

Britain's Insecure Truce

By Douglas J. J. Owen

TWO important divisions on internal questions have taken place in the British House of Commons. Against the Catering Bill, 116 members opposed the Government; another 119 voted against the Government because of its attitude towards the Beveridge scheme. These two figures, however, represent two entirely different groups within Parliament, and they illustrate the fragile nature of the Political Truce. The 116 were Conservatives, and the 119 were mostly Labor members.

The Catering Bill proposes to bring the catering trade workers, including waiters, into line with trade union legislation for negotiating wage rates. To understand its real importance we must see this Bill in its perspective. Informative comment was made by the *Manchester Guardian* on February 11. It said: "Tuesday night's division in the House of Commons on the Catering Bill was the most significant vote we have had since the war began. It marks the first serious rift in the Parliamentary unity, not on the war, but on the conception of the social and economic order that is to follow the war. The Government from now on cannot escape doing things that will reveal more and more its intentions about post-war society, and if a modest advance like the Catering Wages Bill is resisted by the Tories with Tuesday's warmth, what will happen if and when, say, the Government carries out the Uthwatt proposals on land development rights or the Beveridge Plan itself? The possibilities of still wider rifts are obviously present; the point at which they come, if they do come, may be of great consequence to the shape of post-war politics."

Land Value Taxers do not consider the Uthwatt* proposals very revolutionary, but it is interesting to find the *Manchester Guardian* relating these votes to possible land legislation of any kind. When Tories vote against a war Government on a matter like this, we have a slight foretaste of what may be expected if a Cabinet really stands up to the land monopolists.

The debate on the Beveridge Plan revealed a deep cleavage in another direction. Apart from the merits of the Plan, it is regarded on all hands as a symbol, and the Government's evident lukewarmness has given a shock to the legitimate hopes of vast numbers that some good might come out of the agony of the war. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, who takes credit for finding astronomical sums for war—yet without taxing the rapidly increasing values of land, a source of revenue estimated at £500,000,000 a year—talks in a cheese-

paring way about the cost of social reforms, and of benefits to unemployed and sick workers. If this excuse sprang from a correct view of a Chancellor's duty, in the spirit of a Gladstone or a Snowden, not to mention Henry George, it would be understandable. The Government expects the Beveridge reform to take its place in order of priority. But it was not stated what the order of post-war social reform would be; whether housing, education reform, civil aviation, or insurance is to take first place. And no mention is made of the urgent need for reforming our local taxation laws, as demanded by increasing numbers of local authorities. While all wait their turn in the "queue," the legislative bus passes by "full up." The Government knows that it should put ABC before XYZ, but it ignores the fact that in the matter of priorities the collection of land-rent for revenue is the beginning of the alphabet.

Those who know their "Progress and Poverty" will see no progress in Beveridge, and no cure for poverty. We can neither praise the Government, nor praise the Plan. A truer estimate is that of the *Scots Independent*: "To praise this [Beveridge] Report is just to give fulsome thanks for those few wretched crumbs that fall from the Big Business Man's table for the workers of this country to scramble for. The truth is that the table and all that is on it are the right and property of all who work to keep it spread. In truth, the Beveridge Report is an impudent document, a niggling echo of Lloyd George's petty reformism. It merely ties together all the tag ends of 'Social Services' which have accumulated these thirty years as patch-up remedies for poverty and want, to provide an everlasting cushy job for a huge centralized bureaucracy, as the earlier reports do."

POSTWAR QUOTAS REPLACE TARIFF!

While these discussions are going on, some attention was given in the House of Lords on Agriculture. Pious aspirations were ventilated. For instance, eleven Lords from various parties have united to put forth certain principles for post-war agriculture. Tariffs are agreed by the eleven as no solution to the price problem. They recommend, however, a system of import quotas for certain foodstuffs! This is a denial of the Free Trade expressions within the Atlantic Charter not to mention hard economics. They want a continuance of private ownership, which shall be subject to "management" control. No reference is made to the question of land values.

The Farmers' Union have also met on the subject of post-war legislation, and their findings are awaited.

* See "Planning by Guesswork," November-December, 1942.

There is also a statement of policy by the Committee of the Royal Agricultural Society. Though this was drawn up some eighteen months ago, it is just published. It seems to favor a statutory Commission, according to the *Yorkshire Post*, which would control food imports, secure to the farmer stabilized prices, linked with guaranteed wages, and see that the land of the country is properly farmed. "The main idea," says the *Yorkshire Post*, "is to lift farming out of party politics, which would be excellent in itself, though one doubts how far farmers would like this particular expedient, and still less how it would strike the general public, who, after all, would do the paying." That last phrase touches the Achilles' heel of most of these plans, which ignore the factor of land ownership as a moral issue, and treat it as a sectional interest.

Yet another declaration is that of the Central Landowners' Association, which is mainly concerned with justifying the continuance of the landlord-tenant system, as against land nationalization. All these statements ignore the rights of the people in the land, in the land values fund, or even society's right to have a voice in the way the nation's land shall be treated. The Minister for Agriculture has promised to deal with the question of agricultural policy within the present year, and all these various bodies quoted above give the impression of staking out their claims beforehand—instructing the Minister how he is to proceed if he wishes to please them.

DESPITE CEILINGS—LAND SPECULATION AS USUAL

Meanwhile the business of buying and selling land, and the rents attached to land, goes on apace, unimpeded but stimulated by war activities. At Southampton 1,210 acres, situated at the mouth of the Hamble river, realized a total of £42,300 for 36 lots. Up in the North, the Duke of Sutherland offers for sale the estate of Tressady, about 21,950 acres in Sutherland, on the L. M. S. main railway line from Inverness to Wick and Thurso. It includes perpetual rents, leasehold ground rents, grouse moor with good shooting, and fishing rights. The rent roll amounts to over £1,800 a year. It is this kind of farming, the farming of farm rents, that is in question when agriculture comes up for discussion. The continuation of this robbery business will be fought for by such groups as the 116 who are prepared to risk the stability of the Government in wartime, rather than see their vested interests jeopardized. An internal conflict is threatened that promises to be as exciting as the international one.

On March 3, the *Daily Telegraph* said: "The phenomenal price of £1,700, about £283 an acre, was paid at an auction sale at Boston, Lincolnshire, yesterday for just under six acres of land at Freeston, a neighboring village. This exceeds the exceptional price an acre recorded in the same part of Lincolnshire, a highly fertile area, in December, when a three-acre field made £770 and a five-acre field £1,050. The former owner of the

land sold yesterday bought it before the last war for £440."

Well may the *Daily Telegraph* give this paragraph the heading "£283 An Acre For Farmland," this being about seven times the average value of land in country districts. It illustrates the enormous increases in land values fanned by the war. The possibility of "boom" conditions after the war is anticipated and forestalled. Meanwhile, the Minister of Health advises our municipalities to prepare for Housing development by purchasing city sites now, and promises to use his compulsory purchase powers where needed in their behalf. This land ramp goes on, prices and rents are soaring, and the conditions are eventuating which will make it difficult for demobilized forces to find an outlet for their labor. We shall have, no doubt, more than the minimum of 1,500,000 unemployed foreshadowed by the Beveridge Report. Exactly such a process was foreseen and foretold by Henry George in "Progress and Poverty."

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