



'To promote the cause of Religion and Justice by the ways of Truth and Peace.'

LEO XIII to the N.Z. TABLET

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THE IRISH LAND BILL.

IUST before the Easter recess Mr. WYNDHAM, Chief Secretary for Ireland, introduced in the House of Commons his Irish Land Bill. Although the latest scheme for the settlement of the agrarian trouble in Ireland was introduced by the mover in a speech of great lucidity, still, in consequence of the complicated nature of the proposals, it was impossible at a short notice for those most

interested—the Irish representatives—to express any definite opinion regarding it. If there were any who had been sanguine enough to hope that the Government would introduce even a modified scheme of compulsory sale, they were grievously disappointed, for there was nothing of the kind in the Bill, and indeed no thoughtful person could expect anything else from a party which has four great Irish landlords as its principal supporters. Ever since the British Parliament came to recognise that the Irish tenant had any rights, that august body has been engaged in periodical efforts to regulate the relations of tenant and landlord. That Parliament had never seriously grappled with this question, which has been the root of nearly all Irish discontent, was made manifest by Mr. WYNDHAM on the occasion referred to, when he said that forty Acts in all had been passed, and that they had been a decided failure, a burden on the taxpayer, and a source of vexations and interminable legislation. What a confession of failure? In nearly every case on the introduction of one or other of these measures, it was contended that the final stage in the agrarian trouble had been reached, and that henceforth peace and contentment were assured to the unfortunate cultivator of the soil. Perhaps to some extent these anticipations would have been realised were it not that circumstances were being continually altered by economic conditions. Rents that were considered fair twenty years ago, when the Irish farmer had few competitors in the English markets, would be impossible to-day when the English consumer has the pick and choice of the best products of the Australasian Colonies, the United States, Denmark, Argentina, and, to crown all, the almost illimitable plains of Siberia. The tendency of late years is for prices of farm produce to go down, with a decided improvement in quality, so that the English people find it much cheaper to import from abroad than to produce at home. In most of the countries which supply the English market the cultivator of the soil is the owner thereof, and any margin of profit which remains after meeting the cost of production goes to his credit, but in Ireland the farmer must make two margins of profit—one for the upkeep of the landlord, and the balance, which under present conditions is infinitesimal, goes for the support of himself and his family. Under such circumstances the lot of the Irish farmer grows harder year by year, and to make matters worse, he now finds the foreign competitor underselling him at his own door. Notwithstanding the depreciation in the prices of farm produce, the Irish landlord has never been able to understand that his portion of the profit should suffer any diminution, and with commendable magnanimity has always allowed the unfortunate cultivator to bear the double burden. As the tenant has been powerless to remedy this injustice, and as the landlord was generally immovable, the Legislature had from time to time to step in and try to equalise the burden, hence the necessity for so much land legislation.

The Land Act of 1881, which might be described as a rent-fixing measure, was and might yet be productive of great benefit to the farmers of Ireland, but unfortunately its machinery has completely broken down: the landlords have blocked the courts with appeals, and the tenants, not being able to afford the luxury of expensive litigation, have lost faith in its benefits. It was the hope of the framers of the measure that when a certain number of rents had been fixed other parties would see what the rents should be and arrive at a settlement without litigation. The reverse has been the case. Since this measure became law 320,000 cases have been taken into court, over 240,000 have been fixed, but there have been 74,000 appeals lodged against these rents. The rents were originally fixed for a term of 15 years, and now there are 22,000 appeals against the second-term rents, that is rents that were fixed 15 years after they were fixed the first time. Upwards of 50 per cent. of the decisions regarding fair rent have been appealed against, and there are at present 10,000 appeals on the books of the courts with no immediate prospect of the judges overtaking the work for a number of years. Many of the appeals not yet decided were lodged four or five years ago. What is the use of an Act to a small farmer when the whole of his substance very often is wasted in protracted litigation with a wealthy landlord? The knowledge that the latest and perhaps the most beneficial measure of land legislation had been a failure in consequence of defective machinery was one of the prime motives in inducing the Chief Secretary for Ireland to bring in a Bill on new lines.

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The provisions of the Bill have been summarised as follow: The Government will purchase any property which a landlord wishes to sell, subject to certain formal conditions. All the expenses of preparing an estate for sale incurred at present by the vendor will, under the new Act, be borne by the Government, and the present Land Commission will take the place of the landlord when he obtains the assent of three-fourths of the tenants to a sale of the property at an agreed price. The annual instalments to be paid by the purchasing tenants will be at the rate of £3 15s per £100, instead of £4 as at present. This, be it noted, will be an inducement to the tenants to give a higher price than they otherwise would, and consequently it may be said that the reduction in the annual instalment will be of much more benefit to the vendors than to the purchasers. In future the State will pay cash to the landlord instead of fluctuating land stock as formerly. A landlord after selling the whole of an estate to the Land Commission can, if he so desire, buy back any portion of his former property, not exceeding in value the sum of £10,000, and he will obtain the same State credit for the transaction as the tenant does in buying his holding. A provision of the Bill which has met with general approval is that under certain conditions the tenants of small holdings can buy adjacent lands for the enlargement of their farms. Should the Bill become law, which is very doubtful, the machinery for the working of it will be placed in charge of a tribunal composed of two officials who are to be known as the Estate Commissioners, and it is almost needless to observe that its success will depend in a great measure on the manner in which these functionaries will discharge their duties. In the past Government officials in Ireland have been notorious for their anxiety to conserve the interest of the landlord to the detriment of that of the tenant, and it is perhaps too much to hope that the Estate Commissioners, whoever they may be, will rise superior to their surroundings. There is a saying to the effect that you must first catch your hare before you can cook it, and in like manner the Estate Commissioners must first find a landlord willing to sell before they can purchase. This is the weak feature of the measure. There is to be no compulsion as to sale, and the landowner who exacts the highest rent is the least likely to sell, as the money received for his property would not yield an income nearly so large as that which he receives as a rack-rent from his impoverished tenantry. Mr. WYNDHAM admitted in the House of Commons that the number of landlords willing to sell their properties was growing less every year. This is a significant admission in face of the fact that the Conservative Press in the United Kingdom, and their echo the cable agent, are for ever bewailing the tribulations of Irish landlords, and how difficult it is for them to collect their rents. Now if the Irish tenant is such a bad payer as his

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