

***THE PEOPLE'S RIGHTS:
OPPORTUNITY LOST?***
by Andrew MacLaren

BOOK REVIEW

The People's Rights
Winston S. Churchill
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What would have happened had Churchill's Liberals succeeded in their original plan for reform?

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The republication of any Churchill work after sixty years is an event commanding widespread public interest. Such attention is owed the rich desert of *The People's Rights*, last published at the culmination of the election campaign of 1909/10, when the speeches from which Churchill compiled the book were delivered.

Many a reader will find himself astonished that so vivid a portrayal of one of the great men of our time should have lain so long out of print. Yet modern readers will miss much of the value of the book if it is read only for the brilliant and sometimes surprising insight into this vital stage of Churchill's political development.

For the principles and aspirations set out here are not those of the individual, but the life force of the great movement that reached its zenith in the Liberal Governments of Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman and Herbert Asquith that followed the landslide Liberal victory of 1906. If one dares to summarise the purpose and vision of Liberal leaders of that time, it was to bring in a society in which the poverty and social injustice of the previous century would be eradicated without diminishing the liberty and independence of the individual. The incentive would remain to develop his abilities to the full for the good of himself and of the community.

In seeking and proclaiming the steps which were to be taken, Churchill and the other leaders of the radical wing of the Liberal Party encountered fierce opposition from powerful vested interests, even within their own party, and in particular from the House of Lords. The struggle with the Lords, following their rejection of the so-called "People's Budget" in 1909, led of course to the introduction of the Parliament Act.

Churchill himself had crossed the floor of the House in 1904 on the Free Trade issue and his passionate advocacy of Free Trade found brilliant expression in the 1909 speeches. It was not long however before he became the equally fervent and conscientious exponent of other great Liberal causes, many of which are now little remembered. Apart from Free Trade, the great economic and social issues were taxation and the alleviation of poverty. The Liberals were concerned to remove the basic cause of the problem - not just to mitigate its undesirable effects.

It was the American economist Henry George who, towards the end of the 19th century, had examined the paradox of the age in his *Progress and Poverty*. His principles had a major impact, first upon the radicals of Scotland and Ireland, including Campbell Bannerman himself; and later upon the policy of the Liberal Party.

Henry George propounded that whilst people have the right to possess what they produce, or receive in exchange for their work, there is no such right to private ownership of the elements upon which all depend - air, water, sunshine and land. Indeed, George held the right of access to these basic elements as strong and equal as the right to life itself, and that if private ownership of basic elements is permitted, suppression and exploitation of one class by another is inevitable. The consequent injustice must become more acute as the community develops.

Thus it became a major point of Liberal policy to shift taxation from production, and to raise taxation upon the value of land, on the basis that this value, as witnessed by the tremendously high prices even then demanded for commercial land, is created not by any individual but by the existence and work of the whole community. A natural source thus arises from which the community may meet its growing needs without discouraging production or inhibiting the growth of earnings.

The justice and practicality of this proposition can rarely if ever have enjoyed a more brilliant advocate than Winston Churchill, and today's reader is left to wonder how different might be the present state of Britain had the forces of social change pursued these principles to their enactment. As it was, the great power and intellectual prowess of the Liberal Movement, which had commanded worldwide admiration for the breadth and nobility of its vision, was soon to be dissipated by war, internal feuding and the fear of Bolshevism.

Under the cruel heel of war and unemployment, Britons came to value security more and independence less. The emphasis in social advance shifted to the massive provision of public benefits, and the increasing intervention of the State in almost every area of human activity. The two World Wars and the great depression between them severed, to a great extent, the line of liberal thought that had developed over the previous century.

Of Churchill himself, one can only feel that he was fated to be the great war leader. Certainly, opposition to communism and later to the rise of European tyrannies dominated the remainder of

his political life. It is perhaps ironic that a reason so often given for his dismissal in 1945 is that he was not capable of dealing with social problems, and thus was unfit to be a peacetime leader.

The People's Rights tells a very different story and comes now not as a document of historic interest but as a challenge to politicians, indeed to the entire electorate, to consider again the causes of poverty and the basic issues of social and economic justice. Perhaps current disillusionment with politics springs from a sense that if justice in the community can only be achieved at the expense of individual liberty, the price - especially in terms of ever-increasing taxation and bureaucracy - is too high to pay.

As a proposition that justice in the community and the freedom of the individual are complementary and that taxes may be raised without undermining either, *The People's Rights* comes as a major contribution to current political and economic thought. Indeed it deserves a place in the annals of Man's struggle for freedom and yearning for a society in which the genius of every person would be nurtured and the liberty of every person respected.

Biographical note:

Born in Glasgow in 1883, Andrew MacLaren was active in the Scottish Liberal Party and was working with the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values in London when Churchill sent for copies of Henry George's works at the time of the great battle over the "People's Budget." He was, in 1970, one of the few alive who could speak from personal and intimate knowledge of the events and personalities of that time. As Labour Member for the Burslem Division of Stoke-on-Trent (1922-45), MacLaren was a fervent advocate of Land Values Taxation and Free Trade and - to the consternation of many socialist colleagues - fiercely opposed the Welfare State and nationalisation of industry as an alternative to dealing with the basic causes of poverty and injustice.