers from the local authorities. I pay my tribute to the work done by the assessment committees, county valuation committees, and the Central Valuation Committee, but, however much one may praise them for the work they have done in the past, and however much we may learn from their experience, their continued existence must not stand in the way of progress in this vital matter of uniform standards of rates.

[The only thing said about the non-application of the new valuation procedure to Scotland was by Mr. Woodburn, the Secretary of State: "We do not need it as our own procedure is considered to be quite satisfactory, or at least relatively satisfactory." Second reading of the Bill was carried by 286 to 138.]

THE BILL IN COMMITTEE

"RICH" AREAS AND "POOR" AREAS

December 9th

MR. DEREK WALKER-SMITH (Conservative—Hertford): One of the vices of the principle of taking the national average of rateable value, ignoring everything above it and equalising only up to that margin, is that anything above that margin, however much or however little it may be, is ignored for these purposes.

COMMANDER GALBRAITH (Conservative—Pollok): The point I do not understand is how it is that the lowly paid worker in a highly rated authority gains relief under this proposal. I cannot see how the lower income groups are going to benefit under these proposals, whether they be in Merthyr Tydfil or Bournemouth.

MRS. MIDDLETON (Labour—Sutton): After all, for the majority of people, the choice as between Liverpool or Birmingham, Plymouth or Merthyr Tydfil is really no choice at all; it is the sheer economic necessity of their work which causes them to reside in either one place or the other. The bulk of the ratepayers in those areas where rateable values are high are bound to suffer injustice under these arrangements, and working men in those highly rated places will have to pay more in rents, and more in rates.

December 16th.

AGREED FAULTS OF PRESENT ASSESSMENTS

MR. BEVAN: There are areas in this country where the overwhelming bulk of the valuation work is done by private firms, and where there is not adequate machinery nor adequate facilities unless persons in private employment are used. I have given an assurance that that will be done.

MR. ALPASS (Labour—Thornbury): I am a member of the county valuation committee of my county. Without hesitation, I say that the assessments in my county and division have been nothing but an absolute scandal. I could give many illustrations. The trouble has been that in the main these local committees have been composed of farmers and landowners, and they have been very careful to look after their own arrangements.

MR. LIPSON: In Cheltenham we have had to pay a bigger proportion of the rate to the county, because the rest of the county have not done their job properly. From my own experience I am quite sure that too many people on assessment committees have reasons of their own for keeping assessments down.

MR. BEVAN: Anyone who knows anything at all about this matter, knows that inside county districts there have been grievous problems for ages, because county districts have borne a disproportionate share of county burdens as the valuation committees have weighted their valuations.

SIR G. JEFFREYS (Conservative—Petersfield): I think that local knowledge is of very great importance, and that there may be reasons which would make the particulars which the hon. Member for Thornbury gave about farmhouses appear not so unfair as they sounded from the way in which he put them.

MR. ALPASS: I have farmhouses in my Division assessed at £7, about 50 per cent. lower than the assessment of houses occupied by working men. If the local knowledge has been of any use, it has not had the desired result.

MR. PARGITER (Labour—Spelthorne): I have examples which include Gloucestershire, but also other places as well. For instance, one finds that in Carmarthen a country house with six bedrooms, for sale at £10,000, is assessed at £28. If hon. Members want to get away from Wales, we will go down to Sidmouth where there is a four-bedroomed house, the sale price of which is £8,000, and which is assessed at £52. From my experience, and from figures available to me, this matter is fairly general throughout the country.

ALTERNATIVE TO CENTRAL VALUATION

MR. TURTON (Conservative—Thirsk and Malton): If we have strong valuation committees and first-class county valuation officers, and provided there is the right of appeal to the county court rather than to the quarter sessions, I believe the Minister's great centralisation fabric is unnecessary. The Minister has not yet mentioned how this system of a valuation by the Inland Revenue for rating purposes will tie up with the valuation by the Inland Revenue for taxation purposes. Will the man who is valuing for Schedules A and B also be valuing for rating?

