



THE LIBERALS, THE LAND QUESTION AND FISCAL POLICY, 1906-1924

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In the early twentieth century the United Kingdom was one of the most urbanised and industrialised societies in the world. The standard way of looking at the key political issues of this period has been, until recently, to see them as driven by this urbanisation and industrialisation—so in domestic terms the central themes were seen as ‘naturally’ being conflict between the urban middle class and working class and the attempt to mediate this conflict through state-sponsored welfare reform.¹ In so far as the politics of land reform intruded onto this picture they were dismissed as an annoying irrelevance. What importance could controversies about subjects like the role of landowners or tenants’ rights have for a society like the United Kingdom? In so far as land reform’s appearance at national level could not be ignored, it could be dismissed as representing one of two things: either the interests of remote parts of the country, like rural Ireland or Highland Scotland, that had been left behind in the rest of the United Kingdom’s dash for industrial modernity; or the outmoded and eccentric enthusiasms of some members of the Liberal Party—another sign of the party’s failure to grapple with the problems of urban society and its imminent doom at the hands of the new Labour party founded in 1900.²

More recently, this teleological approach has started to be questioned and historians have begun to accept both that land reform was an important feature of early twentieth century politics in England and that this was for very good reasons [PACKER 2001; READMAN 2008]. Landowners were still an important part of the political landscape in this period and land reform policies that were developed to attack their control of the land were attractive to most Liberals and socialists as well as offering solutions to a range of problems, both rural and urban [ADONIS 1993]. This article considers how the Liberal party tackled the variety of issues that developed under the heading of land reform; and in particular, looks at how the meaning of land reform remained fluid and could transform itself rapidly in response to changing circumstances. Rather than being an archaic and irrelevant set of issues, the land question was central to Edwardian politics and represented an attempt to deal with pressing political issues. First of all,

¹ For an influential example of this approach, see GILBERT 1966.

² Recent important work on land reform in the non-English nations of the United Kingdom includes BULL 1996, NEWBY 2007 and CRAGOE 1996. Sceptical accounts of the Liberals’ involvement in land reform can be found in OFFER 1981 and BERNSTEIN 1986, esp. 145-147.

this article examines how the series of issues known as the 'Land Question' crystallised, initially in the 1880s; then, how these approaches dominated the ways in which Edwardian Liberal governments dealt with land reform for their first four or five years in office; next, how the Liberals' approach to land reform was transformed by Lloyd George's land campaign of 1913-14; and finally, how World War One changed this situation and signaled not only the demise of the Liberal Party, but also that of the land issue.

The core of the land issue in this period was the system of landholding in the United Kingdom. The parliamentary land survey of 1873 (the only one of its kind) was usually interpreted as having revealed that fewer than 6,000 people owned two thirds of England and Wales.³ The wealth, social influence and prestige that this situation bestowed on landowners was the basis of their role as the traditional governing elite—as late as 1880 about half of all MPs owned at least 2,000 acres and in 1885-1908 40% of all cabinet ministers were members of the landlord-dominated House of Lords—a body that did not lose its power to veto legislation until 1911 [HANHAM 1959 : xv, n. 2; ADONIS 1993 : 167-168]. Some mid-nineteenth century radicals in the British Liberal Party, among them Richard Cobden and John Stuart Mill, had been vocal critics of this structure of landholding and had argued for the re-creation of a rural society of small-scale agricultural producers [DEWEY 1974]. But they had been unable to make much progress with the Liberal party's leadership, who, of course, contained many great landowners, and who subscribed to the mid-Victorian economic orthodoxy that Britain's system of great landed estates was an efficient producer of cheap food for the country's urban population. Land reform only became a key component of Liberal thought in the 1880s—rather than being an immemorial part of Liberal policy it is only in this period that a land reform programme was created and it is that programme which shaped the Edwardian Liberal governments' initial approach to land reform. Three main reasons lay behind this development.

Firstly, agricultural depression set in during the late 1870s, under the pressure of cheap imports [THOMPSON 1963 : 308-310]. This not only raised doubts about the much-vaunted efficiency of British agriculture, it focused attention on the institution of landownership by provoking protest movements from within rural society. The government was forced to step in to mediate conflicts between landowners and tenants in both Ireland and the western Highlands of Scotland, thus providing precedents for state intervention in the land system [WARREN 1983; CAMERON 1996 : 14-39].

