



## CHAPTER XII

### *The Contest with the Leisured Class*

THE OBJECTIVE of most of Joseph's later activities was to bring about a thorough discussion of the taxation of land values on the platform, in the Press, and in Parliament. In Britain a particularly favourable opportunity for action had arrived. A new Government had come into office in 1906, with a majority greater than that possessed by any previous Ministry. Its head, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, had been for many years sympathetically disposed towards the movement. In the House of Commons itself the group of land-taxers was, numerically at any rate, more powerful than it had ever been before. Joseph soon won his way into their confidence. He had no personal axe to grind, no party affiliations to embarrass. He simply wanted to help in any way in which practical service could be rendered. He travelled much, speaking continually; he wrote to the Press, interviewed Members of Parliament, and entertained at home in that social fashion which makes half the legislation of Great Britain. His city office became a

kind of campaigning centre where invariably enthusiasts were to be found. Among those who came to office and home was David Lubin. When first he came his plan for an International Institute of Agriculture had not yet found acceptance. He was then on his way to put it before potentate of this or that country. It is now twenty-five years since that good man Victor Emmanuel III responded to this other good man in thought and by act: and there was then founded in Italy David Lubin's International Institute of Agriculture. Joseph Fels and David Lubin were of course appreciative of each other. As they met then so to this day their work intermingles. The nature of their efforts was such that they are for all time: they partake of eternal verity.

At the end of 1908, when the unemployed agitation was at its height, the "Right to Work" National Council called a united conference, composed of representatives of Municipal and Local Authorities, Labour, Socialist, and other progressive bodies. It was held in the Guildhall, London, and the proceedings were opened by the Lord Mayor. The Chairmen of the Conference were the Rev. Prebendary Russell Wakefield—now Bishop of Birmingham—John H. Lile, Esq., J.P., C.C., and J. Keir Hardie, M.P. Among those who represented the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values was Joseph. As is usual at such Congresses, the resolutions proposed

were varied and numerous, ranging from a demand for the Government to recognise its responsibility to provide work for every unemployed citizen, to the limitation of the hours of labour, the provision of meals and clothing for necessitous children, a grant of £1,000,000 to assist the Distress Committees and other agencies engaged in Relief Works, &c.

At the date fixed for the Conference, Joseph had arranged to leave London for the United States, but he determined to be present in order to press the reform, which in his judgment was of more practical value than any of the resolutions on the agenda. His, perhaps, was one of the shortest speeches to which the Conference listened, but it made up for its brevity by its directness.

"My interest, I am frank to say," he declared, "is the socialisation of the public means of support. To me nothing has so much value in all the resolutions on the agenda, whether they be called practical or remedial, as that which asks that drastic legislation for taxing land values should be put into operation." (Hear, hear.) "You may be interested to know that, within a 'bus or tram ride of the Bank of England, there are 10,000 acres of land lying idle. That is enough land if cultivated under intelligent superintendence to support 8,000 families. The Vacant Land Cultivation Society has in London 250 families now being partially supported on the 40 or 50 acres we have

been able to get. What we have been able to do with that 40 or 50 acres of land has so astonished me that I beg this Conference to insist upon the Government putting into effect the taxation of land values. This would produce millions of pounds sterling. There is a large amount of land that can be used by somebody. The landlords are not using it, but the unemployed people, of whom there are vast numbers and on whose behalf we are assembled here to-day, could make use of it. The task before this Conference is to find a solution for the problem of unemployment. There is only one solution, the provision of profitable work. Relief work is useless; it is simply making holes and filling them up again. The most profitable labour is labour that is reproductive, than which none is more important and valuable than the cultivation of land. There is, as I have said, plenty of land, but the trouble is that the people cannot get the use of it. How can the obstacles be removed? The surest way of forcing the land of this country into cultivation is by taxing it. It will not then pay the holders to keep it idle for speculative purposes, or as mere sporting grounds for the pleasures of the rich. I am a landlord myself, and yet I want my land to be taxed, as it should be, up to 20 s. in the £, because I know what the effect will be. I am willing to start with 1 s. in the £. (Hear, hear.) One shilling will produce millions. (Applause.) I am convinced that before you can get any permanent

cure for the unemployed problem you must tax land values.

“I, of course, support the demand for ‘drastic legislation for taxing land values’, but we all know that simply passing resolutions counts for very little in the estimation of the average politician. This very question has formed the basis for academic discussion for years. What I want is to see it done. And there is an easy way of doing it, as indicated by my amendment, which I move as an addition to the resolution as follows:—

“And that the Chancellor of the Exchequer be requested to put the taxation of Land Values in the next Budget.”

The resolution, as amended, was carried with cheers, and Joseph hurried off to Liverpool, en route for New York, happy in the knowledge that a practical proposal had been made. It was one that received Government recognition sooner, perhaps, than many of those present believed to be possible.

