

LAND & LIBERTY

(Incorporating "LAND VALUES.")

Published by THE UNITED COMMITTEE FOR THE
TAXATION OF LAND VALUES.

Twenty-ninth Year. Established June, 1894.

3d. Monthly. By Post 4s. per annum.

United States and Canada, 1 Dollar.

Editorial Offices:

11, TOTHILL STREET, LONDON, S.W.1.

All communications to be addressed to the Editor.

Telegrams: "Eulav, Vic, London." Telephone: Victoria 7525.

"MERE RENT RECEIVERS"

We congratulate Lord Bledisloe on the suggestive address he delivered before the British Association for the Advance of Science at Hull on the 11th September. Taking as his subject, "The proper position of the landowner in relation to the agricultural industry," he is reported to have said that the agricultural landowner was to-day on his trial; unless he justified himself as such the nationalization of the land was inevitable; public opinion would demand his extinction and Parliament would endorse the demand; most landowners had been, for the last two generations, mere rent receivers, and have possessed neither the knowledge nor the inclination personally to administer their own estates, still less to cultivate them on commercial lines for their own and the nation's benefit; in a greater or less degree they had regarded the land as an amenity, but never as a great national problem for the solution of which they were primarily responsible; the landowner had lived a life detached from the industry and often ineffectually sought relief from his growing poverty by attaching himself to a property defence league; he became, in fact, a mere property defender.

More to the point than these strictures upon the landowner as individual was Lord Bledisloe's emphatic pronouncement that the land is under-cultivated. He showed that there were great possibilities for increased production and for opportunities for a livelihood that were now for one reason or another lying fallow. In a few sentences he confounded the economists who allege a "law of diminishing returns in agriculture" and answered those who declare that this country is over-populated. He said that in comparison with the wealth of discovery in almost every branch of agricultural industry, the absorption into ordinary British farm practice of these results was far from commensurate with the labour and expense involved. This means that there are infinite ways in which agriculture could increase its production by improvements in the arts; if only proper encouragement was given for their application, and the "law of diminishing returns" has no more *specific* reference to agriculture than to any other occupation. To prove that, there came the significant statement from the speaker that there was far too wide a gap between the most enlightened and commercially successful farm practice and that of the average farmer in this country; with the added remark that it was not to our credit that this country should have 55 per cent. of its cultivable area under pasture.

The speech has provoked widespread discussion, the more so because it comes from one who is himself an ex-President of the Central Landowners' Association. The Press Bureau of the United Committee sent out at once to the newspapers a letter which was closely followed by one from Captain E. G. Pretymann, President of the Land Union. The latter scolded Lord Bledisloe for making statements which "are seized upon by every enemy of private ownership of land, and will be their stock-in-trade for months to come; a letter has already been received by the Land Union from the Committee for the Taxation of Land Values using Lord Bledisloe's statement as arguments in favour of their propaganda." Incidentally, the LAND UNION JOURNAL prints our Press communication and essays a reply to it.

Lord Bledisloe has already contributed to the "stock-in-trade of our arguments" to the discomfort of Captain Pretymann and his confrères, and that some time ago. We witness the further breach in the differences between the Land Union and the Central Landowners' Association, and the amalgamation of the two bodies, desired by the former, is still to seek. It was Lord Bledisloe, who, in a speech reported in the GLOUCESTERSHIRE CHRONICLE of 17th April, 1920, said that "such organizations as the Land Union and the Land and Property Defence League had done excellent work, but they only dealt with that type of land upon which it was the settled policy of any Government, present or future, to levy special site value taxation, hence the need for this special organization; it was a far safer course for agricultural land not to be too closely identified with property, which was more subject to political attack." So much for Captain Pretymann's expressed surprise that the landowners should be attacked as mere property defenders, and the LAND UNION JOURNAL's assertion that the majority of electors in this country "will have nothing whatever to do with the theories of land value taxation in future."

We are not so concerned as is Captain Pretymann about Lord Bledisloe's recriminations. They do not make the stock-in-trade of our argument. We are concerned with the economics of the case and with evils of the whole system of land tenure and taxation. If Lord Bledisloe likes to play the part of the demagogue and throw the blame of unsatisfactory conditions upon certain persons, that is his own business.

Something more than personal laziness and indifference is responsible for "the wide gap" that separates good farming from the misuse of land that could be made equally productive. Sir A. D. Hall, another eminent authority on agriculture, has given precisely the same testimony as Lord Bledisloe, having stated in his book AGRICULTURE AFTER THE WAR that "on the average farm the expert . . . sees a general low level of knowledge and of management. In every district farms stand out, and if the neighbouring holdings with the same class of land and the same opportunities were only worked with equal intelligence and industry there would be no agricultural question to discuss. . . . It is not too much to say, that if the farming throughout Great Britain reached the standard, not of the best, but of the good farmers existing in every district, there

would be an increased production of food of from 10 to 15 per cent. without any addition to the proportion of arable land." If these are the possibilities without increasing the proportion of agricultural land, how much greater are the possibilities and how much greater the chances of re-populating the countryside, if there was scope for cultivating all the land that is now withheld from its best use!

