

LAND & LIBERTY

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THE GENERAL ELECTION

The Coalition has fallen. Mr. Bonar Law, as the new Premier, has formed a Government, and decided to carry on till the General Election, the polling day being fixed for 15th November. At the outset it looked as if the election would be fought on personal recrimination and swords were drawn accordingly. Let us trust for the sake of common decency that the main features of the debate will be otherwise staged. Not a word, so far, has been uttered by the leaders of any party as to the urgency of legislation that could be passed by one bold stroke to relieve industry of the burden it staggers under and raise the condition of the people. There is no lead in this direction, nor any sign of one.

The end of the Lloyd George Government came about pretty much like what happened at its inception in 1916. The Tory Members of Parliament, the other day, impelled by their supporters in the country, made a bonfire of the 1918 coupons, and by that Act sent Mr. Lloyd George, "the man who won the war," into the wilderness. As a Tory Member of the Government put it at the meeting, he is a "dynamic force" primed sooner or later to send the opposing forces in the Coalition group into the wilderness. The pilot who weathered the storm has been retired, but not silenced, and we are advised to get on to the side of great expectations from that quarter. We shall see.

The ex-Prime Minister has since spoken on two great occasions, besides a dozen side-shows at railway stations, but not one word has fallen from his lips about his pre-war policy as to the need for bursting up the monopoly that, in other days, he proclaimed to be at the root of all economic and social tyranny. Instead, we are asked to think of foreign affairs and accept the Versailles Treaty with Mr. Lloyd George's assurance of its liberating qualities. He does not yet appear to realize that it is this precious Treaty, with all its illusive interpretations, that has at last brought him to the ground.

Mr. Garvin, of the *OBSERVER*, thus describes the handiwork of his political hero:—

The Chanak crisis, reacting far and wide on the rest of our external connections, has worked to the profound prejudice of our whole world-policy and of our own most vital interests. After a disastrous six weeks the general situation is no longer what it was before. It is deeply changed to our detriment. Our belated and isolated methods, while quite unable to remedy Greek suicide, continued the exasperation of

Turkey and the alienation of all Islam—notably including Moslem India—when that obsolete line of politics could no longer claim the shadow of sane excuse or object, and nothing but unmitigated mischief could result.

That was bad enough on the one side—so bad that worse could scarcely be. Yet worse still, on the other side, that clamorous fiasco has left Britain for the moment without a single effective partner in Europe. We have turned our remaining friends into open or covert opponents. We have turned no opponent into a friend. This process quite reverses the proper course of a sound foreign policy.

So much for the conduct of foreign affairs under the Lloyd George administration. Foreign affairs have their place in our politics, but to the plain man our "spheres of influence" in other lands were ever a baffling matter. In the main foreign policy can be translated into the struggle with other nations for new territory with markets, actual and potential, for our trade and commerce; and if the politicians were in earnest on the question they would stand for fair play all round—for international free trade. What, in the long run, does it matter to the trader what country lays claim to any part of the globe so long as he is put on equal terms with every other trader, within and without the gates?

But the chaos and confusion abroad is no excuse for the failure of the Government to make good at home. The 1918 Government firmly and eloquently pledged themselves to a policy of rapid reconstruction; and when their flimsy schemes went to pieces Mr. Lloyd George could only complain that it was impossible to repair the devastation of a great ravishing, destructive war in four years. Not a word about the penalizing land laws, or the ravishing rings and combines they engender and nourish, whenever enterprise or communal effort for industrial betterment is undertaken.

What foreign government or foreign entanglement, however embarrassing, stands in the way of the building trade and the employment it would provide? The land is free from foreign domination, its resources are not yet exhausted and there is a vast army of unemployed workmen eager enough to respond to any call for service. The ballot boxes cannot be altogether "stuffed" with foreign affairs.

What about the Opposition? In vain do the rank and file of the Liberal Party call for a lead from their chief men. Mr. Asquith had nothing to say on the Taxation of Land Values at the Dumfries Liberal Conference. He is for clean politics, straightforward dealing and economy; and he seems, like a great many others, to be under the delusion that these good ends can be achieved without any deeper cut.

In 1905, when Campbell-Bannerman was Liberal leader, the issue was not in doubt. There were then, as now, millions on the verge of starvation, and the remedy put forward was land reform and the Taxation of Land Values. In 1922 this policy occupies still a foremost place in the programme of the English and Scottish Liberal Federations, but the Liberal leaders treat it with studied contempt. Seventeen years ago the land was to be made a treasure-house for the nation and the

hostile tariff on houses, in the form of rates and taxes, was to be faithfully dealt with. Nothing has come of this promise, and to-day there is no Liberal leader prepared even to glance at it.

