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THIS DISCONTENTED WORLD

Freedom—the Way to Peace and Prosperity

*Presidential Address by the Hon. Charles O'Connor Hennessy at the Fifth International Conference
for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade.*

Again I am grateful for the honour of sounding the keynote of an international gathering of the followers of Henry George, assembled here to discuss the most vital problems that may concern the welfare and happiness of the human family.

We would not be candid with ourselves or with those beyond our circle who may interest themselves in what we say or do here, if we did not at the outset express the feeling that since our last assembly at Edinburgh, seven years ago, world affairs have taken on a much darker hue. To-day we perceive few bright and happy omens in the international landscape. Indeed, the prospect of the coming of a world in which men and women may live normal and happy lives in an atmosphere of enduring peace, seems at this time more distant than at any time in our memory.

We find disturbed, distressed, confused and discontented populations on every side. We seem to witness fear and instability in the policies of some great Governments. We see the abandonment by other Governments of any regard for popular sovereignty and those civil liberties upon which democracies have in the past relied. Since 1929 we have witnessed the extension of the rule of dictatorships over the lives and fortunes of many millions of human beings. We have seen the insidious growth, in even normally democratic countries, of State policies of regulation and regimentation, of commodity price fixing and wage fixing, that destroy liberty while hampering the beneficent operation of natural law in the economic world. We note the piling up of vast public debts and burdens of taxation unparalleled in any previous period of peace. We witness the increasing tendency in all nations toward selfish policies of trade restriction in the interest of privileged groups within national boundaries—policies that increase the cost of living to the common man in every country, while fomenting international ill will through the strangulation of commerce, that has ever been the natural agent of understanding and friendship between peoples.

We find the League of Nations, which was the hope of men of good will and high idealism, to be now a shattered wreck, perhaps beyond the hope of rebuilding again into any practical instrumentality for conserving the peace of the world. Again we see the nations, arming feverishly for destruction, having abandoned the concept of collective common counsel for peace to resume the evil system of strategic alliances for war.

We are not here to assess the blame for this real catastrophe in human history. Events with which we are all familiar have brought about a situation where the noble Covenant of the League of Nations designed for the establishment and maintenance of peace through the counsels of prudence and justice, has now passed into the discard where lie the sad remains of shamefully broken treaties and violated covenants. It seems idle any longer to appeal at Geneva to the spirit of good will and neighbourliness that has so often of late been invoked with more or less sincerity by the leaders of

governments. It would indeed seem that until nations can be re-born—born again of a new vision and spirit, even as was told to Nicodemus in the Bible story, men will no longer maintain faith in the making of treaties, however solemnly entered into, when they have so recently witnessed the most explicit engagements of nations cast to the wind, when cynical political leaders wished to be relieved of the danger or inconvenience of keeping the plighted word.

And so with the illusion of disarmament which has engaged the interest and the efforts of so many good men and women enrolled in the peace societies of the world. There has been no genuine approach to peace nor any disarmament of nations, but quite the contrary. We have seen the carrying on of a constant and intensified economic war between nations, while fearful instruments of destruction upon the land, on the sea, and in the air, have been multiplied and magnified beyond any records of the past. It is not remarkable, then, that men of vision and sober judgment in many parts of the world have of late expressed the conviction that the tendencies of our time, political as well as economic, exhibit what Lord Robert Cecil the other day described as "the accelerating drift toward another world catastrophe."

Just before I left New York, Dr Nicholas Murray Butler, President of Columbia University, having returned from a European survey to report to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, of which he is the head, declared that something must be done at once to deal with the impending crisis in world affairs. He advocated the calling by the United States Government of a world parley upon the international economic situation. He found perverted economic policies at the base of the world's troubles. One practical method that he saw to prevent a world breakdown and possible war was to cause trade to expand in a normal way, so that confidence might be restored to the capital and credit markets of the world, and normal purchasing power to now dependent and impoverished populations.

Plausible as must seem the remedy proposed by Dr Butler, there seems but the slightest ground for believing either that his proposal would be accepted by the United States Government, or that any Conference so proposed would be likely to end in the adoption by the nations of policies of international freedom of trade. We recall that nine years ago at Geneva, at the call of the League of Nations, representatives of 50 nations gathered in an Economic Conference, seeking to remove the economic causes of war while promoting the improvement of trade conditions within the nations. After weeks of deliberation, that notable gathering found no difficulty in arriving at a practically unanimous conclusion as to the causes of world-wide industrial depression and the economic sources of international ill will. M. Theunis, then Foreign Minister of Belgium, who drafted a review of the undisputed findings of the

Conference, used language very like that which Dr Butler is using to-day :

"The main trouble now," wrote M. Theunis, "is neither any material shortage of the resources of nature, nor any inadequacy in man's power to exploit them. It is all, in one form or another, a maladjustment—not an insufficient productive capacity, but a series of impediments to the full utilization of that capacity. The main obstacles to economic revival have been the hindrances opposed to the free flow of labour, of capital, and of goods."

