

MR PHILIP SNOWDEN, M.P.

ON

LAND VALUE TAXATION



THE RIGHT HON. PHILIP SNOWDEN, M.P.

*(Chancellor of the Exchequer in
the Labour Government, 1924)*

SPEECHES

IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AND
AT HANLEY ; AND OTHER DECLARATIONS

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Mr Philip Snowden, M.P.,
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HOUSE OF COMMONS FINANCE
BILL—SECOND READING *

(5th June, 1928)

The Second Reading of the Bill having been moved—

MR PHILIP SNOWDEN: I beg to move, to leave out from the word "That" to the end of the Question and to add instead thereof the words:—

"this House declines to assent to the Second Reading of a Bill which gives no relief in the heavy burden of taxation borne by the wage-earning class, imposes new indirect taxes, and proposes to raise revenue from national taxation for the relief from local rates of a particular class, irrespective of individual need, instead of promoting a fundamental reform of the rating system by levying rates upon site values which are created by the industry and enterprise of the community."

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The outstanding feature of the Budget this year is the rating proposal, which was adumbrated at considerable length in the Budget speech of the Chancellor of the Exchequer; but the Finance Bill is only concerned with providing the revenue under this scheme to compensate the local authorities for the loss of rates by the de-rating of certain properties.

I propose this afternoon to confine my observations to the principles of local rating. I think there is general agreement; indeed, I think there are no differences of opinion, as to the need for the reform of our chaotic local rating system. It is out of date, and it is altogether inapplicable to modern conditions, especially modern industrial conditions. I also venture to submit

* This extract from Mr Snowden's speech is reprinted from the *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 218, No. 72, 5th June, 1928.

the view, which perhaps will not be so generally shared, that it is not the amount of the rates which constitutes the burden, but the wrong method of assessment and the unfair incidence of the rates.

The revenue to be raised by this Finance Bill and to be handed over to the local authorities is not likely to lessen in the least degree, but is much more likely to aggravate the existing evils, inequalities, and injustices of local finance. This proposal means, simply, taking money out of the pockets of one class of people in order to put it into the hands of others. The proposal of the Finance Bill is to raise this revenue mainly by a Petrol Duty.

The Chancellor tried to justify this Petrol Duty by pointing out that the price of petrol to-day is cheaper than it was a year or two years ago. Surely that is no reason why he should put a tax upon it and increase its price. He ought to have welcomed that decrease in the price of petrol, as an aid to production and a stimulus to trade; instead, he has made the cost of the article dearer by this imposition.

[Having made a searching and critical reference to the new tariff on petrol, Mr Snowden continued] :—

It has been stated that the declared purpose of the plan of rate relief suggested by the Chancellor of the Exchequer is to encourage production, but you are only increasing the cost of production by such methods as those which I have described.

There are many other objections to the Petrol Duty which might be urged, but I think I have said sufficient to show that it is an unsound and an unjustifiable tax. It was stated last week at the annual congress of the Co-operative Societies that the Petrol Duty would cost Co-operative Societies £250,000 a year extra for the running of their vehicles. . . . Of course, they will have the satisfaction of knowing that they will have to pay £250,000 a year extra for petrol, while, according to a statement made by the right hon. Gentleman the Member for Carmarthen (Sir A. Mond), in the course of the Budget Debate, the Imperial Chemical Industries will gain some £200,000 a year. Therefore, the Co-operative Societies may find a certain amount of satisfaction from the fact that what is being done will add to

the £4,000,000 profit made by the Imperial Chemical Industries.

Nobody knows better than the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is going to be the ultimate effect of the change which is proposed by this scheme. It cannot be more than a temporary relief, and this form of relief—it is no use denying it—must sooner or later pass on to the rent, and will therefore become an addition to the income of the ground landlord and those who take rent from property.

You can have no relief of the rates so long as you allow land values to be appropriated by private individuals. All forms of relief of this kind go back to the landlords in the shape of land values.

“A portion, in some cases the whole, of every benefit which is laboriously acquired by the community, is represented in the land value and finds its way automatically into the landlord's pocket. If there is a rise in wages, rents are able to move forward, because the workers can afford to pay a little more. If the opening of a new railway or a new tramway or the institution of an improved service of workmen's trains or a lowering of fares or a new invention or any other public convenience affords a benefit to the workers in any particular district, it becomes easier for them to live, and therefore the landlord and the ground landlord, one on top of the other, are able to charge them more for the privilege of living there.”