Secondly, the relatively democratic 'householder' franchise was extended to the county constituencies in 1884.⁴ Traditionally, the Liberals had performed poorly in the English countryside (unlike in Scotland, Wales and, formerly, Ireland), as most tenant farmers tended to identify their interests with that of the Conservatives as the 'party of agriculture'. But the new franchise gave the Liberals, for the first time, an incentive to produce

³ BATEMAN 1883 remains the standard interpretation of the material from the land survey.

⁴ See JONES 1972 for the third Reform Acts of 1884-1885.

policies that would appeal to a crucial element of the working class in the countryside—the landless agricultural labourers—one of the most important groups in the 110 or so English constituencies with a substantial rural population.⁵ The key initiative here was taken by Joseph Chamberlain, who, building on earlier Radical ideas about the need to re-formulate the land system to break landowner's authority, famously suggested in his 'Radical Programme' of 1885 that the state should provide allotments for rural labourers—'3 acres and a cow' as the policy was labeled [Barker 1975 : 11-53]. The relative success of the Liberals in the county constituencies at the 1885 general election seemed to confirm that land reform was a popular policy that could win over rural England.

Finally, and crucially, when the Liberal party split over Irish home rule in 1886, the great majority of Liberal landowners fled the party for Liberal Unionism and the comforting embrace of alliance with the Conservatives. In 1880 41% of the House of Lords were Liberals; in 1887 only 7% [ADONIS 1993 : 20, Table 2.2]. Quite correctly, the Liberals believed the landed elite had abandoned them and, almost to a man, were actively opposing them. This allowed and encouraged Liberals to support and develop anti-landlord policies, including land reform, and to construct an entirely negative picture of the role of landowners in society and politics, which in turn justified the need for land reform [BELLAMY *et al.* 1999].

In the countryside, the Liberals' focus remained very much on developing Chamberlain's allotments proposals of 1885. This approach was reinforced by the debacle the party suffered in 1886 in English rural seats, winning only about 16 seats with a significant agricultural population. Many Liberals eagerly seized on the idea that landowners were exerting a policy of 'feudal' political and economic pressure on rural voters to enforce Conservative dominance. In the late 1880s and early 1890s Liberal social investigators and propagandists painted a relentlessly bleak portrait of rural society in which political intimidation was rife and labourers were paid starvation wages and forced to live in miserable hovels. This picture of the English countryside as a place characterised by landed tyrants and oppressed serfs became deeply ingrained in Liberal thinking. It was seen as a standing affront to the kind of open, democratic society that Liberalism stood for and, therefore, quite drastic measures of state intervention could be justified in order to extend liberty to agricultural districts. These were the obvious places where the state's authority was required to override the coercion of society by a powerful caste. One of the few positive achievements of the brief 1892-1895 Liberal governments was the 1894 Local Government Act, which created parish councils with powers to acquire land which could be rented out as allotments to local people [READMAN 2008 : 64-66]. It was hoped that this would give otherwise landless agricultural labourers the hope of economic and thus political independence and free them from the 'feudal screw' that Liberals claimed dominated rural areas. So, the Liberals had a well-developed approach about how to apply land reform to the English countryside before 1906 and this was to continue to dominate their policies in office up until 1912.

⁵ PACKER 2001 : 197-201, for this estimate.

But the land issue was not just about the countryside—it also had a crucial urban dimension, which of course gave it the potential to be relevant to far more of the electorate [PACKER 2010]. Again, this development was largely a product of the 1880s, when Liberals, especially in London, had pointed to the way in which great landowners in the metropolis, like the Dukes of Bedford and Westminster, had seen the value of their urban properties soar, while they avoided contributing to the growing burden of local rates, because local taxation was paid by the occupiers of land and buildings, rather than the ultimate landowner. The taxation of ground rents paid to owners of developed land was endorsed by the National Liberal Federation in 1888 and London Liberals started to press the matter in the Commons. This movement was reinforced by the nostrums of Henry George, an American whose book, *Progress and Poverty*, became a best-seller in Britain in the 1880s. George's plan to replace all taxation with a tax on land values (the 'single tax') seemed bizarre to most contemporaries, but the controversy around his book helped concentrate attention on land taxation and created a band of enthusiasts in the Liberal party who raised the issue at every opportunity [TAYLOR 2004 : 45-72].

