

LAND & LIBERTY

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Editorial Offices:

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

All communications to be addressed to the Editor.

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

PARLIAMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT

There are over a million registered unemployed, and last month two of the opening days of the Parliamentary Session were devoted by the Commons to a "full dress debate" on the subject. The King's Speech showed sympathy with the distress, but helplessly affirmed that the problem could not be cured by legislative means.

In a leading article the MANCHESTER GUARDIAN accepted this view of the matter. "The debate on unemployment," the writer said, "should only disappoint those who imagined that even now some miraculous remedy might be found for a disease which has defied the efforts of the economist as stoutly as cancer has defied medical science. We know a good deal, though far from all, about the causes of unemployment, as we know something of the causes of cancer, but we do not know enough to lay the scourge." If this were true it would be serious; but we know our professional economist and all his question-begging statistics, and findings. He is out to explain and to regulate the disease but never to eradicate it. He accepts the landless man as a creature of bad circumstances, and these he deftly fits in to the political adjustments rooted in social injustice while the fountain springs of unemployment are left untouched.

The surgeon grappling with the causes of a fell disease works his way in freedom; the professional economist is not so situated. He is a tied man, tied to the interests of those by whose favour he speaks and moves and has his being. In a country not run on approved tariff reform lines the economist is prepared to prove that protection would cause unemployment; and in some other place where protection holds sway he is equally prepared to prove that its abolition would bring unemployment, if not the ruination of all industry. The surgeon may go to the very core of a new truth on the subject matter he is investigating, and if he proves his case there is no geographical or political boundary to stop its course round the world, but who will maintain in our narrow national politics that the economist works on a similar plane?

Employment means the co-operation of labour with land; that is all it ever meant or ever will mean. From the beginning to the end of industry this is the one natural partnership that cannot be dissolved; the alternative is the end of all things. Whatever the economist may say as to any set of political circumstances, or discover as to the bearing "spots on the sun" may have on the problem, it is in the chronicles that legislation, and legislation

alone, robbed the people of their natural bounty and made them strangers in the land of their birth, and the King's Speech notwithstanding, what legislation has done legislation can undo. The processes by which the people were driven from the land and the means by which they are kept from its call are common knowledge. The Prime Minister himself has borne witness in by-gone days to the great iniquity; but, this aside, to argue that we do not know all about unemployment is no sufficient reason why we should not put what knowledge we do possess to immediate practical purposes. The clamant needs of a starving multitude make a powerful appeal for all the prompt action that can be taken.

The debate in the Commons was an open and unabashed confession of impotence. The MANCHESTER GUARDIAN, rejecting any miraculous remedy, searched the Scriptures and found consolation in the reflection that God moves in a mysterious way, and sorrowfully assured us that: "In time Nature will work her own cure and the unemployed be reabsorbed in industry without our doing anything more to assist them." This counsel of despair explains in a breath the sentiment that characterized the debate and kept it apart from any wholesome attempt to get at any underlying principle, or any kind of guidance. The war was fought "to make the world safe for democracy," and when it ended the victors were told by the Government, by Parliament, and by their great democratic mouthpiece in the Press that it was fought on a mistaken impression of the issue at stake. The fight for the right to life and liberty was after all a fight with nature!

What is naturally wanting to cure the disease? There is coal in the mine, wood in the forest, stone in the quarry, clay in the ground, game on the moor and fish in the loch, which the war does not appear to have exhausted nor disturbed; there is the land for cultivation, and the seasons come and go as if there had been no war. Parliament can tax industry into idleness, it can tax the rag off the back and the bite out of the mouth, continue to maintain and enact laws that deny the competent and willing worker access to the natural opportunities for work that lie in profusion all around him in every town and district. Parliament may do all these things, and more, and when the results of this unnatural and criminal policy express themselves in a mountain of destitution the national assembly meets, and with evident general approval ignores the fundamental facts of the case staring them in the face.

In the course of his speech, which was hailed by a Labour member as his greatest oratorical effort, the Prime Minister, meeting the contention that more was done to relieve unemployment after the Napoleonic wars, a hundred years ago, said the Government of that day made no real effort to relieve the distress, leaving it entirely to the working out of the natural laws of political economy. The Prime Minister's rhetoric is at fault. The problem was not left to the natural laws of political economy to work out; it was worked out by the rapacity of the landlordism of that time, and no one knows that better than himself. Were not those the days when commons were "appropriated," and cruel corn laws imposed? The laws of political

economy had no more to do with what was done by Parliament a hundred years ago than they have to do now with the recent land legislation of the present Government. The laws of political economy are natural laws and work their way in spite of any puny parliamentary action calculated to subdue them to the will of a rapacious crowd of profiteers, profit mongers and well-placed spendthrifts. The laws of political economy explain how wealth is produced and how it is distributed, naturally. The wrong and the resulting misery to all concerned is to be found in the manipulation of these natural laws to selfish ends, to ends that enable the few to grow rich at the expense of the many, that enable the non-producers to take to themselves the hard-won earnings of patient and unremitting toil. Political economy as expounded by the masters of the science, and as it stands revealed to all capable of consecutive thought, tell us, if it tells us anything, that want and the fear of it can only come to an industrious people when they consent to work in economic bondage and not in economic freedom.