LIEUT.-COLONEL ELLIOT (Conservative—Scottish Universities): In regard to the desirability of a rapid revaluation, it was only recently, on 30th October of this year, that the president of the County Councils Association said: "On behalf of the County Councils Association, the Association of Municipal Cor-

porations, the Urban District Councils Association, the Rural District Councils Association, and the Metropolitan Boroughs Standing Joint Committee, I placed before the Minister of Health the considered and unanimous opinion of these bodies that his proposals were not in the best interests of the country. I also undertook on their behalf that, if the Minister would give further supervisory powers to the Central Valuation Committee and the County Valuation Committee, valuation lists to which no exception could be taken could be made available by the present authorities in approximately half the time that will be required under the centralised organisation now proposed to be established."

That is a point which is being made by hon. Members on this side of the Committee. The Minister's proposals, according to certainly a non-party body, will require double the time which the alternative proposals would require.

December 18th

REBUKING A LADY

Mrs. Middleton, the Labour Member for Sutton, moved an amendment which would provide for the repeal of those sections of the 1929 Derating Act which give rate-reliefs to industrial hereditaments. Telling examples were cited of the losses local authorities suffer thereby. She referred to the Labour Party's opposition to the 1929 Act when it was introduced and how they had voted against it. Weakly, however, she excused herself for not demanding the abolition of the derating of agricultural land because, as she affirmed, "the agricultural industry has always operated on a much narrower margin of profit than other industries," and also because, with the "reorganisation" of the agricultural industry now going forward, "it might be unwise to interfere at this moment" with its derating privileges.

This concession in regard to agricultural holdings and the fallacious arguments in defence of it reflect the Labour Party's downfall before the landed interests. Mrs. Middleton's demonstration against the Derating Act was of a limited nature, but it was enough to provoke Mr. Bevan's ire and she was scolded. He said: "I do not propose to argue this matter at all because if this amendment was carried the Bill would have to be entirely recast . . . all these principles would be torpedoed and we might as well take the Bill back. It is purely a Second Reading point and I do not understand how anyone who has voted for the Second Reading of this Bill can vote for this amendment." But then, as we have noted already, the Derating Act was, in Mr. Bevan's opinion, one of the "reforms" in the series leading up to his Local Government Bill.

Such are the defences of a measure now going upon the Statute Book to standardize and perpetuate injustice in land tenure and taxation. Landlordism and landlord's law have seen to it that by the Derating Act and its likes the public treasuries are deprived of the public revenues resting in the value of land. The preposterous notion is bruited abroad, and actually abetted by a Labour Government, that rural and urban local authorities, so many of them, in this rich country of ours, are necessarily condemned to a state of helpless mendicancy. It is about time that Ministers, calling off their sham fights with the Opposition, looked at the true cause of the maldistribution of wealth and the right remedy for it.

"A lucky outcome from a bit of old-time spivery is seen in the sum of about £2,000,000 reported to have been paid for Bloomsbury Estate for development of London House, the hall for students from the Dominions. When the governors of the Foundling Hospital wished to buy a site in Lamb's Conduit Fields in 1741, the landowner refused to sell the plot they desired unless they took with it unwanted adjoining acres. The enforced conditional sale cost them £7,000. In 1925 their successors sold the land for £1,650,000, and even that, as we now see, was not peak value."—*Liverpool Daily Post*, January 7th.

Under the title *Local Taxation and Land Values*, the United Committee has published a four-page quarto leaflet embodying the three articles in our previous issue, "The Local Government Bill," "London Boroughs and Rating of Land Values" and "Municipal Support Recorded in Resolutions." Supplies of the leaflet were sent with circular letter to the Town Clerks of a large number of Local Authorities, asking that they be handed to Members of Council Committees concerned with local finance. Gratifying requests have been received for further copies, showing that this literature has been well taken and giving encouragement to extend its distribution over a still wider field.