More importantly, an increasing number of Liberals in urban Britain were drawn to the idea of using land taxation as a supplement to, or even a complete replacement for, the local rates—a scheme usually known as site value rating [OFFER 1981 : 229-231; SMYTH 2000 : 42-45]. It seemed to have two great advantages. Firstly, it was claimed it would stimulate house-building by taxing vacant land at its capital rather than its use value, thus encouraging (or forcing) landowners to sell land for development.⁶ Secondly, site value rating would provide another form of income for local authorities, who had seen rates rise by, on average, 141% in 1875-1900 [WALLER 1983 : 257]. This development worried many Liberals. Not only was it widely seen as a disincentive to local businesses, but rate rises were also highest in the poorest local authorities, which had the greatest social needs, but the lowest property values. Rates were also the only direct tax that most lower middle class or working class people paid and they tended to be regressive, taking a higher percentage of the income of the poorest ratepayers, than of the richest. Site value rating claimed to redress this situation by forcing landowners to contribute to the cost of the local services from which they benefited—C.P. Trevelyan, for instance, suggested a modest 1d./£ levy on the capital value of land would produce £15.6m. a year for local authorities [TREVELYAN 1905 : 9]. These arguments ensured that 52% of Liberal candidates in 1906 endorsed land taxation and it would clearly be the key component of the Liberals' approach to urban land reform in office [RUSSELL 1973 : 65].

But land taxation was not the only component of the urban land issue. By 1906 two other elements had developed from late-nineteenth-century concerns. The first was that the land might contribute to a solution for urban unemployment. This was, of course, a long-standing tradition of working class radicalism, promoted by the Spenceans, Robert Owen, the

⁶ For instance, C.P. Trevelyan, *Hansard*, 4th ser., 103 (19 February 1902), col. 480.

Chartists and radical heroes of the 1880s, like Bradlaugh, who had all shown some commitment to settling the urban poor on the land [CHASE 1988; BIAGINI 1992 : 50-60, 84-93, 184-191]. What was new was the interest that economists like Alfred Marshall and social investigators like Charles Booth started to show in the issue—an interest closely linked to new concepts of an urban ‘residuum’ of unemployables who might have to be drained from the urban labour market [HARRIS 1972 : 118-119, 124-140]. So, settling the unemployed of the towns in the countryside might serve very different purposes, from a radical alternative to capitalism to a sort of penal colony. Particularly high unemployment in the early 1900s prompted interest from the radical Poplar Board of Guardians, under the influence of George Lansbury, the Salvation Army and social workers like Canon Samuel Barnett and the issue was attracting more attention than ever when the Liberals returned to power in 1905 [SHEPHERD 2002 : 60-64; HARRIS 1977 : 109-110].

Finally, there was town planning. The late nineteenth century had witnessed increasing criticism of the persistence of slum areas and the poor quality of most working class houses, especially the high density of houses per acre. Solutions to these problems were suggested by a number of individuals and groups who gradually coalesced into what became known as the movement for town planning [SUTCLIFFE 1981; HARDY 1991]. The best known was undoubtedly Ebenezer Howard and the ‘Garden City’ he inspired at Letchworth, but this was only one example of a much broader movement. The central idea behind town planning was to argue that when new suburban areas were developed, the estates should be laid out in accordance with an overall plan, which would provide for a lower density of houses per acre and more amenities and break away from the traditional grid-like pattern for working-class houses. Land would be cheaper in the suburbs and this would allow new housing to be built at a lower cost than in town centres, which would make it affordable for working people to rent. But, if land values rose as an area was developed, this would push new housing out of reach of working class families. The solution the town planners developed was to suggest that local authorities should be able to buy up suburban land and offer it for development, so ensuring it was provided at a reasonable price.