I gather from the smile on the face of the Chancellor of the Exchequer that he recognizes that quotation, and I can appeal to no greater authority; I certainly could not put my case to the House of Commons in a more eloquent form than the Chancellor of the Exchequer has done. The price that the landlord is able to exact for the use of these privileges is determined by a number of considerations. First of all, the price is determined by the extent of the need of the people, the amount of land they require, and the population. As a matter of fact, every child born adds to the rent of the landlord. The more people you have living on the land, the more the ground landlord is able to take from the community for the privilege of living on the land. Every scientific advance, every machine improvement, everything that adds to productive power, finds

ultimately its place in the rent that the landowner is able to take.

It is the same with regard to transport. Every improvement in transport services raises land values. We see it going on everywhere, not only here in London and around London, but, now that motor omnibus services have covered the whole country, you find, alongside the roads on which you travel, on agricultural land which is at present relieved of 75 per cent. of its rates and which next year is to be relieved of the whole of its rates, these notice boards :

“Eligible land for building purposes” ;

and, if you inquire the price of it, you find that it is not the agricultural value of the land that is asked, but 10, 20, 50, or even 100 times the value that could have been obtained for the land a few years ago. May I appeal again to a high authority :

“It does not matter where you look, or what examples you select, you will see that every form of enterprise, every step in material progress, is only undertaken after the land monopolist has skimmed the cream off for himself. Everywhere to-day the man or the public body who wishes to put land to its highest use is forced to pay a preliminary fine in land values to the man who is putting it, not to an increased use, but, in some cases, to no use at all.”

That is the opinion of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

These instances of land values created by public expenditure for the needs of the community are well known to everyone. Less than two years ago the Corporation of Liverpool, anxious to carry out a street improvement, had to pay at the rate of £1,500,000 an acre for land. Every penny of that value had been created for the population by the industry and enterprise of the City of Liverpool. Again, take Sheffield, a city which is groaning under the burden of excessive local rates to-day. They wanted land for a school, and they had to pay 820 years' purchase on the rateable value of the land. They wanted to widen a street, and they had to pay 846 years' purchase upon the rateable value of the land. With regard to housing, I have here a case from South Shields. There were $9\frac{1}{2}$ acres of agricultural land just developed for building purposes.

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Sixty houses have been put on that site, and they are paying in ground rent £432 a year, yet before that land was needed for housing purposes its annual income was £38.

I daresay Members of the House will recollect a speech made by a former Tory Minister, whom I remember very well. His name used to be Sir Albert Stanley, and he is now Lord Ashfield, the Chairman of the London Underground Railways. They recently made an extension, as hon. Members know, out at Edgware, and he was complaining of the difficulty of getting the population out there, because the land-owners there were holding up the land until they could get a higher price for it. Let us have the views of the Chancellor of the Exchequer on that. Taking the case to which I have already referred, he said :

"There is the man who keeps a large plot in or near a growing town idle for years while it is ripening, that is to say, while it is rising in price through the exertions of the surrounding community and the need of the community for more room to live. I daresay you have formed your own opinion upon it. The Conservative Party generally think that it is an admirable arrangement. They speak of the profits of land and the land monopolist as if they were the fruits of thrift and industry, and a pleasing example for the poorer classes to imitate. We do not take that view of the question. We think it is a dog-in-the-manger policy. We see the imposture upon the public, and we see the consequences in crowded slums, in hampered commerce, in distorted or restricted development, and congested centres of population, and we say here and now to the land monopolist who is holding up his land—you shall judge for yourselves whether it is a fair offer or not—we say, to the land monopolist, 'This property of yours might be put to immediate use with general advantage. It is at this moment saleable in the market at 10 times the value at which it is rated. If you choose to keep it idle in the expectation of still further unearned increment, then at least you shall be taxed on the true selling-value'."

That is the opinion, that is the conviction, of the Chancellor of the Exchequer; and what is he doing? Is he saying that to the land monopolist? No. He is saying to him, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. You are only paying 25 per cent of a small

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rate on a very small assessment now. I will relieve you of rates altogether, and let you go on until this land has received an enormous further advance in value."

What is the value of the sites of this country? I do not know—no one knows. We have not even an approximate estimate, but, at any rate, we can form some idea from those countries where they have accurate estimates of site values. Take New Zealand. In the last 47 years, the site value in New Zealand has increased from £62,000,000 to £339,000,000; in other words, from £129 per head of the population to £241 per head of the population. I do not think the average in this country would be as high as in New Zealand. If it were, the land values in this country would be worth £10,000,000,000. Even if it were £5,000,000,000, hon. Members can do a little simple sum in arithmetic and estimate what the annual income would be if the site values were rated, say, at 4d. or 5d. in the £.

