

LANDHOLDERS' RIGHTS AND DUTIES

The right of the individual to his full and proper wages cannot be seriously questioned. To enable him to secure it two things are essential, firstly he must have access to land, and secondly he must have security of tenure so that he may lay his plans ahead and enjoy the fruits of his effort.

At the same time, if the rights of his fellows are to be secured every landholder must duly pay the full rent of his land into the public fund and must maintain his land in good condition. Subject to these conditions he should have the right of access to any free land, and once he takes possession he should have security in the holding. This does not mean, of course, that every man will have five acres and a cow. In many occupations men require but little land. For very many a desk in an office or a bench in a factory is the total individual requirement. How much land is needed depends entirely on the nature of the industry.

With the twin obligations—of paying the full rent and keeping the land in good condition—attaching to land-holding, no man would retain more land than he could usefully occupy. This would mean that in every country where this condition prevailed there would be an abundance of land of every kind available for use when required.

Not unnaturally, men would move to the land best suited for their own requirements. In England all those towns and smaller communities which the actions of land enclosing and of industrial monopolies have closed or drastically reduced would come back into their own. All the idle coal seams, tin and iron deposits, the timber land and agricultural land, the water power and other bounteous resources of this land which are now closed against use would become available. The operation of shutting down upon industries of every kind has driven men into the bigger cities in search of work and has caused these towns to sprawl out to a hideous size, despoiling vast tracts of country. The opening up of all idle land and the compelling of the full and adequate use of half-used land must reverse this process.

To the individual this would mean that he need no longer fear competition for work and would have a wide choice as to where and how to live. Under such conditions wages must rise until they have taken back all the wealth that is now taken by the speculative inflation of rent. Wages would further gain benefit from the improved production which must result. At the same time, the less valuable land would become open to all for the enjoyment of their leisure hours. There would be no more difficulties about green belts and open spaces. The best land would be used and used well, population would shift to those areas where natural resources were most inviting and a much more even distribution of the population must result.

A landholder has not merely his duties to the public to fulfil; he must also observe his obligations to his neighbours. A man's right to the full product of his labour can be denied if his neighbour's holding is used to the detriment of surrounding land. Clearly no-one should be permitted to use his land so as to prevent his neighbours from enjoying the full benefit of theirs. He must not, for instance, build a tannery in a residential district.

It is interesting to observe to what great extent the enforcement of the public right to rent will ensure that this does not happen. If a tannery is built in a residential area the value of the surrounding land will be very seriously reduced. This must mean a loss of rent to the public purse. If the Government requires the tannery owner to make good this loss he will very quickly close down. Indeed, with the foreknowledge that this will be the inevitable result the tannery would never open.

This is an extreme case. A man may reduce the value of his own and surrounding land by an inappropriate or inadequate development. There are very many buildings in London today which actually reduce the value of the land on which they stand and adversely affect the neighbouring units. If such reduction of value were recovered as a matter of course by the Government, this would quickly stop inadequate or inappropriate development.

It is not being asserted that this measure of recovery from landholders of loss of rent caused by the use they make of their land would remove the necessity for other provisions to secure the best use of land. Clearly much is to be gained in urban areas from forethought in the laying out of streets, the creation of parks and recreation grounds, the disposition of public buildings and the development of transport and other public services. Other measures will readily spring to the mind of anyone who gives thought to the matter. Were the rent collected by the authority, then, instead of improvements costing the taxpayer crippling sums, bad use of land would cost the authority the resulting loss of rent. The immediate financial interest of the public authority, therefore, would impel it to do

everything necessary to ensure that land was not so used as to detract from the efficiency and amenities of the district under its control.

Such a condition would inevitably benefit all by preventing individuals in search of private gain from obstructing their neighbours in the full use and benefit of their holdings. More than this, it would ensure the maximum development of public services consistent with the requirements of those using them.

To sum up, the rights of the individual in respect of land are as follows :—First, he may have access on request to any vacant land subject to the fulfilment of his duties to pay the rent and maintain the land in good condition. For this purpose a land registry, such as the one now in existence, could be used and the holder's title to possession could be evidenced by a land registry certificate. Secondly, the landholder in possession may use his land as he pleases, provided he does not reduce its value or the value of the surrounding land or in any way cause a nuisance to his neighbours, and provided he conforms to the general regulations which the authority may make to secure that the possession of land is not abused. Thirdly, he may challenge the rent charged against him if the valuation does not conform to the principles laid down for its assessment, and he may have access to a land map showing the values set on all parcels of land for the current rent period. Fourthly, he may, by action in the Courts, restrain his neighbours from so using their land as to infringe his rights on his land. Fifthly, he may remain in possession of his land indefinitely except in those special cases where the public authority requires the land for one or other of the public services. Lastly, he will have an absolute property right in any improvements he makes in or puts upon his land. In the event of the public authority requiring his land for one of the public services, he shall be entitled to compensation for any improvements on his land at their full market value, and compensation for the cost to which he is put by moving to another site.

These principles would lay the foundation for real freedom which would extend to all members of the community. Life begins on the land, and unless a man's rights and duties in respect of land conform to the principles of justice, poverty and insecurity must result. As has been seen before, private property in land is a denial of the fundamental rights and duties of men in respect of land, but security of possession is an essential requirement for individual freedom. The citizen's home should be his castle, and his place of work should be free from invasion, provided always that he does not use these possessions to the damage of others.

Under such a condition there will be ample land of every kind to spare. Men can always find employment on land, and under such conditions unemployment could not exist. The struggle for work which holds wages down would cease and wages would rise to their true level, each man being able to demand his full value, that is to say, all that he could produce for himself as his own master on the best land open to use. Again, the speculation in land, which consists of the withholding of land, would be impossible. Quite contrary to the effect produced by the withholding of land, production would be maintained at its maximum. The result would be that those unhealthy booms engendered by restrictions in production could not take place and the industrial slump which must follow these booms would be a thing of the past. Yet again, the heavy and crippling burden of taxation which is now borne by industry would be unnecessary and could be removed. This in itself would cause a rise in production to the benefit of all.

These conditions would lay the foundation of a truly healthy society and would make possible the fulfilment of all the principles of justice which rest upon the fundamental truth that every man has an equal right to live. What further and other measures are necessary to secure to every man the full reward for his labour will be discussed in the second part of this book. This much, however, is certain—no other measures can be of avail where human relations in respect of land are based on false conceptions.