It was this that connected town planning with the urban land issue, because it made the success of these schemes dependent on the ability of local authorities to acquire large swathes of land at low costs. This would involve giving local councils new powers of compulsory purchase and reforming the methods of calculating the price paid—all things that would scarcely be welcomed by landowners. But without these powers it was landowners who could block town planning, by refusing to sell land, or by charging prices that made low-cost housing development impossible. Town planning appealed above all to Liberals precisely because of this link with land reform and early enthusiasts included Liberal businessmen like George Cadbury and Joseph Rowntree, New Liberal journalists like C.F.G. Masterman and a host of figures from local government collected in the pressure group, the National Housing Reform Council. By 1905 the issue was being vigorously promoted and even Campbell-Bannerman, the Liberal

leader, had started to make favourable references to town planning in his speeches.⁷

So, when the Liberals finally took office in December 1905 there were already a whole range of policies connected to land reform associated with the party, from providing land to agricultural labourers, through land taxation to land colonies and town planning. All of these issues had come to prominence in the late nineteenth century and all were designed to tackle pressing political or social issues, both rural and urban. The first years of the Edwardian Liberal governments saw a determined attempt by advocates of these policies, within and without Liberalism, to persuade the new government to implement these policies and the battle over these issues dominated how the Liberal government approached land reform in its first four or five years. However, all of these issues had rather different fates, which reflect the fluidity of land reform—rather than being a set of *idées fixes* for Liberalism, land reform was intimately involved with the political process and rapidly evolved with developing events.

The Liberals' most important policy initiative for rural England was to build on the provisions of the 1894 Local Government Act, which had allowed parish councils to provide allotments. This measure had been a modest success—by 1902 over 45,000 tenants were working allotments rented to them by local authorities [SMITH 1946 : 58]. But it had not helped the Liberals win over rural England, which had, as usual, overwhelmingly returned Conservatives at the 1895 and 1900 elections, nor had it transformed the structure of English agriculture to reduce the dominant role of landowners. After 1906 the Liberals hoped to build on this measure with a much more ambitious piece of legislation—to require local authorities to provide land that could be rented for smallholdings. The distinction between allotments and smallholdings was crucial—allotments were tiny pieces of ground which agricultural labourers could work in their spare time. They might allow access to greater earnings and independence, but they were essentially a supplement to waged labour. Smallholdings were meant to be bigger plots of land that could turn agricultural labourers into small-scale farmers. Lord Carrington, the President of the Board of Agriculture appointed in December 1905, was a keen advocate of smallholdings and his whole tenure of office was dominated by the Smallholdings Act of 1907 that he promoted and with which he was closely identified [ADONIS 1988]. The aim of the legislation, was, as Carrington made clear, to promote 'a peaceful agricultural revolution', in which the English countryside would be transformed from a land of great estates, tenant farmers and landless labourers, into one of small, independent agricultural producers, renting their land from the local authority.⁸ As a consequence of this transformation, the countryside would, of course, become dominated by grateful Liberal-voting smallholders, rather than Tory landowners and their farmer allies.

In some ways, this was among the most ambitious and radical legislation that the Liberals produced in 1905-1914 and it shows how

⁷ CREESE 1966 : 110-203; *The Speaker*, 7 January 1905; *The Times*, 22 December 1905.

⁸ Bodleian Library, Oxford, Carrington diary, 31 December 1907.

important they felt it to be to put an end to 'feudal' England, as a standing affront to Liberal values (and the interests of the Liberal party). Unfortunately, the 1907 Smallholdings Act did not prove to be the agency of rural social transformation which the Liberals had hoped for. By December 1910 only 65,953 acres had been let to 4,846 smallholders.⁹ Outside of a few market-gardening areas, most agricultural labourers either felt they did not have the capital to become smallholders, were able to find land if they desired it without going to the local authority, or simply continued to prefer migration as the easiest route to social mobility [PACKER 2001 : 47-48].¹⁰ Anyway, they declined to display the land-hunger the Liberals had hoped to satisfy. The January 1910 elections produced yet another 'debacle' for the Liberals in English agricultural seats, of which they held no more than 30 out of about 110. So, in rural England, the Liberals' experience of land reform was intensely frustrating. They were able to turn their proposals into legislation, only to see them decisively rejected by rural society.

