

MR. PEPYS IN THE WEST

A Talk About a Suggested Method Towards Solving the Land Problem---and Others



friends in the vicinity of his former home, setting forth the advantages of moving to Canada.

"Yes," said Bafferton. "That is the way it would work. Every settler who had idle land in his neighborhood would let his friends in his old home know about it, and would send them the definite figures of its price. The improvement in the social conditions for himself and his family would be ample incentive for him to do all in his power to get the district around him settled. Go ahead to the next clause, Sam!"

A Basis for Taxation

And I read:—

The wild land tax shall be levied on the selling prices fixed, instead of on assessments, as provided in present legislation.

"That," said Snagsby, "would have a regulating influence on the fixing of the price by owners. An owner, even though desirous of avoiding taxation, could not afford to risk naming a price lower than that at which he would be willing to sell. Some owners might name higher prices in order to avoid the possibility of an early sale, but would, as a result, increase their tax burden, and consequently, the provincial revenue, without nullifying the general objects of the suggested legislation, because the number of such owners would not be sufficiently large to retard settlement. In general the tendency would likely be for an owner to fix a reasonable price."

"What comes next?" asked Bafferton. And so I read on:—

The Dominion Government, the Provincial Government or any individual or corporation, shall have the right to purchase any parcel of idle land at the fixed selling price, provided full payment be made in cash.

Any purchaser shall have the right to purchase through the Land Titles Registrar in whose district the land is situated by paying to the Registrar a deposit of 10 per cent. of the purchase price and filing an affidavit of intention to purchase. The balance of the price shall be paid to the Registrar within 60 days, and, in the event of default the deposit shall be forfeited and paid to the Consolidated Revenue Fund of the province. The Registrar shall pay the purchase price to the owner, or distribute it amongst the encumbrances entitled to it, and from the purchase price there shall be deducted by the Registrar

one per cent. for assurance fund and expense purposes.

(It is necessary to make provision for the purchase of land through the Registrar, or some other government official, so as to make it impossible for owners to hamper unduly the purchase of land, and also to avoid delay in the event of non-resident owners and other owners not readily accessible. Such a provision would also be necessary for the protection of purchasers in the event of complicated titles.)

"Hold up a minute there!" cried Snagsby. "Suppose a man who wanted to buy wasn't able to pay all the cash down?"

"Well, as to that," said Bafferton, "I should say that though the price, as provided, would be an all-cash price, there would be several methods by which a man could buy. He might have sufficient cash—if not, he might raise a loan on his farm adjoining the land which he proposed to purchase. The loan might cover both properties and result in enough money being raised to pay for the new property. Even though the owner of the land is not limited from charging a higher price when selling on terms, yet the fixing of an all-cash price which would be readily ascertainable by anyone would have a regulating influence on the term price to be charged."

"That's all quite true, Bafferton," Snagsby agreed. "Read on, Sam!" he said to me. "Drive ahead." And I continued:—

At any time before the filing by a purchaser of an affidavit, the owner of any piece of idle land shall be entitled to withdraw the same from sale by filing with the Registrar an affidavit of intention to improve, and no government, person or corporation, shall have the right to purchase the said land under the terms of this legislation within a period of six months from the filing of such affidavit. The owner upon so filing an affidavit shall not be entitled to an increase in the price of the land for the next following calendar year.

A Provision for Withdrawal

"Would you mind reading that again?" said Snagsby. And when I had done so, he said: "Yes, I see. Provision of that sort would be necessary for the protection of owners desiring to improve their land, and the denial of the right to increase the price is necessary in order to prevent

the filing of affidavits of intention to improve merely for the purpose of preventing the land from being sold. On the other hand, if the intention to improve is bona fide, the absence of the right to increase the price does not prejudice the owner. But ought there not to be some provision for the case of such an owner having for some good and sufficient reason failed to make the improvements?"

"There is," I said. And I read:—

In the event of an owner defaulting in the making of the improvements, he shall have the privilege of at any time applying to a Judge for an order allowing him to again file an affidavit of intention to improve. The Judge shall grant such an order only when satisfied as to the bona fides of the first affidavit as well as the bona fides of the intention to improve under the terms of the proposed second affidavit.

"I hope that is quite clear to you, Snagsby!" said Bafferton, with exceeding politeness. "Read on, Sam!" And I read on:—

In the calculation of the six months' period referred to in preceding clauses, the months of December, January, February and March shall be eliminated.

"That is because those four months are months during which agricultural work cannot be carried on, is it not?" asked Bafferton.