"This is a country," the Prime Minister continued, "which depends more upon exports than any country in the world. It depends more upon international trade than any country in the whole world, and if international trade fails, I do not care what you do in this House by legislation, or by administration outside, or by expenditure of public money, you will have nothing but starvation and ruin." At this stage a voice said "Break down land monopoly," and the answer came, "That does not enable you to sell cotton in China." Perhaps not, all at once, but it would enable starving men to grow food for themselves, and so make them independent to some extent of the State and its charity organisation societies.

A tax on land values in Great Britain might not touch the land monopolizer in China; it might not sell a bale of cotton in China, but it would by crippling land monopoly at home sell some in Lancashire, and to that extent it would clothe bare backs, re-stock empty wardrobes and call a halt to so much unemployment. This was once, and not so long ago, the Prime Minister's own remedy. For unemployment, for housing, wages, food, health, for the development of a virile, independent, manly, imperial race, he thundered, you must "burst land monopoly, tear it up by the roots."

But instead of the promised Taxation of Land Values we have the new corn law to maintain agricultural rents, and provision made for the urban landowners enjoying their due share of the plunder. Before the war came the Prime Minister was out to restore the land to the people. We have beaten them (the vested interests) before, he declared, and we will do it again. Yet two short years since the peace and the heroes who won the war and saved civilization, the manly imperial race, in embryo, are by the ten thousand at the street corner, and in broad daylight, begging for pennies to keep body and soul together. Instead of being "burst," land monopoly has been hardened. The opportunity to work, to exercise labour on idle land, has been made a stiffer proposition, and for this distress there is no "miraculous remedy"! Work depends on what's doing in Greenland's icy mountains and India's coral strand, and the man who

asks what about land monopoly is told in an off-hand way by the Prime Minister (*in the Press report, but not in the Parliamentary report of his speech*), that he yields to no man in his desire to see this reform accomplished. It is a case of jam yesterday and jam to-morrow, but none to-day.

Land monopoly has served its day with the Prime Minister. It served him well, and he has done his best to make amends to the monopolizers he so bitterly and needlessly castigated up and down the country. But the problem of poverty persists, and something else must be improvised to take its place, and bricklayers and banks step before the curtain, for a short enough run, until for certain some other phase of the drama is evolved out of the peace that truly passeth all understanding.

As to the bricklayers, let us hope they will mend the error of their ways, but whatever they stand for they cannot by adding one brick to another undermine the power of the man who owns and controls the brickyards, or persuade him to take less than "full market value" for the privilege of levying toll in the making of bricks. The greater the speed and efficiency of the bricklayer, as of all workers, the higher the rent of land, including brickfields, where land is monopolized; that is the lesson taught by the laws of political economy. Let those who see the mote in the bricklayer's eye first take the beam out of their own. To venture into the Prime Minister's own imagery let him answer his own question and say how would the laying of a thousand bricks a day instead of three hundred help to sell cotton in China. Bricks are for home consumption and not for export, and therefore, according to his own view of the matter, the bricklayer is not in the indictment.

As to the banks, it is most likely they labour under the belief that they know their own business best. It is also a likely enough proposition that in the interests of their patrons and customers they do look askance at some Government schemes. But all that is a mere detail in the great ebb and flow of high finance. What we do know is that there has been at other times in our experience extreme unemployment, and that neither bricks nor bank credits were called in question. It is wealth that is wanted, and wealth is produced by labour and not by credits. It is the other way about—credits are made up from wealth and distributed to the further advantage of industry, or to idleness, as the case may be. It is vain to throw stones at the banks, while industry is denied the freedom to produce the commodities upon which the credits rest.

The war has broken the exchanges built up in years of peaceful industry and world-wide commerce, or so modified what remains of them that they answer other calls than ours. These exchanges and their highly sensitive machinery lie shattered at our feet, so the tale is told, in as many pieces as there are, at least, additional frontiers. All this we may recognize and deplore, but it is as dust in the balance compared with the major facts of the case, and these are that both at home and across the seas industry is daily and hourly throttled by land monopoly.

The Commons debate was barren of any insight into the fundamental cause of unemployment. Labour, the producer of wealth, was put in the dock as a helpless mendicant, a beggar on the door-

step of Imperial Parliament. The Government complained that organized labour was standing in the way of so much development, that millions were being spent on the destitute, and whined, that after all the disease was not confined to this country; the people in other countries were suffering as well. The Labour representatives begged for mercy and so much more bread and cheese. The dignity of labour was not in evidence, and all present bent before the storm. Give us bricks and bank credits, cried the head of the Government, and we shall do the rest; stop waste, reduce expenditure and give the unemployed two shillings more a week, was the demand of official Liberalism; the Government has failed, it should resign and give somebody else the opportunity to deal with the problem, the Labour spokesmen murmured. Not one voice called for the liberation of the land. But that, of course, borders on the miraculous, and whatever would the MANCHESTER GUARDIAN say to any kind of admission that man and not the niggardliness of nature was at fault?

J. P.