The fault in Lord Bledisloe's speech lies not in what he said but in what he failed to recognize. It is not a little absurd to accuse some men of being "mere rent receivers" while they enjoy the legal privilege to reap where others have sown. The rent is there for the taking; the question is, to whom does it rightfully belong? If Lord Bledisloe has no protest to make against the private appropriation of the rent of land, his exhortations to the landowner to become a producer and prove "his utility to the State" are of no avail. And it is absurd to expect men to be more progressive and more industrious when the law exacts swift penalty on all improvement. The law encourages the man who holds productive land out of use; it fines the man who is enterprising just in proportion as he puts labour and capital into the land. Consider some of the improvements that Lord Bledisloe proposes for the development of agriculture: the co-operative purchase of farm requisites, and co-operative sale of farm produce; the utilizing of mechanical energy such as tractors, oil engines, electric motors; the grinding of every variety of corn; the building of silos; the establishment of central dairies; the manufacture of concrete for farm buildings; erection of slaughter houses; organizing schemes of local drainage. There is not one of these improvements that would not raise the assessable value of the farm and would not be the occasion for increased rates and taxes. That is substantially the reason why the improvements are not made. And another factor is overlooked. If agriculture is to flourish, there must be a greater population on the land and the people must have houses to live in; but what encouragement is there for the building of such, while every house is taxed as soon as it is occupied?

The cause of agricultural depression, stagnant trade and low wages for the worker lies therefore much deeper than any action or inaction on the part of the landowners themselves. Not the landowners only but all classes in the community are responsible for the laws that place obstacles in the way of the greater production of wealth and result in its bad distribution. If land is not used it escapes taxation; if it is developed and improved the rateable and taxable value whether for rates or income tax or death duties is correspondingly increased. Is it any wonder that agriculture and other industries fail to expand, or go back, and that large masses of men are thrown out of employment?

In one district after another the wages of agricultural labourers are being reduced to levels below even the miserable pre-war standard. The latest suggestion, from Warwickshire, is that labourers should or can live on 20s. a week, and as we write we learn that in Norfolk a fierce protest is being made against the farmers' decision to force down local wage rates, as sweating of the most scandalous

description. If the workers will not work on these terms, what can they do? What alternative have they? With their rights denied, they have no foothold in the land. For them it is the order of banishment, to seek a living in the towns as wanderers in an already overcrowded labour market.

The remedy for these evils is not the nationalization of land and the State management of industry. The remedy is simply to make available all the avenues to employment that are closed down by monopoly on the one hand and penal taxation of the producer on the other hand. The alternative is to give private enterprise the opportunity it has never yet had. The policy of the taxation of land values applies with the same force to agricultural as to urban and all other land. The gap between the most enlightened farm practice and the inefficient use of land differs in no respect from the gulf between the improved city site and the vacant lot. It can only be bridged by assessing all land at its true market value, irrespective of the use to which it is put, and exempting improvements themselves from taxation. Then every encouragement will be given to industry and every producer will become the capable and efficient manager of his own business or occupation without any interfering State control.

Neither Lord Bledisloe, nor anyone else, Conservative, Liberal or Socialist, will find remedies in futile exhortations to some section of the community to "mend their manners," while the law makes men vicious, selfish or obstructive. Alter the law so that it recognizes the equal right of all to the use of the land and ensures to each the full enjoyment of the fruits of his labour. That is the remedy. In this dispensation the landowner, as landowner, would have no place and as a "mere rent receiver" he would cease to exist. Land would be occupied for use and all reward would be the result of industry. No man can morally claim more. To claim less is to accept economic slavery.

The first imperative step to this far-reaching reform is to secure the separate valuation of the land apart from improvements and to transfer rates and taxes from improvements to the value of the land—just such a step in fact as Denmark, making no distinctions between agricultural and urban land, has recently decided to take with the universal approval of the small peasant proprietors themselves.

A. W. M.

Charged at Aldershot with poaching on Yateley Common (THE STAR, London, 21st September), Henry North declared in Court:—

"This is a case of rich against the poor. That is a poor man's common. I fought for it, and have as much right there as the richest man in the land. Before the rich took possession, a commoner might walk across it and do as he liked."

Fined 10s. 6d.

In Greater London Allotment Holders Gift Day scheme last month some 50 hospitals benefited to the extent of hundreds of tons of potatoes and other non-perishable vegetables. In some cases as much as three and four tons of vegetables were given by single groups of allotment holders. A gift of half a cwt. of potatoes from individual plot-holders was quite common.