The urban land issue's fate was much more complicated. The most important element of this for most Liberals was land taxation—an issue that had become closely associated with the reform of local authority rates through the idea of site value rating. Here most Liberals had high hopes of swift action by the new government. The matter was turned over to John Burns, President of the Local Government Board, and hence responsible for all matters affecting local authorities. Burns was regularly reminded of the significance of the issue by both Campbell-Bannerman and his successor H.H. Asquith and the cabinet even drafted in the attorney-general, Sir William Robson, to help Burns produce a bill.¹¹ But no bill on site value rating appeared, despite hopeful pronouncements from the government. Burns was defeated by the complexity of the problems he faced and especially how to produce a scheme to find the value of land, without the improvements on it—local authorities only valued the combined value of land and buildings in order to levy rates.¹² Enthusiastic land taxers were increasingly frustrated, but they could not find a way round Burns's inaction. Even if there had been a more effective head of the Local Government Board, it was impossible to imagine a Liberal bill on site value rating passing the House of Lords, or that sufficient public fury could be aroused on such a complex issue in order to force the Lords to give way.

⁹ *Annual Report of Proceedings under the Smallholdings and Allotments Act 1908 part I, Smallholdings for 1911* (Cmd 5615), p. 3.

¹⁰ For the situation in Norfolk, see S.W. Martins, 'Smallholdings in Norfolk, 1890-1950 : A Social and Farming Experiment'. *Agricultural History Review* 54 (2006) : 304-330.

¹¹ Robinson Library, University of Newcastle, C. P. Trevelyan papers, MS Ex. 21, Trevelyan to M. K. Trevelyan, 18 December 1906; British Library, Add MS 46282, Asquith to Burns, 16 April 1908; Bodleian Library, Harcourt papers 576, W. Robson, 'Valuation Bill', September 1908.

¹² National Archives, Cabinet papers 37/95/122, J. Burns, 'Valuation Bill', 10 October 1908.

This impasse was broken by the sudden intervention of David Lloyd George, the new Chancellor of the Exchequer. Faced with the need to meet huge new spending commitments in 1909-1910, especially on old age pensions and the navy, Lloyd George knew he had little option but to raise direct taxes, especially on the wealthiest [MURRAY 1980 : 117-147]. But no Liberal Chancellor had expected to be faced with the sheer scale of the rises in income tax and death duties necessary in 1909. Lloyd George needed a strategy to distract attention from the ways in which such tax rises would hurt prominent Liberal supporters and leave the government open to charges of harming the economy by destroying the capital needed for investment [PACKER 2007]. He was also looking for a way to reinvigorate the government's appeal in the face of a string of by-election defeats [BLEWETT 1972 : 46-51]. The answer he came up with was to supplement the key tax rises in the 1909 Budget with a range of new taxes that would assault the Liberals' enemies. Most controversially, he proposed three new taxes on land (undeveloped land tax, increment duty and reversion duty)—taxes that were not needed to meet the fiscal deficit, as even the Chancellor predicted they would only raise £0.5 million a year, but whose purpose was entirely strategic [PEDEN 2000 : 46-47].

This initiative transformed the role of land taxation in politics, raising it from the local to the national arena, and making it a central topic of debate in 1909, through the series of oratorical assaults on landownership that Lloyd George launched to defend and publicise the land taxes, most famously at Limehouse.¹³ Politically, the land taxes were a great success. The government's performance in by-elections picked up after the introduction of the Budget and the Conservatives' analysis of the 1910 election results led them to conclude that land taxation was popular, at least in big urban centres [MURRAY 1980 : 188; PACKER 2001 : 62-63].

