

# Britain's & Two Liberalisms

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INDEPENDENCE, or so-called security of livelihood—which shall be the ideal for personal and social life? This is the question that divides the Liberal ranks in Britain.

At a recent meeting of the Liberal Party in London, one of the most important debates was that on a resolution based on Sir William Beveridge's book, *Full Employment in a Free Society*. Proposals for State management and control of industry and commerce; for a policy of spending money to make work; for a "planned economy," with the promise to workers of full insurance against the ills of life—are all a part of the new Liberalism offered to this assembly for its acceptance.

There has grown up, however, within the Liberal Party in the last few years a strong movement by a more fundamental group calling themselves the Liberal Liberty League. Mr. Ashley Mitchell and Mr. T. Atholl Robertson are two of its leading spirits, and they have gathered round them an increasing number of the most earnest men and women of the party. They made their presence felt at last year's Assembly, and this year they demanded the destruction of monopoly and the liberation of productive enterprise from its present

\* Not all of Britain has gone socialistic—there is a growing force within the Liberal ranks that is socially sound and properly grounded in safe economics.

burdens and handicaps. This group aims to restore to their proper perspective the two questions of Land Monopoly and Free Trade. They hold that of all our social and economic reforms, two are paramount. One is the taxation of land values, with exemption of industry and thrift from penal taxation; and the second is the unequivocal opening of British ports to the commerce of the world, irrespective of the practices adopted by other countries.

The rival programs are well defined in a new book by the late Professor John Hilton, entitled *Rich Man, Poor Man*.\* The book carries a foreword by Sir William Beveridge and deals with the mal-distribution of wealth in Great Britain. It shows that of our twelve million families, only four million are worth, all told, more than £100 each; that another four million are worth only between £2 and £100; and that as many as four million families live from hand to mouth.

\*This was the Halley Stewart Lecture for 1938. Published by Tom Nelson & Son, New York. \$1.50.

Professor Hilton estimates that in Great Britain in 1936 the total worth of property in private hands was £20,000,000,000. If divided equally, this would give every family more than £1,600 capital. The fault, therefore, is not with production but with distribution.

It is in the foreword that we see the difference in the two approaches to any solution of this social maladjustment. Sir William Beveridge quotes the author's statement: "It has been put to me so often that I feel I must believe it, that what our millions want above all else is security against destitution in the event of a mishap."

This, of course, is the assumption underlying the Beveridge and every other security scheme. But Hilton goes on to say: "I beg leave to doubt whether peace of mind and social health can ever come from mere security against destitution. We should strive also for a state of affairs in which the typical family has sums of its own with which to further its own fancies and fortune." The fundamental wrong in Britain is the disproportion in property or incomes, and the Beveridge plan, like other plans, envisages no real change in these basic proportions.

Hilton is nearer the mark than is Beveridge. The poor don't want to be left in their poverty with the palliative of a little security against its worst effects. They want to get rid of their poverty and be free and independent of the State. Insurance schemes will not do this for them.

The Beveridge plan, in fact, is based on heavier weekly payments out of weekly earnings, and heavier taxes to help pay the State's part of the insurance fund.

The desire for independence is shown by the strong demand for "small holdings," that is, farms of up to fifty acres. The obstacle everywhere is the high price of land. In 1929 the average cost of 16,000 small holdings was £953, or about \$4,500, which means that the holding is burdened with a heavy interest charge.

The *Manchester Guardian* refers to the 300,000 American soldiers who intend to settle on the land when they get home, and to the Federal Veterans' Administrator's warning that 52 per cent of those who did so after the last war failed within two years. The returning soldier in both countries is to be urged to sell his birthright of an independent living for a "mess of pottage" in the shape of a "modicum" of leisure and a standard of living which somebody else calls reasonable, but which is a subservient and dependent existence.

It is significant that many thousands in this country and in the United States are determined to run the risk of failure, so highly do they rate the prize of independence which the risk carries with it. It is a manly urge to be found in every human breast. The only way to satisfy this urge is to facilitate access to the land, thereby gaining directly from its use, or indirectly benefiting from the increased productive activities of all men.