The chapter of political history which led up to and culminated in the Budget of 1909 is sufficiently well known. It represented the fruition of the new Liberalism. It had been many years since the taxation of land values had received, in the famous Newcastle programme, the official recognition of the Liberal Party. Every Liberal leader of importance during the long period of opposition had given at least lip serv-

ice, and some of them, like Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, seemed ready to meet its claims in full. The party, however, continued to be dominated by the old guard with its Whig tendencies and Gladstonian descent. It circled about the time-honoured policies of Free Trade, Disestablishment, and Home Rule. Measures of social reform were incidental and tentative. Liberalism had to find itself after coming into power. Gradually, however, the new elements began to emerge and take first place. The problems of dense population and the intensifying industrial struggle could not be solved by the Gladstonian formulae. The discontent of labour, now vocal in the House of Commons, was ever more ominous.

The day had arrived for live issues handled by live men. Mr. Lloyd George placed himself at the head of the Liberal democracy and led an attack upon the very stronghold of privilege. What the Budget actually proposed was little enough, but the principle which it involved would without doubt achieve a social revolution. A land tax was to be introduced which differentiated, for the purposes of assessment, between the site value and the improvement value of land. A new valuation was made necessary which would give the people the first understanding they had had since 1690 of what the land was worth and its possibilities as a source of revenue.

But the most important result of the Budget was

that the eyes of the elector were opened to the meaning of the Single Tax. Joseph began to make preparations for a campaign of unprecedented magnitude; the measure was not Single Tax; it was far from what he desired. But it was the thin end of the wedge. It marked the beginning of a statutory recognition of the land tax principle; and as such was given the strongest support of the United Committee and all believers in the Single Tax.

An amazing outburst of opposition was provoked by the measure. The House of Lords, as guardian of privilege and representative of the leisured class, decided to stake its very existence as a legislative power on this struggle. If there had ever been doubt as to the importance of a land tax, the determined resistance of the Lords showed it to be the conviction of privilege that the enactment of this principle into law pointed the way to its doom. "Anyone would have thought," Joseph once exclaimed, "that Mr. Lloyd George proposed to consign the members of the House of Lords to the workhouse."

The opposition was well organised. The whole power and tradition of privilege were invoked to secure the defeat of the measure. It was not without success that the Unionist Party endeavoured to shift the burden of conflict from the tax problem to the constitutional question of whether the House of Lords had the right to reject a Money Bill. Leagues

were formed to protest against the Budget. From the beginning to the end of the fight Joseph gave practical expression of his sympathy. He has even been accused of being the chief provider of munitions for the campaign. Although the Land Taxation proposals in the Budget merely touched the fringe of the question, and were utterly inadequate from his point of view, he felt that they marked an era in constructive legislation. He liberally supported the great demonstration in London, which did as much to revive the determination of the Liberal Ministry as it did to overawe the opponents of the measure.

He was convinced that nothing was so important as to awaken the people to an understanding of the possibilities which that measure contained. There have been few elections in British political history the issue of which has been more significant, and upon which the attention of the whole world was more clearly focussed, than that of 1910. It returned the Liberals to power with a mandate not only to pass the land clauses of the Finance Bill, but to end once for all the veto power of the House of Lords.

Joseph saw that the whole system derives from and centres in that apex of the social order, the not inconsiderable group who own the land and therefore the people. He felt no animus against the persons concerned, it was the system he was against. The rent roll for them is an inexorable determinant of their



existence. Often a lad leaves Oxford with an imagination stimulated by the world he faces and resentful that life can never have for him the flavour of a great adventure, that his hands can never know the joy of making and shaping things. The social scheme determined his course from the day he was born, and not many years are needed to settle him in acquiescence and maintenance of the system. The class is, of course, being constantly increased by the possessors of newly-made fortunes. Their admission to the ranks of "Society" is for some time resented, but the economic factor on which the whole scheme rests is all-determining, and no rich man can be for long excluded in spite of the vulgarity which his wealth derives from recent contact with the toil-stained.

It is refreshing to know at least one rich man who played the rôle badly. Joseph was never able to see that the humanity beneath a greasy engineer's suit was essentially different from his own. He could never bring himself to believe that it did not matter whether poor children were fed or not. He knew that if the struggling masses had their due there would be no great fortunes to expend on carriages, flunkeys, great houses, expensive dress, and charitable subscriptions. Directness of vision and honesty of principle made impossible for him participation in the great masquerade. Behind the array of conventional pretence he recognised the sordid form of the world's greatest

injustice. A leisured class rides upon the backs of the poor. The community which displays great luxury displays a corresponding degree of privation; the counterpart of the palace is the hovel. To enable any individual to flaunt his wealth, numbers are doomed to grinding toil. Confronted with this situation, the course of an honest man is simple. One accepts the situation or one does not. Joseph did not.