

LAND & LIBERTY

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LABOUR AND AGRICULTURE

AN OPEN LETTER to Farmers, signed by Mr George Dallas (Chairman of the National Executive of the Labour Party) and by Lord Addison, appeared in the *Daily Herald* (31st August) and other newspapers. It purports to give an explanation of the Labour Party's agricultural policy.

The letter commences by saying that the Prime Minister's speech at Kettering in July "means that there is to be no further extension of British agriculture. Every other industry can expand as much as it likes." We hold no brief for the Prime Minister, whose general economic policy we consider to have been detrimental and almost disastrous to the country and to have aggravated international tension and distrust. But a fair construction of his speech seems to be that, protectionist as he is, he has been brought to realize that a further extension of tariffs on agricultural products will injure the export trades of this country. That is an elementary proposition in economics which we need not weary our readers by demonstrating. If Messrs Dallas and Addison consider that protectionism is a means of increasing economic prosperity generally, it would be well that they should say so in clear and unambiguous terms so that the public may know definitely where they stand.

The protectionist trend of this manifesto does, however, appear in numerous passages. For example:—

"Food is more important than guns. Why does the food producer not get the same guarantee as the munition manufacturer?"

"He (the British farmer) is confronted by a completely uncertain market in which he has to face the competition of the whole world."

"It (the Labour Party's policy) will control imports of foodstuffs by means of import boards."

The Open Letter, however, adds: "It will cut out the fluctuations of excessively high and excessively low prices." It may be that this statement is intended to mean that on the average the price of agricultural products will not be raised. We should be surprised to learn that this is the meaning taken out of the manifesto by the ordinary farmer.

The *Daily Herald* on the other hand in a full column leading article is emphatic that a wise Government "would first of all reject as undesirable any measure which would make food dearer. Food in this country is not cheap. It is dear." This clearly means that the

Daily Herald believes that the Labour Party's policy will on the average reduce the price of food. It is time that its editor had a conference with Messrs Dallas and Addison.

The *Daily Herald* thinks that the farmer can be helped to reduce high costs of production by the State "providing capital at low rates of interest so that farmers could secure the modern capital equipment they need, fertilizing and draining the fields so that bigger crops would be yielded." The State, of course, has no capital except such as it obtains from its citizens either by taxation or by borrowing. If it provides capital at exceptionally low rates to farmers, it can only do so at the expense of other citizens, who may well ask whether their labour is less meritorious than the farmer's.

The *Daily Herald* also suggests that costs of production in agriculture could be reduced if the State would "co-operate with the farmers in securing a less costly system of distribution so that the farmers' share in the price the consumer pays would be larger." Experience of marketing schemes as so far tried in this country gives little warrant for this view. These schemes it is true are not co-operation in the true sense of that word, but compulsion. There can be a field for effective co-operation in agriculture, given conditions such as exist in Denmark, where there is a large and dense population of small holders and small farmers, but those conditions have yet to be created in this country.

That the *Daily Herald* is not too optimistic of the results of these proposals seems to be evidenced by its concluding observations. "Now when all that was done, what if the farming community were still smaller and poorer than the State thought right? Then there would be nothing for it but direct subsidies from the Exchequer." It is remarkable that neither the *Daily Herald* nor the authors of the Open Letter allude to the fact that agriculture is already being subsidized directly or indirectly to the extent of some £40,000,000 a year. Are we to understand that this formidable levy upon the rest of the community is to be continued or even increased?

Most remarkable of all is the fact that neither the *Daily Herald* nor Messrs Dallas and Addison make any reference to the land system, nor to the share which the "sleeping partner," the landlord, takes for giving to others permission to use the land. Why this omission? The Open Letter says that "the Labour Party believes that it is a grievous national loss that good land should not be fully used, especially when we know that the people need in much greater quantities the very food it is best fitted to produce." It is true that the people do need more fresh food, but they cannot buy more unless either the price is reduced or their wages are raised. And why is it that good land is not fully utilized? Has the price which is asked for it something to do with that fact? The authors of these pronouncements are completely silent. What has become of all the subsidies which have been poured out for agriculture in recent years? Have they helped to maintain the price of land and prevented it from falling to a level at which it would be economical to work it? These are questions which demand an answer from those who would frame a rational and economic land policy.

A. W. M.