"It is, Bafferton, it is!" Snagsby remarked, very politely. "I hope that is quite clear to you!" "You have remarkable keen perception, Bafferton, sometimes." "Read on, Sam!" And I read on. But all the foregoing paragraphs make up all that is essential in the report. The others are matters of detail.

Threshing It All Out

We threshed the whole thing out at length. One thing we agreed upon very decidedly, and that was the wisdom of the suggestion that the owner of each and every parcel of idle agricultural land fix his own selling price. Such price as fixed by him to be (instead of the assessment valuation provided in present legislation) the value of it for the levying of the taxation of land values which must provide both Provincial and national revenues in the years to come. The more we studied that suggestion, the more admirable did it appear to us, commending itself to our judgment from every point of view.

"Most of all do I find it deserving of being acted on by the Legislatures of the three provinces," said Snagsby, "because it would prevent the renewal of the evils of land speculation and the consequent bedeviling of the economic conditions of the country, to the profit of the speculative brotherhood of boomsters, but to the enduring detriment of the common good and of true welfare and progress."

Simple, Workable and Just

"Right you are!" agreed Bafferton. "I can conceive of no more direct way of arriving at the consummation of the aims which Lloyd George had in view for the United Kingdom when he brought in his great budgets and the legislation providing for a valuation of all the land. You remember how it was said that such a making of another Domesday Book would prove an undertaking of formidable difficulty and costliness. Here is the simple, easy and just way to get it done for this country. Let each man put his own value on the land he has! That will not only be the greatest possible stride towards the best possible solution of the land settlement problem, but it will be the simplest, easiest and cheapest method of solving the problem of how to fix assessment values for land taxation, and a method as unquestionably just as it will be simple, easy and cheap. Think of how admirably workable it will be! Think of how it will cut out all the trouble of having assessment boards, and appeals from them, and all the rest of it—all the possibilities of skulduggery, political and otherwise, and bad feeling unpleasantness! The more you think of it, the better this whole plan is seen to be of having every man fix the value of his own land."

Who, indeed, can do it better!

W. J. H.

WINNIPEG, November 5.—The copy of the report of the Canadian Problems Club, of this city, which I had promised Snagsby to have on hand when he arrived this evening for our regular weekly smook and talk, was spread out before me on the table when he came in, bringing Bafferton with him.

"What is the idea of this report?" asked Bafferton.

As set forth in its preamble, I explained in reply, it is intended as a recommendation for legislation to be passed by the Legislatures of the three prairie provinces, with a view to

(a) The promotion of land settlement; (b) the encouragement of immigration; (c) the consequent increase in production; (d) the formation of a reasonable basis for a more comprehensive land settlement scheme with possible government purchase and government aid as a result of close co-operation between the Dominion and Provincial Governments.

Land Owners to Fix Prices

And then I began to read the report:

The owner of each parcel of idle agricultural land shall be required, on or before June 30, to fix a selling price for same, such price to be filed by the owner with the clerk of the municipality in which the land is situated.

In the event of the owner failing to fix the price, the same shall be fixed by the government, through provincial assessors or municipal assessors, or in any other equitable manner.

(This assessment would be comparatively simple on account of the price level which would have been previously set by the owners not defaulting in the fixing of prices).

The prices fixed shall be returned by the municipal clerks to the Municipal Commissioner, who shall have same classified and printed in booklet form and ready for distribution not later than November 30 in each year.

The price fixed shall hold for two years, and shall continue in force thereafter until changed by the owner. The price for any subsequent calendar year may be fixed by the owner prior to June 30 of the preceding year.

It is advisable to have notice of change given six months ahead so as to give the government ample time to complete the lists of lands thus available and also desirable in order that intending purchasers for cultivation may have sufficient certainty as to the availability of the land).

Advantages of the Plan

"I can see," said Bafferton, "that knowledge that every parcel of idle agricultural land in Western Canada had a readily ascertainable fixed price, would influence a great many American farmers to come up and look over the offerings of land, who would not think of going to the trouble and expense of making the trip if such a ready means of investigating the situation were not provided. And this list would, doubtless, also be made use of by the Department of the Interior, in connection with its lists of available lands which it already has under preparation. These Dominion Government lists would be of much greater value, accompanied with information as to fixed selling prices."

"Quite so!" Snagsby agreed. "The fixing of a selling price for a definite term would have the effect of stimulating immigration and land settlement generally. For example, an American settler could readily ascertain just what lands were available around him, and would know that the price was fixed so that it could not be raised as soon as any interest was displayed by an intending purchaser, and such American settler would be free to correspond with



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