

AGRICULTURAL POLICY

A Letter by Mr Arthur R. McDougal, of Blythe, Lauder, in the "Scottish Farmer," of 7th December

MR HUDSON'S and Mr Brown's statements on farming policy still ignore the crux of the whole problem, by evading the whole issue of land tenure.

(1) *Rent*.—What is the use of fixing prices and controlling everything whilst rents are left uncontrolled? The ultimate result of this will be that on the better lands increased rents and prices of farms will soon absorb any benefits, and the cry for higher prices will start again. The most vicious spiral of all is now starting, viz., that of increased prices followed by increased rent. The raising of rent must be prohibited for the duration of the war and five years after.

(2) *Eviction for Bad Farming*.—This is quite right—but it is useless to evict a bad farmer unless the Agricultural Executive Committee has power to choose a better. If the choice be left to the landlord, he, or his lawyers, will mostly take the highest offerer regardless of his qualifications, either as regards ability or capital, so long as they have security for the rent. Excessive rent is a root cause of bad farming. The Department of Agriculture should have power to fix a maximum rent and to veto any tenant. This would ensure getting a qualified tenant at a rent at which he could farm.

(3) *Liquidation of Bad Landlord*.—Further, what is the use of putting a new tenant, however good, into a farm that the landlords have neglected for 40 years, and in which the drains, fences and buildings are obsolete and semi-derelict? If it is right to evict a tenant for bad farming, then it is equally right and necessary to liquidate a landlord who refuses to put the permanent equipment right. For every acre badly farmed, there are 1,000 acres badly owned and neglected by the owner. The Department of Agriculture should have power to order the compulsory sale of any farm or estate where the owner has neglected its upkeep and refuses to remedy his neglect. The existence of mortgages is no excuse. Where land is excessively mortgaged, say beyond one-half of its value, it should, except in case of an occupying owner, be sold up compulsorily.

(4) *Heather Burning*.—The regulations are right to a point, but they are needlessly complicated. We are at war. Food is paramount. Therefore the farmer should have complete control of heather burning with no complications or reservations except military ones. Any ignorant city profiteer can buy a hill estate and can burn as he likes, but a farmer who has lived on and farmed it for a lifetime apparently cannot be trusted with similar powers. What a commentary on our subservience to the game preserver and feudal landlordism when not even a desperate struggle for existence can induce our rulers to put farming first and shooting interests second!

(5) *Drains, Fences and Buildings*.—The stress on renovating drains, fences and buildings is right, but there seems a tendency to thrust the liability on to the tenant. In spite of the clause in most leases which the tenant is compelled to sign whereby the tenant "accepts drains, fences and buildings as in good order and undertakes to maintain them as such," the tenant is not liable for wholesale renewals rendered necessary by natural decay. In many cases these were very bad when he entered the tenancy.

The liability for permanent equipment lies with the landlord, and the Government must take the matter up properly and compel owners to put their equipment right in exactly the same way as they compel farmers to plough and farm properly. These landlord's obligations have been shockingly neglected in the past; and the thousands of acres of good land damaged by long since derelict drains, 60 to 80 years old and more, are simply the legacy of a policy of rackrent and spend nothing, which has been all too universal in the past.

(6) *Credit*.—Credit is the one thing which is no remedy. Farmers and landlords have been ruined by too easy credits in the past, and the fact that landlords or tenants require more credits points to the fact that there is some untreated cause for this need. The causes have been as shown above

—rackrent and absenteeism and reckless mortgaging on the landlord's part and rackrent and inefficiency on the tenant's part, accompanied by the dilemma of the tenants having been caught out with long leases at high rents contracted in the boom.

The sudden slump in 1930-32, inevitably, through no fault of the tenant as a farmer, caused severe financial stress. The remedy is not credit, but altered conditions that will make a recurrence impossible. This entails security of tenure for the war and five years after, accompanied by prohibition of rent raising.

In conclusion, the only object is increased food production; and in its achievement the Government must deal drastically with every obstacle. Mere price fixing and subsidies are not enough. Finally, it must make up its mind that if food production is to come first, then the farmer and agriculture must come before the shooting interests, feudal privileges of the landowner and the mortgage-holder. So far, farming still takes a second place.

LAMARTINE ON PROPERTY

ON 21st October and following days wireless listeners who happened to tune-in to any Vichy station might have been surprised to find broadcast so many ceremonies and appreciations marking the 150th anniversary of the birth of Alphonse de Lamartine. Lamartine who, in 1848, saved the Tricolour, restored "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité" as the insignia of France, and founded the democratic Second Republic which might have led the world in social reform.

The Vichy authorities were no doubt wise in their own interest to refrain from any attempt to suppress commemoration of so great a Frenchman. It was easy enough, by appreciations of the poetry and oratory of such a great poet and orator, to divert attention from the social labours of one who regarded his genius so frankly as the servant of social duty. It would have been more appropriate at the present time to recall his words:

"Social labour is the daily and obligatory task of every man who shares the dangers and benefits of society. . . . When the divine Judge summons us before the court of our conscience, at the end of our short journey here below, our modesty and our weakness will be no excuse for our inaction. It will be useless for us to reply, 'We were nothing, we could do nothing, we were merely one grain of sand.' He will say to us, 'I placed before you, in your time, the two basins of the scales in which the destiny of humanity was weighed: in one was good, in the other was evil. No doubt you were only a grain of sand; but who could tell you that that every grain of sand might not have turned the scale on My side? You had intelligence to see and a conscience to choose, you should have placed that grain of sand on one side or the other; but you placed it on neither side; let the wind carry it away! it has proved useless to yourself or to your brethren.'"

Lamartine did not live to read *Progress and Poverty* (he died in 1869) but he has recorded his conviction, at a time when political economists and democrats were most confident of progress, that the economists had missed some fundamental basis of their science, and that the mere granting of the franchise to men enbruted by poverty and ignorance involved terrible dangers. "The numerous class of the proletariat passed unnoticed in theocratic, despotic and aristocratic governments, where that class lived in the shelter of the power possessing the soil; and in that power's patronage had at least a guarantee of subsistence. To-day that class is left to itself . . . and is in a worse condition than it has ever been. It has acquired barren political rights and has not the necessities of life. It will uproot society until socialism supercedes individualism grown odious. . . . True political charity would say to the property owner: 'You will keep your property; for, despite that pretty dream of community of goods, property appears hitherto the *sine qua non* of society—without it there is no family, no work, no civilization.' But charity would say also, 'You will not forget that property rights are not established just for you alone, but for all mankind; you will possess property only under conditions of justice, utility and access for all. . . . That is justice and sound politics, which are one and the same.'"

—FRANK DUPUIS.