

LAND & LIBERTY

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THE LIBERAL PARTY AND THE LAND QUESTION

The National Liberal Convention held in London, 29th January, placed the Taxation and Rating of Land Values in the forefront of the "Land Section" of the Party programme. It is an advance that can be regarded as a triumph for the Radical land reformers attached to the Party. Promotion from the fifth to the foremost place means, or should mean, that this item will take precedence henceforth in all Liberal land reform propaganda. Liberals concerned must wait and see, and in view of the Liberal revival now in progress they should not have long to wait. Supporters of the Land Value Policy everywhere will "watch out" for the Liberal explanatory literature necessary for the equipment of candidates, organizers and speakers, and be ready to listen to Liberal leaders in their speeches emphasizing the urgency of the reform calculated to "cease penalizing enterprise."

The Land Section of the Liberal Platform as adopted by the Convention now reads:—

DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLE AND AIMS—LAND

We desire to undertake a radical reform of the existing land system, which is largely responsible for the present state of agriculture and our rural population, and for the cramped and ugly condition of our towns.

The aims of the Liberal Land Policy are:—

- (a) To bring about by the Taxation and Rating of Land Values a reasonable transfer of public burdens from buildings and other improvements to the unimproved value of land, and thus cease penalizing enterprise.
- (b) To encourage Local Authorities to undertake schemes of improvement under conditions which will secure to the community the increased values due to these improvements.
- (c) To confer upon leaseholders security against confiscation of their improvements, and the right to become owners on fair terms.
- (d) To stimulate agricultural development by eliminating inefficient farming, and giving every encouragement to the efficient farmer, in particular by securing to him the full advantage of any improvements he may make in the land.
- (e) To make available to every cultivator credit on easy terms.
- (f) To provide assistance in the development of Agricultural Co-operation, to encourage research and to make its results more easily available to every cultivator.
- (g) To give every land-worker a living wage, assurance of a house to live in free from unreasonable disturbance, access to land, and if he shows

ability and energy, public help in making a career for himself on the land.

The six items —(c) to (g)—of this Liberal Land Policy are neither stimulating nor attractive; nor can they be exclusively claimed as Liberal measures—they are the common talk of politicians and publicists outside the Liberal ranks. Agricultural development, security of tenure, co-operation, credits, efficient farming and the assurance to the land-worker of a living wage, make good platform talk, but there it ends until the first necessary step is taken to free industry and enterprise from the excruciating fetters of land monopoly. Agricultural research may help the man with a patch of ground and little knowledge, but it can do nothing to help the well-trained potential cultivator of the soil to a holding, large or small. If agricultural research or credits meant "access to land," there would surely be no land question to solve at this time of day. Credits is another name for subsidized landlordism. Like the Corn Production Act of recent years, it will stiffen the price of land all round; the greater the amount of money available for credits, the more difficult will it be to give every land-worker a home of his own on the land. Taxation of Land Values would lower the price of land; credits would raise the price of land and raise the rent as well to many already in possession of a holding.

If the Taxation of Land Values *would* bring land more readily and cheaply into the best use for which it is fitted, and *does not* involve additional taxation manifestly the existing system with its dear land and high taxation must account for the inefficient farmer, the absence of agricultural development, co-operation, low wages, and all the rest.

The delegates at the Convention should have been reminded of their leader's plain and informing statement on the land values question at Buxton 1st June, 1923. Mr. Asquith (now Lord Oxford and Asquith) then said:—

"It is time for us once more to reassert that we recognize for the purpose of taxation, whether Imperial or local, a distinct difference between two kinds of value—the value created by the energy and enterprise of individuals, and the value which is not so created, but which arises from the progress and general development of the community at large.

"Upon that fundamental distinction we have always taken our stand, and we hold, and we always have held, that, so far as practicable, local and national taxes which are necessary for public purposes should fall on the publicly-created value rather than on that which is the product of individual enterprise and industry. That does not involve a new or additional burden on taxation, but it would produce these two consequences—first of all, that we should cease to be imposing a burden upon successful enterprise and industry; and next, that the land would come more readily and cheaply into the best use for which it is fitted. These two things would be two potent promoters of industry and progress."

The clear interpretation of that statement is that high-priced land and oppressive taxation on industry and enterprise are two potent promoters of inefficiency and idleness; and in the teeth of these obstacles to agricultural development it is amazing (if it were not so despairing, it would be amusing) to witness a body of representative Liberals at this time of day on the hunt for the inefficient farmer as a

prime cause of the trouble. The Conference hesitated to express an opinion on this disability until one of the delegates (an ex-M.P.) passionately declared that "thousands of labourers were turned off the land and lost their livelihood because their employers were inefficient." And this fetching rhetoric, as one Press correspondent stated, carried the Conference with a bang! If the Liberals are to go in search of inefficiency as a cause of unemployment, their Research Department will make a big enough draft on their Million Fighting Fund, for they must not stop at the agricultural industry; as any expert or worker in other industries can tell.

