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## LAND & LIBERTY

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### THE GENERAL ELECTION

The present Government, returned at the General Election of July 5, 1945, with an overwhelming majority, had still a number of months to live out its full term of five years. It has decided to cut short its existence and go to the country now rather than later. The General Election takes place on February 23.

There was nothing to be gained by waiting. On the contrary, it may be revealed to the electors at no distant date that the economic outlook is much more serious than they are at present given to believe; and that would make hard going for the responsible politicians. The conclusion appears to be that it is better to take occasion by the hand before the clouds gather and let the emphasis be upon the achievement that all the legislation promised in the "Let Us Face the Future" manifesto of 1945 has been enacted. Trump cards, in the estimation at least of the players, will be the extension of the social services and the setting up of the Welfare State. There will be excellent display of the benefits conferred, but the equally material question of how the cost is met is unlikely to have the same show. Pride will also be taken in what has been done in the way of nationalising industries and in the application of controls and restrictions to build a Planned Economy, as it is called. Yet with all that, the Labour Government's word to the working people is the sore admission that the state of affairs is hazardous and the workers must face it by harder toil, by more production and by withholding their demands for higher wages. Otherwise inflation, they are told, will run riot and such disasters will befall us as no one dare contemplate, least of all the working people.

The House of Commons, on the dissolution, had a membership of 640, the state of the Parties being: Labour, 390, Conservatives 217, Liberals 10, Communists 2, and various Independents 21. As a result of the redistribution of seats and the abolition of the University franchise, membership of the House is now reduced to 625. Obviously there will have to be a large swing of votes if there shall be another administration in place of the present. We put that quite dispassionately and not as if expressing a wish, since we have no comfort in the thought that the only possible alternative is a Conservative Government. The Liberals may gain some accession of strength, but it will not be sufficient to upset the calculations of either Socialists or Conservatives. Even so, there is little to distinguish in the programmes and policies of the various parties.

The Liberal policy embodies Free Trade, although in somewhat halting fashion and with a startling contradic-

tion referred to below. In its Speakers' Handbook there is a page which shows a fair acquaintance with the taxation and rating of land values and has an implied pledge to do something about it. Except for that, the Liberal policy contains so much of Socialist conception and of Conservative doctrine that the voter who rejects both is as likely as not to disfranchise himself by not voting at all.

There is among the parties no fundamentally dividing issue. The Conservatives will have much to say about the Planned Economy and the controls and restrictions, how the Government has kept industry in a straight-jacket, how it has piled up taxation to meet extravagant expenditures, and how faultily the nationalised industries are operating.

But the Conservatives will be hoist with their own petard. For they also have their Planned Economy and their controls and restrictions in the Protective tariffs which they uphold and which are as virulent a form of Socialism as anything they now condemn. Monopolies and privileges are in their special care and they are as responsible as anyone that, these vested interests subsisting, the urge for Nationalisation has gained such headway.

The Liberals would seek power from the coercive State to institute a scheme of compulsory co-partnership, an arbitrary and injurious interference with business undertakings (and fatuous as a wage raising idea) which deprives the party of its title to its very name.

Labour, Conservative and Liberal parties vie with one another in supporting schemes (of course, at the expense of consumers) of guaranteed prices and guaranteed markets for farm produce, the financial effect of which will but be to guarantee the mounting price of farmlands exempted as they are (with both Conservative and Labour approval) from any local taxation whatever. Agriculture is not served thereby, but millstones are tied round the necks of those who have to pay the price of their foothold within this well-fenced occupation.

The Labour party is now solid for Customs tariffs as equipment necessary for its controlled economy; and its surrender to territorial landlordism is complete. It is prepared to lay out vast sums of public money in its land purchase schemes and the price payable for agricultural land must always be the full market value, by which all the largesse thrown at farmers falls ultimately into the owners' lap. The Conservatives have, of course, run true to form and have worked hand in hand with this fraudulent Socialism for the preservation of landlord privilege. But it is highly disturbing to find the Liberal party associated with an out-and-out protectionist policy for agriculture, a reversion to the hated Corn Laws and repudiation of the freedom of trade, which is the citizen's individual right, and the essential basis for the prosperity of agriculture as well as other industries. Just as there is no fundamentally dividing issue, so there are no observed moral principles.

Consider again the similarity of outlook on the fundamental problem of persisting poverty and recurrence of unemployment and the difficulty the mass of people have in gaining more than a pittance for labour or service rendered—how the parties, by their policies do, in fact, deny that these are problems which can be solved. By implication, those hardships are regarded as an inevitable feature of modern society and can, therefore, only be allayed with the help of the paternalistic State. Nothing more can be done, it is falsely assumed, than to collect aid for the needy, as by insurance contributions, and to

supplement wages and give grants to industries out of the proceeds of general taxation—forgetting that taxation as it is levied to-day, penalising all production and trade, must create the conditions it is sought to amend. The parties close their eyes to the bare possibility that if the working people were not landless, that if they had equal access to natural resources and if the obstacles to production were removed, they could provide abundantly for themselves out of their earnings, and the paternalistic State could stay at home.

