

LAND & LIBERTY

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THE ELECTION AND AFTER

There was a singular repose about the Election and absence of polemic. The general comment was that meetings were not largely attended and few seemed to take a live interest in what was going on. Radio broadcasts were accepted as items at the news hour or as interruption of some favourite music, cutting into the usual evening entertainment. Certainly there was little in the contest (saving in some constituencies) to arouse attention or excite zeal for or against any great fundamental or dividing issue. And nothing of the kind was put before the country by the organized parties, nothing to alter opinions that were obviously made up before the election campaign began. The Government chose a suitable moment to appeal for a renewed vote of confidence, turning to good account the international situation and the stand it has lately made for the observance of the League of Nations Covenant. As if mindful of the adage that the eyes of the fool are on the ends of the earth it dragged its coat with great success, and far far away were found to be the causes of war and of the industrial depression here at home. The disputants were invited to step on the several tails of the coat; they obeyed most obligingly and as they argued the given topics of national security and the strength or weakness of the British navy, some voices were heard warning everybody against last minute scares. There was no occasion for the Government to produce any eve of the poll "Red Letter." It created a war atmosphere to begin with, and the alarm "your country in danger" served to throw a veil over its domestic policies. If the leaders of the organized parties had even tried to penetrate that veil and exhibit the things the Government has done to concentrate wealth and power still more in the hands of the few, they could have reversed the roles and fought on different ground with very different results.

Another tail of the coat was the Government's programme of proposals to help the unemployed and mitigate poverty. Indeed, if there were no such thing as a land question, if the private appropriation of the rent of land and the speculative withholding of land from use were never to be regarded as a social wrong, if it did not matter how revenue was raised or who or what bore the brunt of taxation, if no distinction may be made between what belongs to the community and what belongs to the individual, if free commerce or tariff barriers made no difference either way, there is nothing politically in sight to better the plans announced by the Government; the only question is the degree of application. In principle they are right, one side outbidding the other in promise or performance. The impartial spectator could not help getting that impression as the debate proceeded. The agricultural worker thrown out of

work was to get the benefit of unemployment insurance; very good, and the only thing to do, if the idea was absurd that land monopoly had some connection with his circumstances. Mining royalties are to be unified, which is in exact parallel with nationalization by purchase, the interest on the bonds continuing to rob the community of so much rent of land; yet there are hands that clap when the proposition is stated in these terms and voices growing indignant because the Government intimates no more than "unification." The contributory pensions scheme is to be extended; the school age raised; maternity and child welfare services extended and improved. All these things are good in themselves but they are not solvents of the poverty problem. They are the doing of everything for the working classes, as Tolstoi said, except getting off their backs. And when somebody complains that the Government has been vote-catching with other people's thunder, the voter has no qualms about voting the Government a thumping majority. The sincerity of the promise can be put to the test.

But more thunder was stolen when the Government gave out schemes to create employment by guaranteeing £30,000,000 for railway extensions or improvements and promising to spend £100,000,000 on the roads. Whether the money required is to come out of current revenue, or whether as some sages sing it may be got from idle hoards in the banks, was not the point at issue. Nor did it seem to matter what taxes were imposed to provide either the revenue or such a rate of interest that the hoards would be enticed out of the vaults. The Government was scolded for encouraging a good policy after having roundly condemned it, and voters were informed about the lavish sums the true friends of the unemployed would spend in providing work. Again he it said that if there were no landed interests in the way, if such schemes did not simply harden the price of land and shower gifts of increased values on idle privilege, there would be no serious objection to spreading out work on the most magnanimous scale. Parliament might dissolve for good and never trouble the nation again with a General Election to decide such a paltry question as the number of millions the Treasury or the banks or a printing machine should pour out.

Needed public improvements should, of course, be made but there is no blinking the fact that they cost much in ransom to the land monopoly. Many have been abandoned in face of the prohibitive terms demanded. At best they can only give temporary employment. When the new road has been built or other works are completed, when the State-endowed wages have ceased, the situation is as it was before, so far as the unemployment problem is concerned, if it has not been made worse. All this has been proved abundantly by the experience of the last ten years, during which many hundred millions have been spent unavailingly in the hope or expectation of employment so stimulated that the problem itself would disappear. Who ignores these considerations? Who pretends that crooked and stupid taxation has no bearing on industrial stagnation, or maintains a silence about the mischief of land speculation, which is virtually the silence of consent? It is not without significance that Mr Lloyd George's Council of Action now lies buried in the ruins of the Liberal temple where it was given entry to pull away the remaining pillars. Perhaps it had to come to this, and a new and reformed Liberal Party can now rise out of the ashes. Nor is it surprising that Labour leaders are making a post-mortem examination of policies that must have held too much or too little to win a better measure of support from the people.