As we write the Manchester Liberals have issued a fighting manifesto on sound Liberal lines. It contends that the housing question brooks no further delay, that a free breakfast table is still a Liberal aim, that new sources of revenue must be explored by the revival and revision of the Liberal land policy. Will this bold and timely pronouncement bring the Liberal leaders out of their sleep? It has done something. The Manifesto prepared by the Liberal leaders was immediately revised and issued from the party headquarters. Item 8 reads: "A comprehensive reform of the existing land system, including the Taxation and Rating of Land Values." What is now required is bold advocacy. It is for the leaders to convince the rank and file that they mean business this time.

It is the same with the Labour Party. Their Manifesto to the electors pledges the Party in plain terms to the Taxation of Land Values, but there is no word as yet from a single Labour leader that this reform will be put forward as a fundamental issue. The voices that are heard are tuned to the deceptive levy on capital and some sort of nationalization. Such a policy at this election is in the air, quite unrelated to the needs of the day. Even the nationalization of concerns that can be classed as monopolies, such as railways, and other means of transport, is not even within speaking distance of practical politics at this time, and will not be until land valuation comes to separate the value of the monopoly from the value of the rolling stock and the machinery attached to it. A Labour leader laments that the Party could not hope soon to assume the reigns of Government because of the strength of opposing combinations. If this were true it would be serious for the future of the party's hopes and ambitions. But it is not any opposition of the kind, however formidable it appears, the Labour Party have to fear. They are more the victims of their own impossible plan of campaign. When they learn to stop tilting at private enterprise and endeavour seriously to get at the basic monopoly they will begin to make headway, and not before.

It is evident that the "agricultural interest" is preparing again for some special favour at the expense of the taxpayer or the general consumer. The territorial landlords were abandoned by the defunct Tariff Reform League, and they are going to appeal direct to "Hodge" himself. They will promise him a due share of the plunder if he will help them to an agricultural Safeguarding Act, a subsidy, or relief from rates and taxes. That is the landlord bait to catch the agricultural worker in the stream of hard times. But he had better take guarantees that the relief if it is given will not be cancelled by an increase in rent. What the farmer, small holder and farm worker require most is security of tenure, and Taxation of Land Values is the key to that position. It is the alternative to Protection, in any form, and to high prices, and the working part of the agricultural interest can get it for the asking. Taxation of Land Values will tend to cheapen land and cheap land means occupation and relatively higher wages. On the

other hand high wages at the expense of the purchasing power of other workers is a scheme that has nothing to recommend it, and could only bring a sense of bitterness into Labour politics.

We have no sympathy whatever with any political programme, Liberal or Labour, that calls for props to industry and enterprise after land monopoly has crushed both into impotence and despair. We do not believe in taxing the rich for the benefit of the poor. The smaller part of an apple divided in two is not due to the larger size of the other piece; it is due to the knife or to the hand that made the division. And that is the part land monopoly plays in the unjust distribution of the wealth produced. The secret of the unequal distribution of wealth and influence is to be found in the basic monopoly that bars the way to further production.

We are constantly reminded by good-natured friends that we claim too much for our liberating policy. Perhaps we do, sometimes, but it is a help to be on the hopeful side of things; and what can be claimed for any alternative policy? Our good-natured critics declare that time and patience and education is needed. What time? how much more patience? and what sort of education? These are the kind of objections our people will know how to deal with in the coming campaign. They have a winning argument. Let them shun the forces of confusion and devote themselves, as in the past, to the principle and the policy they have made their own, and which they know to be the bed-rock of social justice.

Everything must be done in support of our men who are standing for election, whichever party claims their adherence. On the hustings a man is a partisan or he stands aside. It is a practice that cannot be ignored, but our people will act wisely in giving their time and their energies in this contest to the candidates whom they know to be specially devoted to the cause. The Taxation of Land Values and the untaxing of industry has a place in our politics that no one may hope to undermine, or put lightly aside, because of stress of weather in any sea of adventure. The Liberal and Labour Manifestos contain the proof of this contention. The policy we advance is not everything, but it is an instrument that will open up opportunity and without any demand on the pocket of the taxpayer. That is not the least of its merits. It is not in the way of any other reform, and in practice in other countries it has made good. It has been presented in all its fullness at the Edinburgh Conference, and this high standard must be maintained throughout the election campaign.

J. P.

QUESTIONS FOR CANDIDATES

1. Will you, if elected, press for immediate legislation to revalue all the land, so as to ascertain its present market value apart from improvements, and to impose a Budget Tax on the value of all land, with the corresponding reduction or abolition of the taxes now levied on improvements, on consumption, and in restraint of trade?

2. Will you, if elected, promote and support legislation for the levying of local rates on the market value of land and the exemption of houses and other buildings and improvements from assessment?