However, the triumph of land taxation was heavily qualified. Once the Lords rejected Lloyd George's budget in 1909, the taxes lost their political centrality and were replaced by the battle over the power of the peers in the constitution [BLEWETT 1972 : 315-329, esp. p. 317, Table 15.4]. The attempt to actually collect the land taxes was a disaster. They required a new national land valuation, entrusted to the Inland Revenue, which cost over £2 million, and was not complete by 1914. The land taxes contained so many exemptions and were so complex that they ran into a barrage of legal actions. By 1914 all three duties were either totally or partially suspended while these issues were being resolved and the total sum collected from them throughout 1910-14 was only a little over £600,000 [OFFER 1981 : 363-369; SHORT 1997 : 38-89]. Land taxation had dismally failed to offer a great new source of revenue. Neither did it stimulate a boom in house-building. The years after the Budget actually coincided with a slowdown in house construction, which the Conservatives gleefully attributed to the new land taxes [LAND ENQUIRY COMMITTEE 1913-1914 : II : 82-83].

¹³ DU PARCQ IV, 1913 : 678-696, for Lloyd George's Newcastle and Limehouse speeches.

So, whilst land taxation was a great political success in 1909, the attempt to actually collect land taxes put the whole future of the movement in doubt. The other aspects of the urban land issue also faced mixed fortunes. The most disastrous fate fell to the idea of using the land as a solution to unemployment. In 1906-1907, the Local Government Board, headed by John Burns, decisively blocked any attempt to expand initiatives undertaken by some local authorities, especially in East London, to acquire agricultural land for the unemployed [PACKER 2010 : esp. 204-206]. Burns was probably influenced by his deep dislike of George Lansbury, who was particularly associated with these schemes.¹⁴ But the Board was able to show that existing experiments with land colonies had a very poor record of actually converting the unemployed into smallholders and were enormously expensive. When rising unemployment made the issue politically critical in 1908-1909 the leading figures in the Liberal government, especially Lloyd George and Churchill, turned to new measures like labour exchanges and experiments in unemployment insurance, in an attempt to find initiatives that would yield short-term, tangible results, rather than land colonies, which rapidly dropped out of national political controversy [HARRIS 1972 : 278-333].

In a way, the most successful aspect of the urban land issue, if in a modest way, was town planning. The advocates of this idea relentlessly pestered Burns to include some town planning proposals in the Local Government Board's next Housing Act [ALDRIDGE 1915 : 161-182]. Burns heartily disliked the kind of people involved in the garden city movement—'A picturesque array of cranks' was his comment after visiting Letchworth Garden City in 1906—but he was impressed by the support for a more co-ordinated approach to suburban development that the town planners had been able to beat up in bodies like the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Surveyors Institution and the Association of Municipal and County Engineers.¹⁵ The Local Government Board agreed to include some very modest town planning proposals in what became Part III of the 1909 Housing Act. This allowed local councils to draw up plans for new estates, rather than whole areas, and only after a very cumbersome process. Most importantly, it did not give councils effective powers to purchase land before it was developed. By 1914 74 local authorities had drawn up 105 schemes (though only 2 had been finally approved by the Local Government Board), so town planning had at last entered the realms of practical politics [ASHWORTH 1954 : 191].

It is, therefore, scarcely possible to say that the land reform programme that Liberals had developed in the late nineteenth century had been a great success when it came to implementing these proposals in the years between 1906 and 1910. It was entirely possible that land reform could have simply petered out in the latter years of the Edwardian Liberal governments. But instead, land reform underwent a remarkable transformation, that turned it into the Liberal government's great plan for winning the next general election, due in 1915. The architect of this new initiative was Lloyd George,

¹⁴ British Library, Add MS 46324, Burns diary, 18 April and 5 June 1906.

¹⁵ Burns diary, 11 October 1906; ASHWORTH 1954 : 180.

who declared in an interview with the *Daily News* on 13 May 1912 that ‘It is the agricultural labourer on whom we must concentrate attention’ and suggested instituting a minimum wage for farm workers. But this policy would still be a species of land reform, because the real target was still the landowner. Lloyd George was soon telling political confidants, like George Riddell, that it was the landowner who would be made to pay for these wage increases, because tenant farmers would be able to claim back the increased wages they had to pay from the rent they owed to their landowners.¹⁶

