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LAND PURCHASE FOR IRELAND.

THE attempt to convert Irish agricultural tenants into owners, begun by the Ashbourne Act, and proposed to be greatly extended by Mr. Balfour's Bill, is, in my opinion, unsound and vicious. It cannot settle the Irish land question or make such settlement easier. It does not lead toward but away from any permanent settlement. Its purpose is not to do justice or even to advance towards justice, but to sustain injustice.

Any such scheme is well characterised by Michael Davitt as a landlords' relief Bill. It is also a landlords' defence Bill. To give to certain of the Irish agricultural landlords, from Imperial credit, a higher price than they could get for their estates from private buyers in the open market, is but one of its features. It proposes that the Imperial Government shall again sell these estates in small parcels to the tenants, thus giving a fresh legislative sanction to the principle of private ownership of land, and establishing around the large owners still left a bodyguard of small owners.

It is not strange that under existing conditions the wiser Irish landlords want to sell out, nor that those who prefer to retain their estates, and who yet hope for a return of the days when the right of a man to "do as he pleased with his own" was unquestioned, should wish to secure such a defence as that which French peasants, the nominal owners of two or three mortgaged acres, form to holdings like the six hundred thousand acre Rothschild estate. But why should they be gratified at the expense and risk of the British taxpayer?

The root of Irish social and political difficulties is the injustice which makes Irish land the exclusive property of some of the Irish people and denies to the rest of the Irish people all legal right to

live or work in Ireland save as they buy or beg it of the favoured class. This injustice is not in any matter of quality or numbers. It is not that the Irishmen to whom Irish land is legally given are bad Irishmen, and the Irishmen to whom all legal right in Irish land is denied are good Irishmen. It is not that the one class go abroad and continue to draw rent, while the other class, when they go, continue to send remittances. It is not that the landed are few and the landless many. It is that some Irishmen, whether few or many, bad or good, are given legal rights which natural justice denies them, and that other Irishmen, whether bad or good, few or many, are legally denied rights which natural justice gives them.

This injustice cannot be cured by substituting one set of land-owners for another set; a larger number for a smaller number. Nor yet could it be more than momentarily cured by equally dividing Ireland among the whole population.

Such a division is, of course, impracticable in this stage of civilisation. But ignoring this, let us imagine that the Imperial Parliament were to buy out the Irish landlords, or to set them aside by such a declaration as it has constitutional and moral right to make, and then to divide the land equally among the whole people in fee simple. How long would equality continue? Why, from the moment that equality had been thus attained a tendency to inequality would appear. Children would continue to be born and in different proportions in different families; emigration and immigration would continue to go on, and the changes in the centring of population would change the relative value of land. Some people would be so dissipated and improvident that they would quickly sell their portions without thought of the consequences. Some would be unable to profitably use the little pieces they had received, and others would need more than their share for profitable use. Some would see or would imagine that they could make more profitable use of the capital that the selling of their shares would give them than they could of the land itself; others, in real or imaginary need, would soon incur mortgages which in the great majority of cases would end in final sale or foreclosure. The general conditions continuing which make land the most secure of investments, the fact that land can be sold at the equivalent of a much lower rate of

interest than money can be borrowed for by those who need small amounts, acting with persistent force behind these and similar causes, must quickly bring about a new concentration of land ownership, which would again make the landowners few and the landless many.

How futile any such attempt to secure equality would be—how even more clearly futile must be any attempt to establish an Irish peasant proprietary—may be seen from the fact, stated by Macaulay, that at the time of the accession of James II. the majority of English farmers were owners of the land they tilled; by the fact that the number of French peasant proprietors is steadily diminishing, although the habits, customs, and traditions of the French peasants are much more favourable to the permanence of small properties than are those of the Irish; and especially by the fact that in the United States, where we started with a closer approach to equality in the division of land than in a country like Ireland is now attainable, a process of concentration has been steadily going on which is rapidly turning the great mass of our people into tenants.

It is evident that equality as to the first of all natural needs and the most fundamental of all natural rights cannot be attained by any division of the land among the people. But land legislation for Ireland does not even attempt this. It proposes nothing for the labourers, the artisans, the operatives—for the great mass of the people of Ireland. They are still to be denied all legal right to the natural basis of life. They are still to be left without legal right in their "native land," save that of "moving on" in the streets and highways and of going to the workhouse when unable to pay rent. In short, all that this scheme proposes is to bribe some thousands of the disinherited to leave the popular side and come over to that of the landowning class, by giving them some little share in the plundering of the masses—by making them for a while at least a little better off than their fellows.

Nor is this to be done at the expense of the landlords. The Irish landlords are to give up no part of their possessions to secure the rest. They are not to be at the expense of enlisting the army of small owners which, while it may last, is to furnish them with a defence. What the landlords give up they are to be paid

for. The expense of converting agricultural tenants into landowners is to be borne, not by them, but by the British taxpayer. He is the god in the machine who is to make possible a purchase and sale in which the seller gets without the buyer giving.