The General Election was precipitated by the events that followed the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. The British Government found in the obligations of the League of Nations Covenant a concern that the military security of this country was in doubt, and exploited the fears it evoked. The League of Nations has imposed sanctions on the Italian people by way of inducing the Italian dictatorship to call off its murderous assault. The two-edged weapon of a commercial blockade is being employed to bring loss or ruin to the Italian trading community; but as trade always benefits both parties, its stoppage will injure the merchants outside Italy as well as those upon whom this punishment is supposed to be inflicted. It is a course of action that will in the long run contribute to embitterment, giving the Italian Government a still greater hold over its people, and exciting the national and individual resentment of which war is the inevitable outcome. But that is the case with all the economic sanctions that have been meant to strangle trade. The League of Nations is employing Satan to cast out sin. International strife has been fostered by trade barriers, which are the sanctions that the nations have imposed upon one another. The protectionist poison has worked to establish the thought that trade is aggression and imports a disaster. At Ottawa it turned the British Empire into a League for imposing sanctions against the rest of the world. Its mission is to spread more terror if foreign produce were dropped from the sky than if bombs were falling as in Abyssinia. It has invented the quotas to stop this barrage and bombardment. And at home we have the sanctions of a similar order in the marketing schemes for punishing those who produce or deliver things for consumption. No one may put new land under hops, produce more than a certain quantity of bacon, or sell potatoes grown on tabooed land or open an unlicensed dairy shop for the sale of milk, save at the risk of fine and possible imprisonment. But these are the least of the infringements of liberty and obstructions to industry in the monopoly-ridden world the present Government has been called to administer for another term. Tariffs, quotas, restrictions and taxation direct and indirect that takes toll of the producer's earnings are all part of the edifice which the land monopoly, a law unto itself, has erected. The harshest of all the sanctions is that which prohibits the use of the natural resources unless rent be paid to the owner. These then are the issues that should have been foremost in this late appeal to the nation, and in the name of peace and security. But the votes have been cast and a new Parliament sits dominated by the forces of reaction. It is a matter to deplore but not to despair of. Far better get busy at once on renewed endeavour to educate the public opinion that alone will elect a different House of Commons.

A. W. M.

The *Manchester Guardian*, 6th November, reports:—

An important scheme for the widening of the Rhyl-Prestatyn Coast road has been abandoned owing to the prices for land demanded by landowners. The scheme provided for the extensive widening of the road from Prestatyn to Rhyl and was considered to be the first part of an even bigger scheme for the construction of a ring road around Rhyl which would by-pass all the traffic-congested streets of the town. When the negotiations for the necessary land came to be considered by the Flintshire County Council (who were undertaking the scheme) it was decided "that as the offers of the owners concerned were prohibitive, they be informed forthwith that no further action would be taken."

POPULATION & WATER SUPPLIES

At the Public Works Roads and Transport Congress held on 21st November, a paper was presented by Dr S. Vere Pearson, "The Distribution of Population with Special Reference to Water Supplies." The subjects dealt with included not only water supplies, but water and sewage disposal and the reasons for uneconomical concentration or dispersal of population and consequent undue expense in handling these matters. Space permits us to quote only a small part of this valuable paper:—

"The causes which lead to greater centralization and overcrowding are essentially economic. People congregate where money is to be made, or where they think money can be most easily made and where life is relatively hectic. Economic causes draw people from rural surroundings and occupations to the cities. The lower standard of living, the low wages, and the poorer amenities and excitements of rural districts are constantly drawing people to the towns. The attraction is progressive, for more and more persons are needed to move people about in the large towns, to govern and control society in these days of socialism, and to cater for the town-dwellers' recreations. People leave the food producer miles away from cities in thinly inhabited regions. Such internal migrations of population are not voluntary, though sometimes they appear to be. They are primarily dependent upon the economic consequences of adherence to the present-day practice of governments. These consider it their duty to 'keep the ring' for the landlords to collect the rent of land. Instead they should reverse that practice and collect such dues as attach to sites as can be shown to arise from the needs, growth and public expenditure of the community, basing their practice always upon a distinction between an 'improvement' value and one which belongs to the community. It is only the latter which should be collected to finance the public services. If that were done all that a man produced by his own effort could be left intact and taxes could be abolished. The present methods of collecting funds for the public services are not conducive to the best interests of the community. As long ago as 1885, Edward VII, then Prince of Wales, as a member of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, pronounced against our plan of raising rates and pointed out that it was unfair in its incidence and hampered progress, besides permitting public values to accrue to private individuals.

"When people can obtain good public services they will be willing to pay more to occupy a site for their habitation or their place of work. Therefore, a site value, or what the economists call the economic rent of land is the just measure of the benefits to be received from living in society, and this value should be that which is collected into the common pool instead of taxes and should not be allowed to flow into private pockets. The best plan is to include all public services in the site rent paid, so that even water, sewerage and drainage rates should be assessed on the basis of unimproved values. Then water would be supplied to water users and its payment included in his local land rent levy just as the use of a lift is included in the house rent of a flat paid to a house-lord. But in England we are far from such ideal arrangements as yet. The first step must be to transfer local rates to site-value assessments."

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