A highly successful meeting of the Liverpool League for the Taxation of Land Values was held on January 19th in the Common Hall, Hackins Hey, over which Mr. Wilfrid Harrison, London, presided, and with Mr. A. W. Madsen as speaker. The subject was a challenging one: "The Government's surrender to the Landowners," with a call for the reversal of its reactionary policies in regard to the land. The Town and Country Planning Act, the Agriculture Act, the Local Government Bill and other measures were examined. Public attendance was excellent and the audience helped remarkably with the stream of questions that were put.

A similar meeting with the same main subject has been organised by the Welsh League for the Taxation of Land Values, with Mr. A. W. Madsen as speaker and Dr. D. G. Taylor, M.A., D.Sc., presiding. It will be held on February 17th in the rooms of the South Wales Institute of Engineers, Park Place, Cardiff. Admission free. Cards of invitation to the meeting—for as effective distribution as members and friends of the League can undertake—are obtainable from the hon. secretary, Mr. Eustace Davies, 27 Park Place, Cardiff.

Mrs. F. G. Sumner, speaking for the Manchester Land Values League, addressed the Accrington Discussion Club on January 19th, her subject being "Politics and the Land Question." Miss N. McGovern, in Birmingham, is making arrangements for a speaker to address an equally important body, the Public Opinion Action Association, so that they shall have the principle and policy of Land Value Taxation put before them.

At the recent meeting of the West Derby Henry George Fellowship, non-members attended to take part in the discussion. It had been decided to invite them as an experiment and, as a result, the attendance was doubled. Non-members included Socialists and Communists and the result was a highly interesting evening. "Not only was it of value that newcomers to Henry George's philosophy made its acquaintance," reports Mr. Davies, "but it was a help to those of us who find difficulty in answering questions put to us on our views. We hope that this meeting will result in some of those who for the first time have come in contact with Henry George's philosophy later forming a Progress and Poverty class." The Fellowship meets on the third Monday of each month at 35 Honeysgreen Lane, West Derby.

"May I reply briefly to 'Farmer,' who writes: 'There are many pieces of land in and about Liverpool, cleared of all debris, most convenient, and in districts where homes are urgently needed; yet there are no signs of rebuilding.' The need for land causes it to rise in value so that landowners 'hold on' in the confident expectation of further rises. Land around all cities is bought and sold at fantastic prices, so that production is checked, and in many cases, actually stopped. . . . The cure lies in the taxation and rating of land values; a tax on all land, whether used or unused, which would cause land speculation to cease, and at the same time relieve production and producers of the crippling burden which arises through taxing (instead!) themselves."—O. B. Sweeney, *Liverpool Post*, December 23rd.

Mr. Walter Smith, Watsville, Mon., an old-age pensioner, in his keen desire to bring the importance of the land question before his friends and neighbours, is spending many useful hours in distributing pamphlets from house to house and engaging

people in conversation. He has already handled many copies of the lectures and addresses by Henry George, such as *The Crime of Poverty*, *The Land for the People*, *Thou Shalt Not Steal* and others, and is gratified by the way in which these publications are accepted and read. The dead hand of land monopoly exerts its hard grip in the valley Mr. Smith knows so well, and to impress the people with the argument for Land Value Taxation as the remedy is the mission to which he is ardently devoted.

YOUR SUPPORT

The United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values Ltd. (proprietors of LAND & LIBERTY, postal subscription 5s. or \$1 from U.S.A. and Canada), the International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade, and the Leagues listed below are maintained by the voluntary support of those who believe in and would seek to advance the principle and policy which the Committee, the Union and the Leagues advocate: Land Value Taxation and Free Trade in its fullness, with removal of the tax burdens on industry and abolition of all monopolies and special privileges that interfere with the production of wealth and prevent its just distribution. Donations in aid of campaign funds will be allocated as desired among any of the associations named.

Cheques may be made payable to Wilfrid Harrison or R. W. Frost, 4, Great Smith Street, London, S.W.1. Friends in the U.S.A. and Canada can contribute through the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 48-50, East 69th Street, New York, in which case they should name "LAND & LIBERTY" and make cheques, etc., payable to the Foundation.

ADDRESSES

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I bequeath, free of duty, to the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, Limited, the sum of

£.....