Consider this scheme from the standpoint of its advocates. Certain landlords are to be bought out. They are to receive the value of their land. Certain tenants are to get this land; are to succeed to all the legal rights, and in fact to even more than the present legal rights for abandoning which the landlords are to be paid. But they are to pay nothing. That is to say, they are to get the ownership of the land by paying for a term of years a sum less than they now pay for the mere use of the land. Their rent is to be reduced and the ownership of the land thrown in. This giving to the seller without taking from the buyer; this transfer of the ownership of land from one class to another class without loss or cost to anybody; this paying off the landlord, reducing the rent to the tenant, and at the same time making him the owner, is to be accomplished by the magic of Government credit. If this can be done without loss to somebody, then the philosopher's stone has indeed been found, and the secret of perpetual motion is no longer to be despaired of. But is there not injustice, and gross injustice, in confining the benefits of this wonderful discovery to one small class? Who are the Irish agricultural tenants that they alone of all the people of Ireland—nay, of all the people of the United Kingdom—should be permitted to profit by it? What is Government credit that its wonderful properties of bringing something out of nothing should be used for the benefit of Irish agricultural tenants alone? Is it not the credit of the whole people? Does it not depend upon the power to tax—to take from the earnings of all the Queen's subjects? Is there not, then, the grossest injustice in applying it for the benefit of any one class, while other classes are denied equal benefits from it? If the credit of the whole is to be used for the benefit of individuals, where in justice can a stop be made? Why are not the tenants of the towns as much entitled to be made in this easy way the owners of the houses they now rent as the tenants of the agricultural districts are to be made the owners of their farms? Why should not opera-

tives be made in this way the owners of factories, fishermen of boats, seamen of ships, clerks of shops, and costermongers of donkeys? Why, in short, should not every one who would like to own what he is now hiring, or could show a presumption of profitably using more capital in any reputable business, be thus provided for by the use of the Government credit? Take that most useful and deserving class, the cab-drivers of the cities. They now mostly hire their cabs and horses, paying for them in London some fifteen or sixteen shillings a day. Could it not be readily demonstrated, on paper at least, that by borrowing at 3 per cent. and investing in cabs, horses, stables, and feed, the Imperial Government could rent such cabs to the drivers for ten or twelve shillings a day, and yet out of this set aside a sinking fund that would, in a very short time, enable it to make the driver a present of a cab and the necessary horses?

The Right Hon. Joseph Chamberlain was chairman of one of the Commissions for discovering how poverty can be relieved without touching its cause. Before him, some time ago, according to a newspaper report, appeared a witness who proposed that the Government should lend every agricultural labourer £20 to buy a cow. But he was quickly hushed to abashed silence by Mr. Chamberlain, who asked why, if the Government was to go into the business of lending agricultural labourers money to buy cows, it should not also go into the business of lending journeymen bakers money to buy flour and start bakeries. The man could not answer.

Would not Mr. Chamberlain be struck with similar silence if asked why the Government should go into the business of lending agricultural tenants money to buy farms and refuse to go into the business of lending agricultural labourers money to buy cows? He is too good a man of business to say that there is a risk of depreciation in cows, and no risk of depreciation in land. He is too logical to say that any difference of risk is more than a matter of insurance, or to contend that it altered the principle. Yet, if I am rightly informed, he is a supporter of this Irish tenants' gift enterprise, and has even proposed to extend it to England and Scotland. How he can reconcile this with his objection to buying cows for labourers

I am puzzled to know, unless it be that he deems the landowning class the sacred white elephant of British superstition, for whose sake even the floodgates of State Socialism must be thrown open.

Between the use of national credit in providing farmers with farms and the use of national credit in providing all citizens with capital no line can be drawn by saying that land is of a different species from capital. The distinction between the things produced from land by labour, which alone are properly embraced in the category of wealth, and land itself, is indeed clear. The one species can be brought forth without limit by human exertion ; the other is fixed in quantity by nature. The one tends to decrease in value as material progress cheapens the cost of production ; the other steadily rises in value as population increases and the arts advance. The one tends constantly to decay and to return again to the reservoirs of nature ; the other remains while men come and go ; it is the standing place, the workshop, the reservoir, of generation after generation. The existence of the one is due to man's activity ; the other was here before man came, and, so far as we can see, will be here after man and all his works shall disappear. Ownership in the one springs from the right of the individual to himself, to the use of his own powers and the fruits of his own exertions ; it is essential to the production of wealth and the advance of civilisation. Ownership in the other springs only from appropriation and force. It is an impairment of the right of the individual to himself. It compels him to use his powers for others, to give his exertions, or the fruits of his exertions to others, for permission to use what nature clearly intended as fully for him as for them. There is and there can be no other foundation of the right of property than the right of the producer to the thing he produces. The individual ownership of land is a denial of this right. It compels the producer to share his produce with the non-producer.

