

Lloyd George's Land Scheme

(Continued from page 15.)

In 1849 the British Isles grew food for 24,000,000 people; to-day their produce feeds only 15,000,000. In these other countries, lands which are not fit for agriculture have been afforested and the forest area has increased in all of them in recent times. In this country you have at least 9,000,000 acres fit for afforestation. If this area a little over 2,000,000 is under trees, and the afforestation which has recently been put forward will increase that area by three-quarters of a million. But there will still be over 7,000,000 acres unplanted.

Now, let us try to see what is wrong with the present system. A committee have, during the past two years, together devoted time and thought and energy to a thorough examination of the problem. This completed and brought up to date the great inquiry carried through in 1910-13. As a whole, it is the most thorough and comprehensive inquiry into the rural land problem ever made in this country, or, I believe, any other.

Their full report will be published in the course of the next few weeks. I cannot in the course of a single speech give you in detail the whole of our proposals, but I am going to lay down a few general principles which may indicate to you the line upon which we have been proceeding.

We have come to the definite conclusion that it is useless to attempt to make the best use of the soil of Britain as long as we preserve the existing system of agricultural tenure. Subsidies, grants in aid and credits standing alone only help to prolong the life of a system doomed to perish.

It is true the landlord has hitherto returned out of his rents a large and often a major part of the capital. He supplies the buildings and the repairs, and provides the cost of drainage or the material for drainage. Before the war a considerable number of landlords discharged this function, some adequately, some liberally, others much less so.

But since the war landlords cannot afford any longer to continue their pre-war contribution to the land without abandoning most if not the whole of their rent. The enormous increase in taxation owing to the war has deprived the landlord of the means for discharging his essential part as a capitalist. Landlordism has therefore completely broken down, and nothing has been set up to take its place.

If it is right that the State should resume its authority over the land for the purpose of burying the dead, it is surely also right that it should exercise its ownership where it is necessary it should do so to feed the living.

It is proposed that it should do so, not in order to cultivate the land itself, except for the creation of forests or waste lands, but for the purpose of giving the necessary security to the cultivator of the soil, that he and his children shall reap the full harvest of their labour and enterprise.

Compensation.

Before I come to the question of compensation, let me say it is no part of the scheme of the committee of which I am a member that the existing partnership shall be dissolved without paying the departing member the full value of his legitimate interest.

It means that he should be compensated for the real value of his interest in the business and not for deprivation of the unjust power he now possesses by the exercise of this monopoly, artificially to force up value to an extortionate and unremunerative level.

By this scheme the community and the cultivator are therefore only called upon to pay the real productive worth of the land, and not the fictitious and speculative value which comes from the exercise of an unjust monopoly.

On compensation there is another point which is important—that it should be paid not in a capital sum, but in the form of an annual payment. A capital sum would involve the raising of huge sums of money in a market already overburdened with Government securities for capital sums borrowed by the State. It is fair that the landlord should be secure of the same net income in respect of his land as he is now enjoying—the net, after deducting charges now borne by him for management and repairs.

There must be no increase in rents due to borrowing transactions in respect of the taking over of the land. A fair rent is the first condition of success for any cultivator.

I must here say a word about the thousands and tens of thousands of farmers who have been compelled by post-war conditions and the breaking up of estates since the war to purchase their land when prices were high and to pay in addition monopoly prices in order to save themselves from eviction.

Many of them have been very hard hit. The capital which they ought to have been in a position to put into their business has been absorbed by these extravagant prices. It must be an essential part of a great national scheme of cultivation that exceptional measures should be taken to relieve the unfair and paralyzing burdens now being borne by the class.

Building Value.
Special provision would have to be made also for cases where land has a real building value. It is essential that public should have complete power to regain possession of all land it needs for either housing the people, for municipal or national needs, for the necessities of industrial expansion, and that all building values created in the future by the community should ensure to the benefit of the community.

What is our next proposition? That the State must step in and assist liberally in providing the landlord's

part of the investment. If the standard of cultivation is to be raised to the level of that of Continental countries there must be capital expenditure on a very considerable scale. But you cannot have credit without security, and there is less security in agriculture than in any other industry in this country. No banker or any other business man would risk investing his capital on such a precarious security as is afforded by the present system of land tenure. The precariousness of tenure has had the sure and certain

effect that men have not taken the same risks or displayed the same thought and enterprise in the development of the resources of the soil as they would in the pursuit of some other trade or business.

The first condition, therefore, of increased production from the land is to terminate this vicious and unbusiness-like system of land tenure. But it follows that if the State gives credit and security it is essential that you should not permit indolent, inefficient, and careless cultivators and their children to entrench themselves in the land with complete impunity, defying all

interference. Good cultivation is the condition rightly demanded by the nation if it is to grant real security, and especially must it be a condition to the according of liberal national credit to the cultivator. The dogs who use the manager for sleeping-in must be pulled out by the ears.

So much for the cultivated land of England. But there is far too large an area in this country which ought to be productive but which is not—land of a kind which, if it had been in any other country of Western Europe, would have been yielding wealth to the nation.

I am told that there are at least one million acres of water-logged land which could be drained and brought into cultivation. That is a task which you cannot leave to any individual landlord, but the State can usefully and profitably undertake, or assist in draining the area as a whole.

The Labourer.

A national policy of cultivation must fall unless you retain labour on the land and attract labour to the land. During the last 50 years labour has been driven from the soil by bad housing, wages which compare very unfavourably with those paid in other industries, and, above all, by the complete absence of a prospect of advancement for the more intelligent and enterprising among the workers.

"Getting on" for a countryman does not mean getting on to the land. It means getting out to the towns. This is the only country of which it can be said that the vast majority of those who are engaged in the cultivation of the soil constitute a landless class.

There is nothing that irritates the intelligent labourer more than to see acres of excellent land miserably cultivated by an unthrifty farmer while the labourer himself has not even an acre of his own, however much he desires it. The percentage of bad farmers may not be high, but it is high enough to present the community with an excellent opportunity for improving the cultivation of the soil by increasing largely the number of small holdings; and it would pay the State to incur the initial expense of putting the land in order.

This could often be done by forgoing the annuity for some years, until the small-holder had been given time to bring the land into profit.

"Cry of Despair."

I am told that there are many engaged in rearing-receiving or cultivation who say, "Why not leave us alone?" They have ceased to expect protective tariffs, they are not asking for subsidies, and they have all they can hope to obtain for some time in respect of grants in aid of their rates. Therefore, why not leave them alone?

That is a cry either of selfish contentment or of unintelligent despair. It is right that each man should ask himself—landlord, farmer, labourer—"Is this scheme just and fair to me?" But let them also ask themselves. Is it just and fair to my native land to perpetuate a system that is responsible for so much waste of its most valuable treasure—a system which enables the foreigner to beat us in the most important national industry?

A few years ago we put the honour and greatness of the country we love above interest, wealth, and life itself. I appeal that these proposals should be examined, and, if found to be wise, adopted and carried out in that spirit of high and fear less patriotism and resolution which lifted this nation to such heights of endeavour and success but seven years ago.—Daily Mail, Sept. 18.

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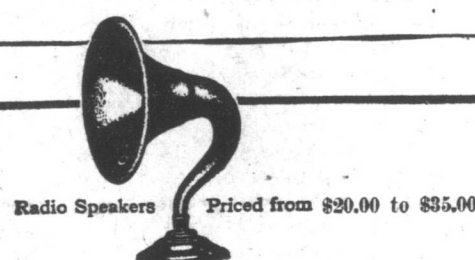
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