

Knell of Landlordism in England

By Joseph Fels

"Justice in men's mouths," says Henry George, "is cringingly humble when she first begins a protest against a time-honored wrong."

The truth of this observation receives fresh confirmation, if any were needed, in the light of recent events in English political affairs.

For centuries England has been taxing beads, houses, incomes, inheritances, clothing, food and drink—taxing every value, in short, except land values. These have been practically exempted from taxation, for the land tax, such as it is, is based on a valuation which has not been increased since 1696. What momentous consequences flow from this method (or lack of method) for raising government revenues will be apparent to anyone who will trace them, and in doing so, he will realize, as perhaps he never has before, the tremendous power for good or evil which lies in taxation and will not wonder why a cry of dismay has been raised by the lords over the budget, which proposes to do away with the time-honored wrong of exemption, by levying a small tax on present land values.

At the risk of appearing to demonstrate the trite and expound the commonplace, I want to point out to the readers of the stupidity, folly and iniquity of taxing things that men make while, at the same time, we refrain from taxing land values.

To tax things that men make, things like houses, clothing, food, etc., is very plainly to discourage their production and make it more difficult for people to get them. Yet these are all good things—wealth which everyone desires and to some extent must have in order to live. Life is hard enough at best and we but add another burden to men's backs whenever we tax them. To punish men for working and producing wealth; to fine them for being industrious, as we do when we take in taxes a part of their product; to mulct the thrifty and exempt the idler, this is either a confession that we are ignorant of any better way of raising government revenues, or knowing a better way, refuse to adopt it. Licenses, tariffs, poll taxes, internal revenue taxes, taxes on personal property, income and inheritance taxes, all have the same vicious effect. They are shifted to the consumer, their cost of collection often exceeds the whole amount of the tax and they compel the poor to pay more than they should and the rich less than they should. They are wholly indefensible either on the ground of necessity or morality. In fact, their effects on the morals of a community are even more deplorable than their exactions. They promote and encourage evasion, lying, bribery and blackmail, both in their collection and disbursement. They require vast machinery of administration including spies, informers, detectives, lawyers, judges, courts and jails. They are everywhere the mainspring of mal-administration, the fountain head and source of political corruption. They contaminate and demoralize whole nations, provoke resentment, anger, jealousy, hate and all ignoble national traits. They turn life into an Ishmaelish warfare in which every man's hand is raised against his brother. They are a stench in the nostrils of all honest men! Their name is Anathema! Away with them!

A tax on land values, on the other hand, has none of these characteristics or effects. Merely as a tax, it stays where it is put; it can not be shifted to the consumer; it compels

each individual to pay towards government expenses in proper proportion to the benefits he receives from government; it is the cheapest to collect; it can not be evaded; it does not lessen the production of wealth, but increases it; it does not act as a penalty on industry, but encourages it; it does not take from any man anything that is justly his; it does not reduce wages nor the earnings of capital. It is the only tax that can be justified both on the grounds of expediency and morality. Its effect on individual and social life is so far-reaching and so beneficial that a famous Frenchman has declared its discovery to be, in his opinion, second only in utility to the invention of writing or the substitution of the use of money for barter. When adopted it will bring about an equitable distribution of wealth, abolish poverty and the fear of poverty and do away with a system that produces a few multi-millionaires at one extreme of society and thousands of tramps at the other extreme. It will elevate taste, morals, manners and intelligence, and this, re-acting on our civic and national life, will purify our politics and thus bring about a higher and better and grander civilization than this old world has ever seen.