The City Corporation of Sydney, New South Wales, a few months ago raised a loan in the London market, and there were some very interesting statements in the prospectus. There the local rates are levied upon the undeveloped capital value of the land. This prospectus stated that the total capital value of the City of Sydney was £61,500,000, and the average annual value about £8,000,000. All the local rates raised by the Corporation of Sydney are raised by a tax on site values. There is an addition of a water rate, and, I think, there is a drainage rate. The main services, such as police and education, are State charges in New South Wales, but a rate of 3½d. in the £ raises the whole of the strictly municipal expenditure of the City of Sydney. What has been the effect? During the time that this system has been in operation, that is, during the last 15 years, the population of Sydney has risen from 500,000 to over 1,000,000. This system operates all over our Dominions, and in some Continental countries, particularly and very successfully in Denmark, and, as the right hon. Gentleman says, throughout Europe the systems of land tenure are far superior to our own.

Instead of the scheme for which financial provision

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has been made in this Bill, I wish that the Chancellor of the Exchequer had had the courage of his convictions. I know that his views upon this question have not changed—his circumstances have changed. I wish he had, therefore, proposed the transfer of rates to site values, which, as he knows, and everyone knows, are not the product of individual effort but rather a collective product. It may be said that there are difficulties, but they have been successfully overcome in other countries, and, however great the difficulties may be, they are infinitesimal compared with the difficulties that will be experienced in carrying out the Government's scheme.

Now we submit this as an alternative proposal to the financial proposal which is embodied in this Bill. I have made no attack upon landowners. I do not blame them. They have a perfect right to take advantage of that of which the law permits them to take advantage. It is not they who are blameworthy, it is the State which is blameworthy, as long as it allows such a system to exist. I challenge the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and I challenge any Member on the other side to defend this system. Can anyone say that the fruits of local rates, the fruits of industry, should not be retained by industry, but should go into the pockets of certain individuals who have contributed nothing by their labour or industry to the creation of that value? With confident belief in this we submit this Amendment to the House of Commons.

SPEECH AT HANLEY

25th January, 1928

The meeting was held in the Victoria Hall under the auspices of the Stoke-on-Trent Central Labour Party. Dr A. A. Hill presided, and Mr Andrew MacLaren, M.P., and Alderman S. Clowes, M.P., supported Mr Snowden on the platform.

Mr PHILIP SNOWDEN explained that he had undertaken that meeting at the request of the English League for the Taxation of Land Values, in the hope that it might do something to stimulate interest in that important

subject. There was, he supposed, no part of the country where more propaganda had been done for the taxation of land values than in that part of Staffordshire, but it was necessary to keep the subject constantly alive, for there was a considerable indifference on the part of the public towards that very desirable and urgent reform. All classes of the community were loud in their complaints about heavy taxation and high rates, but they were blind to one of the principal methods by which their burdens might be removed and, at the same time, a great stimulus given to industry.

THE FUNDAMENTAL MONOPOLY

There had been rumours during the past few days that Mr Churchill was considering the question of dealing with local rates in his next Budget, but he could not see how Mr Churchill could deal with the question in a way which would be satisfactory, or which would relieve the burdens upon the taxpayers and ratepayers, because he was not likely to tackle the question of the taxation of land values. Although in the past he had been a very eloquent advocate of that reform, it was hardly likely that the Tory Government, controlled very largely by the landed interests, would permit him to deal with that matter.

The reason the great mass of the people had not reaped the advantages which might have been expected from the vast increase in productive power after a century unparalleled for scientific and mechanical advancement, was that it had accrued largely to the benefit of a class of monopolists, the chief of which were those who held the monopoly of land. Land was the fundamental monopoly which lay at the root of every other question, and until the land problem was solved the benefits of other reforms might come, but only in a very small measure compared with the advantages which would accrue to the community if the land monopoly were destroyed.