There is, therefore, something offensive as well as humiliating in what goes by the name of social services, which have grown to such dimensions. The forms this assistance takes passes through all the moods and tenses of housing subsidies, food subsidies, family allowances, farm subsidies, guaranteed markets, doles and aids to other industries, not to speak of the social service of price-raising protective tariffs which the manufacturers enjoy—until the Welfare State, so called, and so widely distributive, becomes a grand charity organisation, with its gifts to the beneficiaries, most of them not knowing and caring less by what means and with what retroactive effects the pot is filled out of which they eat. That the gifts are illusory and somehow fail of their purpose is proved by the constant pressure for more. See, for example, how each succeeding Housing Act, in a stream of futile measures, is bolstered up with ever-greater subsidies to keep rents down, or within the capacity of low wages to meet them; see how insatiably the farmers lobby at the doorsteps of the Treasury for more and more aid, Act after Act voting public funds for their benefit. See how all these aids are never enough, and how they escape as through a sieve, but not at all mysteriously, into the hands of that "superior interest" who has just so much more security for the rent that is his to collect.

The Labour party goes to the hustings boasting of its performance that it has successfully carried out its promised domestic legislation. Success! More's the pity. We allow it to be said in these pages that the Labour Government has been the most reactionary British Government in the last hundred years. This is true, not so much by comparison with previous Governments but by comparison with the opportunities it had and the way it has misused them. Its legislative output has certainly been immense. It is written in three hundred Acts of Parliament supplemented by twenty thousand or more rules, orders and statutory instruments giving plenary executive powers to Ministers; and in the throttling network of regulations which goes by the name of the planned economy. It has placed the commerce of the country at the mercy of a bureaucracy by exercise of the arbitrary exchange control and has disallowed individual trading by its practice of bulk buying and monopolistic import boards, the public served or exploited, who knows?

Successive Labour Budgets have re-enacted the protective tariffs, reimposed every nuisance tax impeding production or hampering trade, or have invented more of the like; maintained the levies on wages and placed such burdens on buildings, plant, machinery and stock-in-trade as to make ruinous inroads upon the capital necessary for the running of industry. All that amount of taxation, and by its nature so disastrous in its effects, has proved insufficient to meet expenditures. Nor have the American loan, Marshall Aid, the grants and loans from Canada, Australia and other Dominions made good the difference. The increase in internal debt, the use of the printing press

and the depreciation of the pound are further steps on the road to calamity.

The record of legislation for which its sponsors take so much credit could not be completed in a page or in half-a-dozen. It is a morass of measures, many of them pernicious and not a few iniquitous, which it should be the first duty of a reform government to repeal, while at the same time disbanding the Ministries and Boards which those Acts called into being. We name such Acts as the Town and Country Planning Act, with its ransom of £300,000,000 to land speculation, its many hundreds of millions more of public funds pledged for land purchase, and its development charges so levied as, in fact, to hamstring development; the Agriculture Act, which, with its aids to farmers, its overall control and its land purchase provisions has not only made smallholdings a dead letter, but has established a closed shop for all who are privileged to remain within the industry; the Local Government Act, which has confirmed and, indeed, aggravated the evil incidence of the present rating system; the New Towns Act, which looks not to why old towns are congested and deteriorate nor does anything about that, but would gamble with £25,000,000 more or less on each to-be-built town and then let the rating system do its worst in taxing houses and give private interests scope to gather increased land values to themselves.

A whole series of measures touching the land question tells the same story of public money or Marshall Aid, or what you will, entering the Treasury to be dispensed again on support for Hill Farmers; in £20,000,000 to improve Scotland's water supplies, and Scotland's rating system is adjusted to have rates fall on houses and not on the land benefited; in Drainage, Special Roads, Coast Protection and other betterment schemes, compelling harassed taxpayers and ratepayers to foot a bill which should be charged against the rent of land. The obliquity of the Government is in not having at once re-enacted the Tory-repealed Finance Act of 1931, to secure the valuation and taxation of land values and to secure also, as was easily possible by this time, the reform of local taxation on the same lines. In its social, economic and financial purposes the Government has manifested the gravity of that default.

We do not say that the Conservatives would have done any better if they had been in power, but they could hardly have done worse. As it is, Conservatives and Socialists have been closely associated in effecting mischievous land legislation, and the Liberals have not been unwilling companions. It was time all came out into the open to justify their claims to represent the people in the government of the country. Whatever the result may be, and the political prophets are as perplexed as never before, we shall not this time have the government so ardently desired by lovers of liberty, whose practical politics embody the simple plan that the free market shall be restored, that government take its hands off industry and that private initiative be allowed full scope, free from all monopoly and privilege. It is the pathway to peace and prosperity, to the Rule of Law and the righteousness that exalteth a nation. Land Value Taxation, the abolition of taxation on the work of man's hands, the freedom of trade, are secular phrases, but they are contained in the social philosophy free men must live up to, and these are its instruments. The goal is yet distant, but to have others see it and join in the march towards it, that must ever be our highest endeavour.