Minimum wages had not previously been associated with Liberal approaches to land reform and what seems to have sent Lloyd George off in this new direction was the government’s decision to create local minimum wage boards in the coal mining industry in March 1912, as an emergency measure to halt a national coal strike [PACKER 2001 : 77-79]. But applying the idea to agriculture had all sorts of possible advantages. It gave the Liberals a new strategy for trying to win over rural England, instead of the smallholdings policy that had manifestly failed. Moreover, in the spring of 1912 the government was once again in the electoral doldrums, as evidenced by some poor by-election results.¹⁷ Most Parliamentary time was mortgaged to shuttling the bills for Irish Home Rule and Welsh Church disestablishment between the Commons and the Lords—both measures that were unlikely to enthuse the English electorate. The government needed a great new campaign to revive its fortunes and Lloyd George turned to the land issue, just as he had with the land taxes in 1909. As Lloyd George was fond of saying, the government needed a ‘horizon’ and his new idea for an agricultural minimum wage would provide this, by calling on Liberals to pull together for a final assault on the social and economic role of landowners—just as Liberals had been united and enthused by the battle against landlords’ political role in the successful campaign against the House of Lords’ powers in 1909-1911.¹⁸ Moreover, while Lloyd George’s ideas retained the form of a crusade against landed ‘privilege’, he proposed to change the content of this campaign to contain major social reforms. So Lloyd George was planning to use land reform as a bridge between the old and the new Liberalism, folding extensions to State intervention into more traditional Liberal concerns. Or, in a sense, social reform was being given a particular Liberal twist by becoming part of the war on ‘feudalism’.

Lloyd George had no hope of translating his scheme into legislation before the general election, given the crowded Parliamentary timetable. Instead, he set up a detailed investigation of the land issue, directed by Seebohm Rowntree, who was well-known for his survey of poverty in York [PACKER 2001 : 83-87]. In October 1913 the Land Enquiry produced an elaborate rural report, advocating not only minimum wages for agricultural labourers, but rent courts for farmers, state-built cottages and more smallholdings legislation [LAND ENQUIRY COMMITTEE 1913 : vol. I]. The

¹⁶ RIDDELL 1934 : 63-64, entry for 27 May 1912.

¹⁷ MASTERMAN 1939 : 234-235 for Lloyd George’s concerns about by-election trends.

¹⁸ RIDDELL 1934 : 76, entry for 2 July 1912.

Cabinet had little trouble accepting this programme in October 1913 and the Liberals launched a Land Campaign in 1913-1914 to explain its proposals.¹⁹ Most of the evidence that we have suggests the new campaign provoked a good deal of enthusiasm throughout the party and it was undoubtedly intended to play the leading role in the Liberals' plans for the next election.

Almost from the beginning, though, it was clear that Lloyd George's Land Enquiry would have to tackle the urban land question as well as rural issues, if it was going to produce policies that appealed directly to Britain's urban population. Given the size and complexity of these problems it opted to produce a separate Urban Report in April 1914 and its policies were only gradually being considered by the cabinet in the period up to August 1914, but it is very likely the urban proposals would have joined their rural counterparts as the centrepiece of the Liberal programme in the next election.²⁰ And just as the rural report had revolutionised the content of the rural land issue, so the urban report indicated major changes for the Liberal approach to urban land reform. Land taxation was not abandoned altogether, but, given the problems with the 1909 Budget's provisions, it lost its centrality. No more national land taxes were proposed and only a very minor dose of site value rating [LAND ENQUIRY COMMITTEE 1914 : II : 591-609, 628, 634-636]. The demise of the land as a solution to unemployment was confirmed by its absence from the report. Instead, the Urban Report concentrated on outlining a huge plan to stimulate house-building in the suburbs, in an almost wholesale adoption of the programme of the town planning movement [LAND ENQUIRY COMMITTEE 1914 : II : 148-157, 289-94]. Local authorities would be empowered to draw up preliminary town plans, buy up land, lease it to developers and promote new public transport to these areas, thus ensuring a new supply of cheap, high-standard working-class housing. Effectively, the enquiry proposed making housing the central element in the Liberals' appeal to the towns, though, intriguingly, it also suggested the need for an urban minimum wage to ensure the very poorest could afford the new housing. All of these proposals were linked to the battle against landlordism because they depended on acquiring land compulsorily and at its use value from landowners.