There was a district in North London which, when he went to live there nearly 20 years ago, was purely agricultural in its character, but which, when a new railway had opened up the district, became a thriving town. He remembered a four-acre plot of agricultural

land, which was then let at £8 per year, and had a capital value of £300. Later, that land was sold for £8,000. That was an illustration of how the land monopoly could levy tribute on industry. That railway, a few months ago, was extended still farther into the country, and recently Lord Ashfield, Chairman of the Underground, complained that landowners round there were holding up the land, waiting for its value to increase, and the result was that the development of the railway was being greatly hampered, and the population, which would have gone there from the congested parts of London, were kept crowded in London, because the landowners were refusing to sell their land.

That kind of thing was common all over the country, and he was quite convinced that land values were never increasing more rapidly, throughout the country, than they were to-day.

THE BURDEN OF THE RATES

To make a district habitable, certain amenities and conveniences must be provided, and these, provided at the expense of the general ratepayers, added to the value of the land. Whatever party was in power, they could not reduce municipal expenditure, for if they attempted to do so they would have to pay far more indirectly in a higher death rate, poorer education and a loss of the amenities of civilization. But they could devise a plan by which they could stop the drain of municipal expenditure going where it did at present and be devoted instead to the service of the people who created the value. If they had the system of rating land values there would be nothing to keep back municipal improvements because every improvement would more than pay for itself in the increased values it gave to the land.

In the past 60 years rates for the country had risen from 16½ millions to 168 millions a year, and municipal debt figures were colossal. He sympathized very much with members of municipal councils who were anxious to do things, but held back because of the cost. The present system, however, not merely kept back public improvements, but levied toll upon every article we had to buy. Land which had a high capital value, but

which was held back from development, practically escaped the payment of rates under the existing system. If, by taxation, they could force this unused land into the market, it would cheapen the price of land.

THE TAX THAT CANNOT BE "PASSED ON"

Both national taxation and local rating should be imposed so as not to hamper industry. Taxation generally was a burden on industry. It prevented its development but taxation could be levied in such a way as to be an encouragement to industry. A tax upon site values would lighten the burden of industry, would cause prices to fall, and had the supreme quality of a tax or a rate, that the incidence of the tax would remain upon the person upon whom it was levied.

Our present system of local rating, instead of encouraging enterprise, and instead of tending to promote the health, comfort and education of the people, had the opposite effect. In 1914 the Consett Iron Co., in the North of England, paid £29,000 in local rates; last year they paid £118,000. The rates had risen, per employee, from 15s. 4d. in the £ to £5 8s. per person per year. The iron industry, with the mining industry and the cotton, woollen and worsted trades, were all suffering keenly from foreign competition, and therefore it was most important that the cost of production should be reduced—not that wages should be reduced, because reduction of wages would never lessen the cost of production—but that the burden of local rates should be lessened.

PRACTICAL PROPOSALS

There was a demand for the transfer of some part of local expenditure to the national exchequer. It was true that, in the last 15 or 20 years, burdens which were to a large extent of a national character had been imposed upon local authorities, and the question of a revision of the burden between the national and local exchequers was one which had long been ripe for treatment, but with a national expenditure of 840 millions a year, one had little expectation, in the next 18 months, at any rate, of seeing any relief of the burden of local authorities in regard to those services.

In outlining practical proposals, they had the experi-

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ence of other countries to help them. Sydney, in Australia, started to rate land values in 1908, and was now the second city in the Empire, and had grown from a population of 500,000 to one of 1,100,000 since 1915.

The first step was for them to get a valuation of all the site values, and then put a tax on them. We had no really reliable estimate of the capital value of the land of this country, and he was not much enamoured of estimates not founded on reliable data, but they had the experience of other countries to go upon. If the capital value of the land per head of the population were the same in this country as it was in New Zealand, the land of this country would be worth about £10,000,000,000. He did not know what the figure would be if we had an exact valuation, but if we took the value per head of the population as being half that in New Zealand, we should have a total of £5,000,000,000, on which a tax of 1d. in the £ would produce £20,000,000, and a tax of 5d. in the £—the rate imposed in Sydney*—would bring £100,000,000. Here was a source of revenue, just, equitable, and fulfilling every one of the true canons of taxation, and it was there waiting to be taken when they had a Government which would have the courage to face vested interests and restore to the people their rightful inheritance in the land.