But beyond the making of this accurate diagnosis of the causes of the world's illness, nothing was accomplished by that gathering of the economic physicians at Geneva. The hindrances to freedom of commerce, which were then discovered by the representatives of 50 nations, remain still to afflict the world, but magnified in intensity since that Conference by the extremes of nationalistic tendencies, and the delusions of national self-sufficiency that have characterized the statesmanship of most of the great nations.

With some satisfaction we may recall that at that Economic Conference in Geneva this International Union of ours presented a notable Memorandum, printed in a number of European languages, wherein we emphasized the growing need and increasing significance of free intercourse and trade between nations, because the economic interdependence of peoples was now greater than ever before. The division of labour, we pointed out, had long transcended national boundaries and had become the economic basis of civilized life, so that, as it appeared to us, it had become the duty of Governments to now reconcile the legitimate claims of nationalism with the economic internationalism which has grown up almost in spite of them.

We then pointed out that true free trade involved the establishment of internal policies in every nation that would ensure to the people the destruction of the private monopoly of land and natural resources, so that freedom and justice might be established in the production and distribution of wealth. The impoverishment of peoples, the growth of unemployment, the reduction of wages, the gross inequalities in the distribution of wealth had given rise in all countries, we pointed out, to problems of more than national importance. A state of mind had been created among the masses which served to threaten internal strife and instability of Governments. This truth of our message to Geneva nine years ago is now finding a terrible illustration in the savage civil war being waged in Spain, with its excesses of bitterness and cruelty unparalleled since the French Revolution. Thoughtful students of world affairs must recognize in this Spanish strife a war between economic classes, those of a Government on the one hand pledged to abolish ancient privileges of the few in the interest of greater economic opportunity for the many; and on the other hand those who would restore and preserve those privileges. That an age-old monopoly by a powerful few of the land of the country upon which the many must depend for subsistence is one of the major causes of this terrible struggle in Spain cannot, I believe, be questioned by any fair student of the situation. That the significance of the terrible struggle in Spain transcends the boundaries of that country must be obvious to those who have noted through the Press the trend of the expressions of public sympathy for one side or the other in the Spanish conflict, as revealed in the news columns of the leading newspapers of the world. The struggle of classes in Spain is but a sign and a symbol of what is smouldering beneath the surface of human society in many of the

Henry George, with marvellous prevision, in *Progress and Poverty*, published more than half a century ago, delineated in prophecy much that is happening in the world to-day :—

"It is the delusion which precedes destruction," he wrote, "that sees in the popular unrest with which the civilized world is feverishly pulsing only the passing effect of ephemeral causes. . . . We cannot go on prating of the inalienable rights of man and then denying the inalienable right to the bounty of the Creator. Even now in the old bottles the new wine begins to ferment and elemental forces gather for the strife! . . . In our time, as in times before, creep on the insidious forces that producing inequality, destroy liberty. On the horizon clouds begin to lower. Liberty calls to us again. We must follow her further. We must trust her fully. Either we must wholly accept her or she will not stay. . . . But if while there is yet time we return to Justice and obey her, if we trust Liberty and follow her, the dangers that now threaten must disappear, the forces that now menace will turn to agencies of elevation."

It seems plain to us that until men within national boundaries are set free by access to natural opportunities through the destruction of land monopoly, and the reduction of tax burdens that bear so heavily on labour and its earnings, we cannot expect enduring peace at home in any land; nor until the manifold obstructions to freedom of trade between nations are done away with, can we expect enduring peace either within nations or between them. Governments will best serve their own people and the world when they learn to limit their chief functions to the establishment of the concepts of orderly justice and freedom. The legitimate concern of Governments everywhere should, in our view, be not in doing things for people but in setting people free, under equality of right and opportunity, to do things for themselves; where honest toil and its just rewards will be opened to all, and where the intellectual and spiritual emancipation of mankind may grow to glorious attainments in an atmosphere that, in the language of Henry George, "*will make war the possibility of a past age and turn to works of usefulness the enormous forces now dedicated to destruction.*"

Before we enter into the discussion of the fine programme that has been prepared for this Conference, let me restate the objects of our organization, which are to stimulate in all countries a public opinion favourable to permanent peace and prosperity for all peoples through the progressive removal of the economic causes of poverty and of war. We aim to change men's opinions and guide them to the true road that leads to social regeneration and peace for all peoples. We fervently believe and would earnestly commend to our fellow-men in all lands our deeply felt conviction that, in the inspired teachings of Henry George, a troubled world may find the unerring way to that peace and prosperity for which the true lovers of our common humanity so fervently hope and pray.

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