

Purchase or Single Tax.

BY THOMAS CAMERON.

It is now generally agreed by all who earnestly desire a thorough settlement of the Land Question that the abolition of private property in land is the only radical cure for the evils of the present system, and that this must be the goal towards which all our efforts should be directed. But, although agreed as to the end in view, land-law reformers are not quite all of one mind as to the best means of attaining it. The great majority favour the Taxation of Land Values as being the best of all methods, but a considerable section cling to the belief that the destruction of landlordism will be best brought about by the State purchasing the land from present holders.

Supporters of the proposal to obtain common ownership of land by means of State purchase may be divided into two classes—those who believe that some compensation is due to landholders on account of their compulsory expropriation, and those who, although not nominally admitting the landholder's right to any compensation, yet believe that the quickest and surest plan would be to buy them out. Coming as it does from people who profess to be convinced that private property in land is wrong and ought to be abolished, any proposal for buying out the present holders savours of weakness, and looks very like a giving away of the whole case. Henry George declared, and all land reformers agree with him, that:—

The truth is, and from this truth there can be no escape, that there is and can be no just title to an exclusive possession of the soil, and that private property in land is a bold, bare, enormous wrong, like that of chattel slavery.

And yet some will urge that before this giant wrong can be brought to an end, those who are profiting by its continuance should be compensated, because, forsooth, the awakened moral sense of a nation declares they shall no longer be permitted to reap where they have not sown, nor gather where they have not strewed.

Is it in accordance with the moral law that people should be compensated for being compelled to cease committing wrong? For this in reality is what any such schemes of compensation amount to.

The principle of private property in land is either right, or it is wrong. If it is right, then no one has any business to interfere with landholders in the possession of their land; but, on the other hand, if it is wrong, then the smallest instalment of justice that can reasonably be asked for is the cessation of this wrong—a full measure of justice would require more at the hands of the wrongdoers.

That no greater demand has yet been made shows great clemency on the part of those who have so long and so grievously suffered from the evil effects of landlordism; and if the question is to be considered at all, the claim ought to be made on behalf of the wronged, and not the wrongdoers, even although their wrongdoing may have been quite unintentional. In this matter of compensation to landholders we believe, as Emerson believed, in ransom for the slaves:—

Pay ransom to the owner,
And fill the bag to the brim.
Who is the owner? The slave is owner,
And ever was—pay him.

The idea that seems to underlie and give strength to the wish for some form of compensation, is that because we have allowed private ownership of land to pass so long unchallenged, that many people, never dreaming of any change arising, have purchased land with their own earnings, or with property otherwise rightfully acquired, and it will be doing an injustice to them if we by law deprive them of the income arising from these investments.

What is it that purchasers of land which they do not intend to use themselves, really buy? The essence of landlordism consists in the power it gives to the landholder of exacting a share of the proceeds of industry from those who desire to use land, as the price of permission to use it. It is this power which the law gives them of levying a tax upon land users which makes land ownership profitable, and it is this that is really bought and sold.

Land is of no value to the mere owner, as such, until someone wants to use it—and then its value is in proportion to what inclination

prompts or necessity compels would-be users to offer as the price of permission to use it.

As to the plea that landlordism would be more speedily and surely swept away by a scheme of State Purchase, it is more than questionable that this would be so. Any such scheme would be very costly, cumbrous to carry out, and would, if carried, entail an enormous amount of trouble in management afterwards. What difference will it be to the workers whether heavy toll is taken from their earnings in the shape of rent, or of interest on State bonds paid to landholders as compensation for loss of revenues from rent. The pressure of the burden might be rendered less irksome, but they would still have to carry the load.

In attempting to right this great wrong justice ought to be the guiding principle, and although expediency may suggest compromise, let us not forget the dictum of a great writer—“In Justice is the highest and truest expediency.” And the warning uttered at a great crisis in American history may still appeal to us:—

Amid the market's din
List the ominous stern whisper from the Delphic cave within:
They enslave their children's children who make compromise with sin.

All that land nationalisers expect to gain by State purchase of land, can be much more easily, effectually, and equitably secured by the Taxation of Land Values. Those who maintain otherwise surely have not given sufficient attention to the matter, or they could not fail to be convinced of the simplicity, practicability, effectualness, and, above all, the justness of the remedy advocated by Single Taxers.

It is sometimes said that it is simply confiscation we advocate, but here our critics deceive themselves and blind others to the truth. We do not propose to confiscate anything. Our proposal is to gradually put a stop to the wholesale appropriation of public property by individuals which is at present going on sanctioned and supported by unjust laws. Our desire is to secure to individuals all that justly belongs to them, and also to prevent individuals taking that which does not belong to them but to the community as a whole.

After deducting from the gross rental the value of all separable improvements in or on the land, the value which is left is what we call economic rent, or land values, or, in other words, the price which users agree to pay as the price of permission to use land. These land values are not created either by the individual owners or users, but are due to the natural inherent capabilities of the land, the presence of population, and the combined energy, industry, growth, and general social progress of the community. So that the wealth which we wish to divert into the public treasury, is really common property, which certain privileged individuals are now by law allowed to intercept for their own private use.

