

PROTESTS AGAINST LANDLORD DOLES

THE HILL Farming Bill had its second reading on June 3. The Minister, Mr. Thomas Fraser, Joint Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, drew a doleful picture of the "serious economic depression" said to exist in that branch of British agriculture. The main purpose of the Bill was to give financial assistance from the Exchequer—that is, from the general body of the taxpayers—to enable owners and occupiers of hill farms to undertake schemes of improvement. The total amount of the grants available for covering half the cost of approved schemes was fixed at £4,000,000, but there was provision for increasing that, if necessary, to £5,000,000. The Minister mentioned that already, since 1941, the State had given sheep-breeding subsidies of £7,000,000 to the hill farmers, and in 1941 a further direct subsidy was instituted in respect of hill cattle.

In the debate, three Labour members, Messrs. J. H. Alpass (Thornbury), J. J. Robertson (Berwick and Haddington), and S. Dye (Norfolk, S.W.), protested against this financial spoon-feeding of agriculture, because it could only result in raising the value of land for the benefit of landlords. Other Labour speakers gave the Bill their unstinted blessing, some indicating that the Bill did not go far enough and that the State should be prepared to give more money still.

Mr. J. H. Alpass said: My quarrel with the Bill is directed not so much at the object which is sought to be achieved as at the method by which that object is sought to be obtained. I am strongly opposed to the subsidisation out of State money of private landlords without any safeguard so far as the capital sum advanced is concerned. My hon. friend the member for the Forest of Dean (Mr. Price) said he felt that there were ample safeguards in the Bill. I realise that in one clause it is stated that no increased rent can be charged by the landowner on account of the money put into this operation under the Bill by the State. But there is absolutely no provision in the Bill to prevent the landlord pocketing the increased sum realised when he comes to sell the land. My hon. friend also said that the people to whom money was advanced in this way would not want to sell, but I have noticed that good landlords do not live for ever and that their estates have to be realised. I have witnessed that sort of thing two or three times in my own division. The effect of this Bill will be that the tenants who want to acquire their own holdings will have to pay enhanced prices because of the State money advanced. It is proposed to adopt the traditional Tory policy of subsidising the landlord out of public funds. I am not surprised that this Bill should be received with favour on the opposite benches. There can be no denial that the Bill was conceived under the ægis of the Conservative Minister of Agriculture and that, in effect, it has been produced by the present Minister with practically no alteration.

Some of us have tabled an Amendment to the Money Resolution asking that the money, instead of being given, should be loaned. I am not so much concerned about the amount, provided the money is not given. I do not mind whether £5 million, £10 million, £15 million or even more if necessary is spent on wise schemes, provided the money is loaned, so that the State shall have some *quid pro quo* for the public money which is put into this industry. There is no safeguard of that description in this Bill. State money is given to the landlords and they can get away with the increased value on account of the money advanced by the State.

Mr. J. J. Robertson said: I think we are rather over-generous to the landowning fraternity. The Minister would have been well advised had he looked at this Bill very carefully before he took it over from the Coalition. It was produced as a

result very largely of a committee which was set up in Scotland; no fewer than half its members were landowners, and, most significant of all, there was not one hill sheep farmer on that Balfour Committee. If I might make a suggestion, it is that the taxpayers, who are to make this grant to the landowning fraternity, should insist that where a grant is being made there is some return and some conditions laid down whereby the landowner cannot evict a tenant farmer who is an efficient farmer.

In this year of 1946 the farmers of Britain are still asking for security of tenure. When one remembers that in the Crofters Acts some 60 years ago, the crofters in Scotland gained security of tenure while the farmers have not yet obtained that concession, one would hope that this might be an occasion when the Minister might make some attempt to insist that where a landowner is securing a grant from public funds, one of the conditions under which he receives it shall be that an efficient farmer who has farmed his land shall not be disturbed and shall have security of tenure.

Mr. S. Dye (Norfolk, South-Western) said: I do not think that in approaching the agricultural problem we should come to this House from the point of view of getting what financial advantage we can for some of our constituents. This system has been followed in other countries and it would be a real danger to democracy. It is for that reason that I am critical of this Bill, in so far as it extends the system of giving subsidies to agriculture and, in this particular case, mainly to the owners of land.

So far as this Bill extends the old system of subsidising the landowner, I condemn it, because I think it is on the wrong lines. It may not be the first time, let us hope it will be the last because, sooner or later, we want to get agriculture out of the position of asking for, and being granted, further subsidies to tide it over another difficult period.

(The Bill has been held over till next session.)

Answering a question in the House of Commons on July 9, the Chancellor of the Exchequer said that the estimates for 1946-47 provided for the sum of £360,000,000 to be paid to Government employees, equivalent to what would be yielded by 3s. in the £ in terms of income tax.

The first two cases in which the Chancellor of the Exchequer has agreed to accept land in payment of death duties, in accordance with the policy announced in his Budget speech last April, are the Bala estate in Wales and the Hartop Hall estate in Patterdale, Westmorland. The former is the Glanyllyn portion of the Wynnasty estate which, with Lake Bala, extends for more than 33,000 acres. It represents duties of more than £120,000. The latter includes Brothers Water and a three-mile stretch of unspoilt country in the Lake District, including Little Hart Craig, Middle Dodd and Dove Craig. Particulars have not been given of either the area or the amount of duties that are represented.

Examples of London land values. The London *Evening Standard*, August 6, in a fair reference to the rating of land values as a worthy object, made display of the Mansion House instance to show to what height the value of land has risen in the City. In the 17th century (after the Great Fire of 1666), the site was leased in perpetuity to the City of London Corporation for £10 a year in ground rent. To-day the site is worth £100,000 a year.

A similar example is that of "Pedlar's Acre," the site of the London County Council County Hall. It is a plot of one acre 19 perches, which in 1504 was valued at the modest sum of 2s. 8d. a year. The price of it when bought by the L.C.C. in 1910 was £81,000.