Forty years ago Liberals were told, and some of them from "personal experience" could not deny that the Scottish crofter was inefficient and lazy; there was work to do, anyone could see, but the crofter was "an idler." In the circumstances, he was the obvious cause of his own distress. So the story was told, by the men who had been to see for themselves!

Mr. Gladstone thought otherwise, and so he passed the Crofter Act as a Liberal measure of relief. He gave the crofters lower rents, security of tenure, and no penalizing rates on improvements. What happened? Here is the testimony of a representative Liberal twenty years ago:—

"The Crofter Act has shown that if a tenant is made sure of reaping the result of his own industry, he will soon secure the capital necessary for the improvement of his holding. His holding becomes the safest and most remunerative savings bank for his earnings. . . . To deprive the individual of the result of his labour is to deprive him of the natural inducement to labour, is to enslave him, whether to the State or to another individual matters not. To emancipate the labourer from the present injustice of laws which are thus enslaving him is the declared aim of the Liberal Party."

Another noted Liberal, well known in Scottish Liberal circles for his great attachment to the cause of land reform in the Highlands, said:—

"The Crofter Act is justified also in the wider domain of social life. Take any dozen ordinary farmers still under the domination of landlordism, place them alongside a dozen crofters under the Act, and you will realize at once the vast difference in the men. The crofters bear the stamp of independence and freedom, the others are still where they were twenty years ago. The crofter is alert, with opinions of his own, the farmer has made no such progress—he must think and act under the eye of the factor."

It is a lesson on Liberal principles—at least, for those who have understanding—though all such appear to have been conspicuous by their absence at the Liberal Convention. It was the tyranny and greed of landlordism that gave the crofter his association, if ever he had any, with inefficiency and unemployment.

To blame the victim of such a system, a mere tenant-at-will, is to invert cause and effect, and "childishly blame the stone for hitting us."

That a Conference of representative Liberals can in one forenoon profess allegiance to the Taxation and Rating of Land Values, and put the inefficient farmer in the dock as the culprit responsible for any kind or measure of unemployment, means only one thing—these people have yet to learn the A.B.C. of land reform and what the Taxation of Land Values really implies.

No one will care to deny that the inefficient farmer, like the inefficient railway director or the inefficient politician, exists; but piracy is not justified because the victims do not possess all the virtues. Our inefficient farmer may be a "three-cornered man jammed into a round hole," and for this he may not be altogether to blame. In any case, his existence does not palliate a system of land tenure and taxation that robs him of what he does produce. Why not concentrate on the promised relief, lest peradventure the efficient farmer, meanwhile, falls into the abyss?

Mr. Lloyd George, in his land campaign days, when he was regarded as the man with the goods to deliver, said: "Every Liberal tells you the land question is at the root of everything, but up to the present we have just dealt with it as if we were handling a hedgehog." And as if to put them by way of courage and audacity, he added: "I will tell you what is the matter with this country. There is one limited Monarchy, but also 10,000 little Tsars. They hold absolute autocratic sway." There, in a sentence, lies the root cause of inefficiency and unemployment, and Liberals apparently still cling to the "hedgehog" way of handling it.

Apart from the Taxation and Rating of Land Values, and the elimination of the inefficient farmer, the Liberal Convention had only one or two concrete proposals—to make credits available for every competent cultivator on easy terms, and to provide assistance in the development of agricultural co-operation. The key to this inventory, or classification, is to be found in the Housing Section of the programme:—

"We hold that it is the duty of the State to do all in its power to secure for every citizen the opportunity of living in wholesome surroundings.

"Land Reform is necessary for the full satisfaction of this need. But in the meanwhile we advocate the stimulation of every form of enterprise in a vigorous housing policy with such State assistance as may be necessary."

It is common ground in our politics, thanks to the pioneer work of Land and Housing reformers, that every citizen should be properly housed in decent surroundings. The matter in dispute ranges round the Land Reform necessary to bring about the change. At the General Election the Land Values policy figured in both Liberal and Labour Manifestos to the electors; the Conservative Manifesto set it aside as "spoliation." The Conservatives won the election; but we are not going to forget that their two hundred majority in the Commons represents a minority of nearly one million of the votes polled in the country.

