

THE B.B.C. "ANSWERING YOU"

IN THE North American Service of the B.B.C. there is a current feature entitled "Answering You," being replies to questions sent from the United States, Canada, and the British West Indies. On 9th November Mr H. W. Noren of 546 Greenfield Avenue, Pittsburgh (we recognize one of our own readers) asked: "We are told that about 2 per cent of British people own 100 per cent of land values in England. What is the present Government doing to remedy such a terrible situation?" The answer was entrusted to Mr Geoffrey Crowther, editor of the *Economist*, who said:

"There has been no general valuation of the land of England for 855 years. If they aim at being accurate, the figures you quote must be taken from Domesday Book in the year 1087 and can hardly be regarded as up-to-date. If they are supposed to refer to the present day, they are certainly untrue. If your figures were correct and all the land were owned by 2 per cent of the people that would make less than one million landowners. There are at least four times as many people as that who own their own houses, in addition to all the people who own other sorts of land. There is this point to be remembered too. When you see that a great deal of land is owned by one owner, that owner may turn out to be an educational or charitable institution. The colleges are, I should think, much the biggest owners of land in England to-day. So far as I know, the British Government has no plans to expropriate big landowners. But where large estates are owned by individuals they are being very rapidly broken up by the pressure of heavy income taxes and death duties. What is being done is to ensure that land is only used in the public interest. Arising out of the need for a great deal of rebuilding and replanning after the war, plans are being laid for a very great extension of public control over the use of all forms of land. A bill is now being prepared on this subject and it will be introduced into Parliament very shortly. One of its features will be a provision that the Government can buy any land it requires for replanning purposes at a price to be based on the pre-war value of the land. This, it is hoped, will be the means of securing that, in the future, nobody shall make a profit merely out of holding land that grows valuable not by his efforts but owing to the growth and efforts of the community. I think you will agree that that is further than any other democracy has yet advanced."

Not an altogether competent or even relevant effort, for it turned the question into one affecting the area or surface of land instead of the value of land. It is true there is no official information to give answer, except that by inference the statistics of death duties speak for a concentration of wealth (due, as economic study can prove, to the private appropriation of the rent of land) which is no good feature of our democratic state—£594,708,000 left in 1937-38 by 153,940 persons who had died, and of that sum £394,811,000 was left by 10,057 persons, whereas 443,860 persons died leaving nothing that was worth the trouble of assessment.

The reference to what is called a valuation in 1087 shows a curious disposition to throw a dust-cloud over the argument. Domesday Book was a catalogue of the possessions of the landholders, all holding land under the Crown, made for the purpose of assessing the feudal dues to the Crown. Economic history relates how landholding over the centuries has been progressively relieved of its obligations, so that land values and the rent of land have been more and more lost to the community for private gain.

Mr Noren and the B.B.C. listeners have been treated to a frivolous remark hardly complimenting their intelligence.

Other historical records "if they are supposed to refer to the present day" would have been equally valid as a rebuff to Mr Noren; the general valuation of 1697 and the Return of Land Ownership ordered by the House of Lords in 1873. The former was the valuation for the old Land Tax of 1692 at the rate of 4s. in the £ of yearly value, a valuation which was intended to be periodical but was never revised, so that the old land tax, where it has not been redeemed, continues to be levied on an assessment which dates back 245 years. The assessment including as it did buildings (and, at one time, personal property as well as land) affords no particulars of the then value of land apart from buildings and improvements, or how much was taken for public purposes and how much was left in private pockets. It would therefore, for controversial skill, have been as much use to Mr Crowther as his 1087 valuation. The House of Lords 1873 Return is the only available public document relating to the distribution of land and the extent of estates and it is the foundation of such books as *Our Old Nobility* by Howard Evans, *Our Scots Noble Families* by Tom Johnston (now Secretary of State for Scotland) and *The Great Robbery* by Graham Peace.