The power of landlordism to rob and harass industry would crumble into nothingness under the pressure of the Single Tax. From the first turn of the screw its effect would be apparent. Land held out of use, or not put to its best use, would become an expensive luxury, and, as the tax was increased, landholders would be more and more anxious to get their land put to use, until at last no one would seek to own land unless to use it. Thus use, or occupancy, of land would gradually become the only form of tenure, and private ownership in land cease to be.

Long before this desirable consummation had been reached, all men would be conscious that a great revolution was in progress, rents would fall, wages rise, taxation grow less and less, trade flourish, and a new era of industrial and social prosperity set in.

Our faith is strong in the belief that to do as we purpose, namely, take in the form of a tax and apply to common uses the whole economic rent of land, would effectually assert natural rights to land and obtain all the benefits which would naturally accrue from common ownership.

Thereby we would provide equality of opportunity for all, and secure to each the enjoyment of the full fruits of their labour, thus ensuring a free and natural distribution of wealth, extirpating poverty and the evils it engenders, and generally pave the way for the firm establishment of juster and happier social conditions of life for all than those which at present prevail.

A "Progressive" Vote at the Glasgow Town Council.

On Thursday, 18th February, the members of the Glasgow Town Council were called upon to elect a Magistrate for the City in room of Bailie Paton, deceased. There were two candidates—Councillor Steele, the reformer and Land Value Taxation supporter, and Councillor Morris Carswell, one of the most bitter reactionaries and most persistent opponents to the cause of Taxing Land Values. The division was as follows:—

FOR CARSWELL.

Bailie Dick.	Councillor Finlay.
R. Anderson.	Murdoch.
Cleland.	Sorley.
Thomson.	Hutchison.
Jack.	Walker.
Deacon-Convener Ramsay.	Wallace.
Dep. River Bailie Cutlibert.	M'Farlane.
Councillor Cronin.	A. Brown.
Boyd Brown.	Dallas.
M'Lennan.	Pettigrew.
Ferguson.	P. G. Stewart.
Maxwell.	W. Stevenson.
G. Mitchell.	Shearer.
D. Willox.	Primrose.
Martin.	Paton.
Cunningham.	Maclay.
Cochran.	M. Carswell.
Main.	R. M. Mitchell.
Dougan.	Kerr.
R. Browne.	R. Graham.

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FOR STEELE.

Bailie Chisholm.	Councillor Morrin.
Murray.	N. Thomson.
Sinclair.	Dunlop.
M'Cutcheon.	Bisland.
Hunter.	Alexander.
M'Phun.	Robertson.
Battersby.	Dr. Carswell.
River Bailie Anderson.	D. M. Stevenson.
Councillor Willock.	Sandilands.
Hamilton.	Calderwood.
Dunn.	Garey.
King.	Oatts.

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Declined to vote—Councillors Breechin and Steele—2.
Absent—Lord Provost: Bailie Fife; Councillors A. Osborne, T. Watson, T. Guthrie, J. H. Dickson, R. Paterson, Gray, and J. W. Dick; Dean of Guild; Treasurer Colquhoun—11.

Why this Tory vote on the part of the “Stalwarts,” excluding the “wobblers,” for the opponent, as against the friend of reform? Councillor Steele is recognised as a reformer inside and outside the Council. He supported Ex-Bailie Burt's straight motion, carried on the 5th October last—to present a petition to Parliament in favour of making Land Values the basis of the city's taxation. Councillor Morris Carswell opposed it. He has opposed this reform all along. Yet we find such men as Bailie Jack, Councillors Cronin, Boyd Brown, Ferguson, Shaw Maxwell, G. Mitchell, Cochran, Dougan, R. Browne, and P. G. Stewart, who get credit for being the most pronounced advocates of social reform, throwing in their lot to give place and power to a man who has always bitterly opposed their interest, when they had the alternative of supporting a tried and trusted reformer.

In his “manifesto to the electors” in November last, Councillor Ferguson wrote down Councillor Carswell as “a consistent municipal Tory,” who, in eight different divisions on questions affecting the “workers,” voted against their interests.

Whence this change of front? Mr. Ferguson threatened “he would change their convictions or their seats.” Does this mean that they are to be made magistrates, or does it mean—well, what does it mean?

Given a race of human beings having like claims to pursue the objects of their desires—given a world adapted to the gratification of those desires—a world into which such beings are similarly born, and it unavoidably follows that they have equal rights to the use of this world. For if each of them “has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other,” then each of them is free to use the earth for the satisfaction of his wants, provided he allows all others the same liberty. And conversely, it is manifest that no one, or part of them, may use the earth in such a way as to prevent the rest from similarly using it, seeing that to do this is to assume greater freedom than the rest, and consequently to break the law.—Herbert Spencer.

“Are you in favour of Taxing Land Values?”