The achievement is a tribute to our out-of-date system of voting, and is no moral warrant for reactionary legislation. The "spoliation" challenge to Land Value Taxation in the Manifesto of the Conservative Party recalls another by Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman:—

"Here you have, perhaps, the clearest example in present politics of the cardinal, abiding, and necessary difference between the Liberal Party and our opponents. It is here that lies the chasm yawning between us, athwart almost every public question. . . . The rating of site values, let me say, is not a mere question of the apportionment and incidence of the rates. It goes to the root of the most pressing and most

neglected of social questions. What is claimed for it, and rightly is, that its effect will be to increase the supply of houses and improve their quality, and to reduce the rents, which in many cases are artificially high, and a cause of widespread impoverishment to the people. . . . That is the state of things to-day, and we have no business to be content with it. It is a source of misery and demoralisation. Take the drink traffic. There is no one with a fuller appreciation of the evils of that traffic than I have, but are they greater than those of overcrowding? . . . So long as there is no comfort possible in a room for a man in his own home of an evening, I am afraid we may legislate, we may preach, we may talk on platforms, the public-house is the master of the situation."

The chasm still yawns, and if the Liberals cannot bridge it, meanwhile, they can at least prepare the scaffolding. A campaign to "stimulate every form of enterprise" with State assistance can only end in stimulating the Conservative, and correspondingly weakening the Liberal forces in the country. State aid, including credits, for any industrial undertaking, the building trade not excepted, means subsidising somebody at the expense of the taxpayers. It means higher taxation, higher cost of living, lower purchasing power, a hindrance and not a help to trade and prosperity. It bears away from the principle of Free Trade, and strengthens the idea that the worker must have Protection, one way or another, if he is to have any kind of an existence.

The Taxation and Rating of Land Values, it can be argued, in view of the present constitution of Parliament, is not now possible of attainment, but in that respect the policy is in the same boat with all other measures that the Liberal Party claim as their special concern. And, that being so, is to be understood, in the event of the Liberal Party being again returned to power, that the qualifying term, "meanwhile," will be made to function? If not, and surely this cannot be the intention, why not raise the issue at once for the "necessary land reform"?

The Liberal Party either stands for the defined policy of freeing the "raw material" of all industry from the unhallowed grip of monopoly with all its evil results, or it does not. In the eyes of those who have looked into the chronicles, the inefficient producer of wealth—even if his name is legion—is not likely to usurp the power and influence possessed by the inefficient and parasitical non-producer, whatever be the terms of the resolution framed and carried at any political convention with or without a "bang."

The fact is, the Liberal Convention gave the Party—and not for the first time—its marching orders on the Land Question. It said Taxation and Rating of Land Values and the untaxing of industry. On these lines of advance progress is possible, as every speaker with a grasp of the question can say. It is now the declared policy of the Labour Party as well, and right here lies the possibility of that union of forces strong enough to carry the reform into practice. The chance will come again to both Liberal and Labour Parties, and it will come with all the more assurance if, meanwhile, the issue is kept clear of all subsidizing entanglements, and the masses given the education, the outlook and the hope of their emancipation.

J. P.

"IN HOC SIGNO VINCES"



The above design was prepared to meet the ideas of Bailie Peter Burt, President of the Scottish League for the Taxation of Land Values. He is Glasgow's best known campaigner so far as that question is concerned. The propaganda has had his unwavering devotion ever since Henry George first visited Scotland.

As an epitome of the philosophy of the good folks who frequent 67, West Nile Street, Glasgow, the insignia does something like justice.

"In days of crime, the good, the true,
The nobly wise, are still the few
Who bid truth grow where falsehood grew
And plant it for eternity."

Some cynic has remarked, truly or otherwise, that "Liberty" has her back turned on New York and the United States of America. In any case, she cannot face towards every point of the compass, but that is all right so long as she holds the torch aloft.

Many crimes have been committed in the name of liberty, but not of our liberty. We stand for equal liberty, political and economic, and this is the only true description of a real liberty. We stand for men with Henry George; we do not stand for working men, monopolist men, or men who can buy privileges, but simply for men.

Restrictions other than a good citizen would impose on himself are not for us. No good citizen feels the need of restricting himself to one or few markets. Therefore, we stand for Free Trade. By Free Trade we do not mean mere abolition of Customs Houses. What we do mean is that industry should not be burdened by tolls or fined by taxation. The man who begs a brother of the earth to give him leave to toil on the earth, who pays a non-producer ransom in order that he may work in a world that the Creator provided for all, or who is debarred from producing fuel, stone for a house, or a house itself, until he agrees to pay tolls in rents or royalties, and fines in rates and taxes is not a free man.

We stand for free men, conducting free industry on land free to all alike for use, and returning to all alike any price which may be charged for a special advantage in fertility or situation. The real "Liberty" is holding the torch aloft for us, and those who would find her, and follow her dictates, must needs learn our philosophy.

WM. REID.

The realization of high ideals is possible even in the world of everyday life. The path to their realization lies, not through repression but through freedom, and free access to land is the first essential. When poverty and the fear of poverty are banished by the restoration of communal rights to the use of God's earth, man will be able to develop his higher nature without being shackled by the leading-strings either of the captains of industry or of the Government official.—A. W. Dakers in the YORKSHIRE OBSERVER,