What break-up of large estates has since taken place is not in point, and the alleged break-up even as to area is grossly exaggerated. The country as to area is still owned by the comparatively few, and the walled estates and territorial proprietorships have by no means disappeared. The heavy income taxes and death duties are not directed, as if by policy, toward any inroad upon the land monopoly. They take all fortunes in their sweep from whatever source derived, and it is only incidental that certain landowners as well as certain other persons, poor as well as rich, are obliged to sell up to pay taxation or to insure against the liability. The break-up of numberless humble homes and businesses under the self-same burdens is a matter studiously ignored by these apologists, ignoring also that the end and outcome of the whole process is to concentrate the rent or value of land still more closely in the hands of the few. What, says Mr Noren, is being done to remedy the situation, meaning taxation which discriminates in favour of the products of labour and against the private appropriation of land values, the fund that rightly belongs to the people as a whole? The answer is a negation. There is no legislation afoot and none indeed is wanted or was asked for "to expropriate big landowners." It is said that millions of people have bought their own houses, and there are also the owner-occupier farmers and others; but the land value of their houses and farms is minute and in any case the bulk of them are mortgaged. The ownership of a great deal of land by educational and charitable institutions is the least happy of Mr Crowther's excuses. There one finds land monopoly and land speculation in the raw as against the rights of the community, for these institutions surrender not one-half per cent of the land value they enjoy and they are entirely exempt from income tax and death duties.

Plans to extend public control over the use of land are neither here nor there. They do not belong to the question which, again, is: what is being done to see that land values are not privately appropriated, but are used for the common good? To that nothing more is said than that the Government intends to buy some land, in occasional and particular circumstances, *gifting* the land value to the particular landowners and so depriving the community of it; all others are left in the enjoyment of their present privileges, and the Government itself becomes speculator in the bits of land it has bought.

Finally, it is not true that there has been no general valuation for 855 years. There was the valuation under provisions of the Finance (1909-10) Act, 1910. It was done, and it would have given most useful testimony, faulty or inadequate as the valuation was and needing subsequent correction; but its information was kept secret, its figures still lie in the offices of the District Valuers, the land values legislation for which it was framed and the prospects of amending and improving it were destroyed by the Government of "Reconstruction" that followed the last war. The fate of the Snowden Act of 1931 is more recent history. It provided for a more competent valuation, of land value only, and a general tax on the value of land, but the National Government, in breach of faith, suspended and repealed the legislation, capitulating to "the power of certain interests" as was publicly admitted by the then Prime Minister, Mr Ramsay MacDonald. The present Government, its successor, shows no sign of redeeming that betrayal—not yet. It is faced by the demand of hundreds of British Municipalities for legislation to rate land values. It refused to give facilities to the Site Value Rating Bill promoted in 1938 by the London County Council. The L.C.C., introduced the measure as a Private Bill, applying to London alone, but the Speaker ruled that a Bill of that nature and purpose had to be a Public Bill for constitutional reasons that need not detain us here. Reintroduced in that House of Commons as a Public Bill, the motion was defeated. Whatever be the attitude of the present Government, there is no doubt about the widespread public sentiment that land values are public values, and taxation should be reformed so as to secure them for the use and benefit of the whole community.

Listeners in the U.S.A., Canada and the British West Indies are advised to send their questions for the B.B.C. "Answering You" to the B.B.C., 620 Fifth Avenue, New York City, or to C.B.C., Toronto, or direct to the B.B.C., London, England. If any such questions relate to land tenure and taxation in this country, the B.B.C. could do worse than invite others, also acquainted with facts, to impart the information.

I am pleased to say that we have found your journal highly interesting and instructive. It is our very sincere wish that the movement will achieve the success it deserves in removing the root cause of social ills.—T. J., HASLEMERE.

Enclosed herewith is postal order for 18s., covering three new subscriptions and the renewal of my own subscription to your valued paper, which is always filled with stimulating and thought-provoking articles.—L. P. B., Montreal.