So, far from being a static, inflexible, old-fashioned group of issues, the land issue was on the verge of being transformed into a new, major programme of social reform when the First World War intervened. The war had a devastating impact on the Liberal party, particularly because of the Asquith-Lloyd George split of 1916, but it also had a crucial impact on the land issue. The driving force behind the interest in 'the land' of all on the left in politics was hostility to landowners. In the years before 1914 it was still possible to view Britain as a country where landowners wielded significant

¹⁹ Nuffield College, Oxford, Gainford papers, C. Hobhouse to J. Pease, 22 October 1913; PACKER 2001 : 126-132.

²⁰ LAND ENQUIRY COMMITTEE 1914 : vol. II; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, B.S. Rowntree papers, 6 (a), B.S. Rowntree to J. Rowntree, 30 [sic] February 1914; House of Lords Record Office, Lloyd George papers C/1/1/18, E. Montagu to Lloyd George, 12 June 1914.

political power and played a major role in obstructing radical change. After 1918 this way of looking at Britain rapidly became obsolete. Landowners had a 'good' war—the disproportionate number of casualties among junior officers meant landed families suffered a relatively high toll of fatalities.²¹ Moreover, they had not profited from rising wartime food prices because the State stopped them raising rents—unlike the wartime profiteers who became the new 'bogeymen' for all radicals and reformers [THOMPSON 1963 : 328]. And landowners not only seemed less obnoxious after 1918, they were usually seen to be less powerful. The brief boom in agriculture and land prices after the war produced a widely-publicised avalanche of land sales by great landowners, in which, it was often said, a quarter of the surface of England changed hands between 1918 and 1921, turning many tenant farmers into owner-occupiers.²² Finally, and crucially, the importance of the House of Lords as an obstacle to reform declined steeply. With the Conservatives continuously in power, either alone or in coalition, from 1918 to 1945, with the brief exceptions of the minority Labour governments of 1924 and 1929-31, there was no need for the Lords to be the last redoubt of Conservatism and the Lords and landowners could retreat into the political background. In the new post-war era, the great political battle was over unemployment and, as the Edwardian experience had shown, land reform was no solution to this problem.

So, the great incentive for radical programmes of land reform was much diminished after 1918. But many of the specific elements of the great pre-war Land Campaign that Lloyd George had planned could not be re-created either. As Prime Minister he had presided over the Corn Production Act of 1917, which enacted a minimum wage for agricultural labourers along with guaranteed prices for wheat and oats, as part of wartime efforts to increase agricultural production [HOWKINS & VERDON 2009]. But Lloyd George also presided over the repeal of both guaranteed prices and minimum wages when prices crashed in 1921—gifting the defence of agricultural wages to the Labour party, which re-instated a State-backed minimum for farm workers in 1924. In the towns, Lloyd George's post-war Coalition embarked on a huge (if much-criticised and only partially successful) programme of State-subsidised council house building in an attempt to plug the gap caused by the wartime hiatus in construction [MERRETT 1979 : 33-60]. Political controversy about housing for the rest of the inter-war period focused on how many council houses should be built and how they should be subsidised. The role of landowners was irrelevant to this controversy, if only because they had sold even more of their pre-war urban holdings than they had of their land in the countryside [CANNADINE 1980 : 420-421]. The pre-war political situation could not be re-created. As a last irony, it was Lloyd George's coalition government that finally, in 1920, repealed the long-inoperative land taxes originally passed in the 1909 Budget [PEDEN 2000 : 145].

²¹ COCKAYNE VIII, Appendix F : 759-826, estimates nearly 20% of peers and their sons aged under 50 who served in the armed forces in World War I were killed.

²² *Estates Gazette*, 31 December 1921.

After 1918 the land issue, like the Liberal Party, could not be reconstructed in its Edwardian form. The near-universal perception that landowners were no longer a significant force in society and politics deprived it of any relevance for many on the Left of politics, whether they were Liberals or socialists. The new issues raised by industrial depression could not be tackled through land reform. But this conclusion should not be read back into the pre-1914 period. Land reform mattered, not least because before World War One it offered Liberalism a great opportunity of successfully combining social reform with traditional radicalism. It was only after 1918 that, like the Liberal party, land reform was condemned to a lingering decline, another victim of the First World War.

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