All this, and more, a tax on land values, if accompanied by the abolition of all other taxes, would accomplish and it is the effort which has been made and is now being made in England to secure this tax that has made the budget such an object of world-wide interest. For the policy of the English government in refusing heretofore to tax land values has had the effect of encouraging land-grabbing and monopolization, has offered a premium for men to withhold land from use, has hastened the concentration of land in the hands of a few and its conversion into great estates and game preserves. This it is that has forced the people off the land, closed opportunities to them for self-employment, driven them to tramp the highways and fill the "workhouse," or seek the towns and cities where they merely swell the ranks of the unemployed already there. The poverty and pauperism which exists in England is appalling and the condition of the masses of people there could be traced so directly to landlordism that some solution of the land question had to be undertaken by the government. The English people had begun to see a direct relation between idle hands and idle lands, also that a tax on land values does not make land more difficult to get, but easier to get, since it makes it unprofitable to hold land out of use, hence, when the time was ripe the land tax and valuation clauses appeared in a budget which exploded a bomb in the house of lords.

It is difficult for me to find language in which to express the rage which has possessed the landed interests of Great Britain since the introduction of this budget. I can only compare it to the attitude which the southern slave owners held sixty years ago in this country towards the abolition movement. Words and arguments have failed the lords utterly. "What! Tax my land!" exclaimed one of them over and over again—an exclamation which was used on a liberal cartoon with great effect during the election. In striking contrast to the poverty of the lords for election arguments was the wealth of the liberal party in this respect. Their literature revealed iniquities in taxation that must have made many a British voter ashamed of his country

that it had so long tolerated a house of lords and realize, as maybe he never had before, what monumental hypocrites the landed aristocracy of the United Kingdom really are. Calling themselves and being called the nobility, posing as the taxpayers, and by their attitude and manner, if not their words, thanking God daily that they did not have to work for a living, they have, while hiding behind the mask of respectability and patriotism, succeeded for centuries in evading the taxes that were raised and spent chiefly for their benefit and protection, and in doing this have laid tax burdens on the poor that have literally ground millions of them to death.

Wendell Phillips once said that slavery was the sum of all villainies. So it is, but I really think that if the record of English landlordism is ever made up the record of American slave-owners will show white by comparison. I speak from personal knowledge, and not from hearsay, for I lived in the south "before the war" and have lived in London much of the time the past nine years.

Caught with their hands deep in the people's pockets the landlords resorted to the old cry, "Stop thief!" To divert attention from themselves they pointed to Germany and asserted that the Germans were only waiting for the English people to pass the budget when German warships would immediately land a German army in England, and if the German soldiers should fail to come, why, then Germany would dump her cheap manufactured goods into England, the English markets would be flooded with goods made in Germany and English workingmen would then be thrown out of employment. The only way to prevent such a catastrophe, the Tories argued, was to impose a tariff like the United States has, on all foreign goods, and in support of this contention they brought to bear all the mean and contemptible lies that have so long been used to defend protection in the United States and which have so effectively bamboozled and deceived American workmen.

Here again I speak from personal knowledge and experience. I am a "protected" American manufacturer, given "protection" on the false plea that I may be able to pay "my" workmen high wages, and I assert that the only effect a tariff has on wages is to reduce them and not to increase them. I am not desirous of hiding the fact that I am here on earth and intend to stay here as long as I can. To stay here, I have got to play the game of business either as master or servant, and I have chosen to be a master. But I don't like the rules of the game. I protest against them. The dice are loaded and the man who has only his labor to sell is cheated and robbed. He is not given an equal chance. Privileges—all sorts of legal clubs are used against him and one of these weapons is the tariff. A part of my own profits are due to the tariff. I speak of these profits always as my "ill-gotten gains" and for a number of years I have been, and I am now, using these "ill-gotten gains" in attempts to overthrow the system which produces them.

But though the protection cry divided the liberal attack on landlordism it did not succeed in overthrowing the liberal party. Enough liberals and radicals were returned to parliament to insure, in my opinion, the passage of the budget and with it, what is infinitely of greater importance, the entrance of the thin end of a wedge that will split landlordism wide open.

The tax on land values and the re-valuation clauses have sounded the death-knell of private property in land. This result would not have been possible except for the prelim-

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