

SIR HERBERT SAMUEL ON THE LAND QUESTION

Speaking at Manchester on 23rd March, Sir Herbert Samuel, the newly-elected Chairman of the Liberal Organization Committee, dealt with the miserable conditions obtaining in the industrial parts of the great cities, said (*Manchester Guardian* report):—

“In a larger degree these miserable conditions are the consequence of the land monopoly and of a thoroughly vicious system of land rating. It is hard to undo the results of past neglect, but we must try. We must untie the hands of our local authorities.

“First, it is essential that urban land should be assessed for rating at its true value. Secondly, the corporations must have the first option on the purchase of any land within their areas which they need for public purposes, and at the value so assessed. Thirdly, they must be able to acquire land in advance for town-planning or other schemes for improvement at that value. So we shall build up great municipal estates, such as some corporations are fortunate enough to inherit from earlier times, to the great advantage of their own finances and of the general well-being of their towns. Next, rates should be shifted, to a large extent, from buildings on to land values, and a betterment rate should be levied wherever values have been increased by public improvements. Fifthly, the town-planning of new districts should be universal, and re-planning schemes should be prepared for congested districts already built over.”

In the Liberal programme the rating of land values is once again confined to Urban districts by one of its leaders. But the thought still holds for a wider application and the question put is:—

If the policy will “untie the hands of our local authorities” why should its advantages be for the towns, and denied to the County Councils? If it will get at land monopoly in one place, why not in another? The small man on the land must pay 62s. an acre while the bigger farmer has his plot at 25s. an acre. A tax on the value of agricultural land would put an end to this scandal.

If the “building up of great municipal estates” is not Socialism, what is it? If rates are “shifted to a large extent from buildings on to land values” there will be land enough and to spare for corporations, guilds, co-operative societies and for individual enterprise as well. And why a “betterment tax” with land values taxation in operation to a “large extent”? Again, if the revenue from land values is to relieve buildings where is the money to come from to “acquire” (purchase) land in advance, so to make land monopolists of our elected persons and their bureaucratic agencies?

The taxation of land values is advocated in substitution of existing methods of raising public revenue.

It cannot very well free the breakfast table duties, and so benefit the taxpayer, or relieve the building trade of its burdens and at the same time provide the land speculator with his price. Lord Oxford has said that the taxation of land values would cheapen land and relieve improvements and that these two things would promote industry and progress. It is the experience that purchase schemes stiffen the price of land and thereby obstruct industry and progress.

It is as unfair as it is unwise to disregard or reject the lessons of experience. In any forward policy it is poor statesmanship that lags behind what has been accomplished on similar lines elsewhere. The land value policy is not where it was twenty or even ten years ago. There are working models in Australia, South Africa and Denmark. Why are they so persistently ignored? There are no municipal rates levied on improvements, for example, in the cities of Sydney or Johannesburg. The local revenues of both these great cities are taken from the unimproved value of the land. Are they never to be brought into the argument on Liberal platforms, or in the Liberal Press? The fruit of this policy is on record; its beneficence would surely help those who are really concerned to educate the public mind of this country on the need for the reform.

It is a capital blunder to proceed with the agitation for land value taxation as if the question was still struggling for dear life in some no man's land; such propaganda has a sinister appearance. Agricultural Denmark has successfully crossed the line that for purposes of municipal government separates town from country. New South Wales, Queensland and New Zealand are striking examples of this wider and deeper cut into the monopoly that, explicitly and inferentially, some people would have us believe is associated with the agricultural industry for its eternal good. There may be difficulties in the way of taking the policy across the municipal boundary line, but let a hearing be given to places that have surmounted such difficulties. These outstanding triumphs of the land value policy will yet speak with “miraculous organ”; they are speaking now to tens of thousands of land reformers up and down the country and we mean to better the instruction.

At a meeting of the Stockport Town Council, last month, Councillor W. Noble, speaking on the purchase of land for public improvements at Heaton Road and Bramhall Lane, said the price of land at Heaton Road worked out at £860 an acre, and that at Bramhall Lane at £605. He suggested that in future the rateable value of land purchased should be given in the minutes.

Councillor Morton agreed with Councillor Noble, but said the Committee were in an awkward position, as the land was about to be sold for building purposes and it was necessary for the corporation to buy it now if the roads concerned were to be widened. If the Committee had waited it might have been another Prince's Street job.—*Local Press*, 3rd March.