There is, in short, as clear a distinction between the right of property in the things produced by labour from land, and the right of property in land itself, as there is between the right of property in a fish pulled from the ocean, and the right of property in the ocean ; between the ownership of a cow, and the ownership of the planet. But this distinction the Ashbourne Act and Mr. Balfour's Bill in

no way recognise. The distinction is as true of town land as of agricultural land, of that which supports houses and factories as of that which bears cows and crops. But while these purchase schemes only propose to deal with some part of the agricultural land, instead of with all land, they propose to deal with that in a way that positively as well as negatively ignores this distinction. They propose to recognise titles to the individual ownership of Ireland by purchasing them of one set of people, and then to give to them a fresh Governmental endorsement by nominally selling, but in reality donating them, to another set of people.

The source of all Irish difficulties is the violation of the principle of equal rights. This Irish land legislation is an attempt to protect a fundamental injustice for a little longer by a fresh violation of the principle. Its true character is somewhat masked by the fact that, while its ostensible beneficiaries are a certain class of Irishmen, the risk is put on the Imperial taxpayer. If I can judge of the popular feeling in Ireland by that of those of its representatives I have talked with, it is that the tenants will never be forced to pay, and that the buying out of the landlords and the handing over of their farms to the tenants is but an instalment of the national obligation which Great Britain owes to Ireland on account of centuries of wrong and oppression. In some sort, also, this feeling is appealed to in Great Britain in support of the measure; and the newly-awakened consciousness that Ireland has been badly treated disposes many Englishmen to regard the money called for by the scheme as a national payment on account of a national wrong.

But if the principle be admitted that the wrongs of the past are to be compensated in the present, where is the thing to stop? Are Irish tenants the only people in the three kingdoms whose present poverty may be traced to past robbery? It might be worth the while of the well-to-do classes to consider how much of all that they possess would be left them by the taxation that would be necessary to make even a beginning in the payment of such a bill.

And there is one class especially who might find it worth while to consider what is involved in the proposition (for that it must finally amount to) to assume as a part of the national debt the

capitalised value of the incomes that the landowners at present get in rent. The rapid increase of public debts is surely and swiftly bringing a day when it will be asked by what authority one generation is called on to pay obligations incurred by its predecessors, and whence class governments, which will have been repudiated, derived power for ever to bind the masses to pay the costs of their own oppression. Will it add to the stability of the British debt to convert landowners into bondholders?

It is now almost ten years since the late Professor Cairnes wrote to me, expressing his astonishment that, as he was pleased to express it, a man of my ability and acquirements should deliberately propose to expropriate landowners without compensation. In replying, I took occasion to express my own astonishment—and it was a real astonishment—that in the face of a great and pressing problem such men as he should have nothing better to propose than the lame and unprincipled schemes for dealing with the Irish land question that were then being discussed in Great Britain. And I told him that, in my opinion, the future would show that such timid, go-nowhere measures would, without settling anything, result in more difficulty, more danger, and, even to the landowning class, more loss and suffering, than could possibly flow from the simple, just, and radical plan, which seemed to him so outrageous, of taking ground values for the use of the community and remitting all other taxes.

What has occurred since then shows that I was right. In the name of law and in resistance to the law, the rights of persons and of property have been violated. With one hand the Government has filled prisons with men whom the people love and honour, and with the other it has broken contracts and interfered to fix prices. There has been violation of all the guarantees of freedom, of all the principles of good government. There have been disorder, tumult, insecurity, outrage, deep and wide-spread suffering, and the awakening and intensification of bitter passions. The poorer and weaker of the landlord class have been crushed out; the richer and stronger have been deprived of a great part of their revenues; the flower of the population, the very bone and sinew of national strength, has been driven in hundreds of thousands beyond the seas. Yet the

Irish land question has not been settled, nor has any advance been made towards its settlement.

The proposal to buy out the Irish landlords in favour of the Irish tenants is but of a piece with the policy that has had this result. It can settle nothing. It can only give rise to new difficulties and fresh dangers. Instead of attempting to substitute justice for injustice, its aim is merely the substitution of one privileged class for another privileged class, and its means involve the admission of principles the most dangerous. "They strain at a gnat and swallow a camel."

It is too late for any such measure to stop or even to retard the movement for the restoration to the British people of their rights in their native land. The present Government have doubtless command of enough Parliamentary votes to appropriate any sum they elect to ask for. They may thus create fresh difficulties in Ireland, but in doing this they will give an enormous impetus to the progress of Radical ideas in Great Britain.

HENRY GEORGE.