THE WAY TO THE SOLUTION OF OTHER PROBLEMS

He did not, he said, share the opinion—if it had been held by anybody—that the taxation of land values would solve every one of our economic, social and industrial evils. When they had the taxation of land values, a vast amount remained to be done in the way of social organization upon constitutional lines, but it would take what belonged to the people for the public use; it would remove the present injustices of our rating system, it would give a great relief to industry and to

* Apart from water and sewerage rates, the land value rate in the City and Metropolitan Boroughs of Sydney varies from 3d. to 7d. in the £ of capital value. In addition, a special land value rate of ½d. in the £ is levied to cover the costs of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.—EDITOR, *Land & Liberty*.

agriculture, and it would liberate the activities of our local authorities—and he believed there was a vast field of usefulness, hardly yet touched, for the local authorities of the country. Parliament, and Government departments, could never solve the social problem for us; what Parliament could do was to give the people the power to do it for themselves.

“When the Labour Government were in office, for far too short a time,” concluded Mr Snowden, “we were going fully into this question, with all the expert advice which a Government department can command, and if we had been permitted to introduce a second Budget in the House of Commons, it certainly would have contained proposals for the national and local taxation of land values.”

Responding to the vote of thanks, moved by Mr Andrew MacLaren, M.P., and seconded by Ald. S. Clowes, M.P.,

Mr SNOWDEN said :—

“When the next election comes, I hope in every division of the Potteries you will make quite sure to return a candidate who will give me support when I introduce a Measure for the taxation of land values.”

(Reprinted from LAND & LIBERTY, March, 1928.)

OTHER DECLARATIONS

Mr Philip Snowden spoke on the Taxation and Rating of Land Values at Saltaire, Yorks, on 18th January, 1928, under the auspices of the local Labour Party; at Liverpool on 20th January, under the auspices of the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce; and at Leeds on 21st January, under the auspices of the Yorkshire County Allotment Federation. Mr Snowden's contributions to the Press on the same subject include special articles in *Reynolds's Illustrated News* of 29th January, 1928, in *John Bull* of 24th March, 1928, and in the *Daily Herald* of 14th May, 1928. These speeches and articles in their reference to Land Value Taxation appeared in the March, April, and June (1928) issues of *Land & Liberty* and some extracts are here given.

SALTAIRE

18th January, 1928

Denouncing the Customs tariffs and the many indirect taxes levied by the Conservative Government since 1924, Mr Snowden said: "If we had remained in office, we should have swept away every vestige of food taxation from the fiscal system of this country."

Under the present iniquitous system, Mr Snowden continued, the whole of the increased value of land went into the pockets of the landowners who had done nothing whatever to create it. He had very little sympathy with complaints about the burden of local rates so long as the ratepayers were content to tolerate the continuance of a system like that. There never was a time when this unearned increment on land was growing more rapidly than at present, due to the development of motor transport. Every town and village in the country showed an enormous increase in land values. The whole value of land was due to the activities of the population, and just as the population grew and wealth increased, so the landlord was able to reap where others had sown.

If the Labour Party had remained in office, in the next Budget a proposal would have been submitted to Parliament for dealing with this problem. Parliament would have been asked to enact a Measure for the rating and the taxation of land values; in other words, for the adoption of a system by which at least some part of what belonged to the community should accrue to the community, and, if we had such a system as that in operation, there would be nothing whatever to stop public improvements. He was sure the next Labour Government would undertake this very important and urgent matter.

THE DOOR TO FREEDOM

In *Reynolds's Illustrated News* of 29th January, 1928, at the conclusion of his article, Mr Snowden wrote:

"Land values are going up everywhere. The landowners are fattening in their sleep. To make the land available for use, the local authorities are spending money on roads, schools, parks, housing, and all the

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amenities and necessities of a new residential district. A public debt is being created, rates are being imposed, and the landowner gets off with all the social value given to his land by this expenditure. It is a monstrous wrong to the community. I have no patience with the complaints about heavy rates, so long as the people calmly submit to this legalized robbery. Instead of basing local rating on land values, we tax the fruits of industry.

"The taxation and rating of land values would secure public values for public purposes. It would relieve industry and agriculture, and liberate municipal enterprise. It would cheapen land and cheapen building, and encourage thrift and business enterprise.

"The rating of land values would be the key to open the door to freedom for our municipalities to go ahead with schemes for promoting the health and well-being of the people, and for relieving local industries of the burden of heavy rates."

PLEDGES REAFFIRMED

In his article in *John Bull* of 24th March, 1928, Mr Philip Snowden reaffirmed his pledges in the following words :—

"In my only Budget speech I gave a very definite pledge that if I were in office the next year I would introduce a scheme for the taxation of land values. I had such a scheme in an active state of preparation. Whatever else the next Labour Government may attempt, it is quite certain it will deal with the question of the rating and taxation of land values."



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