

'God Gave the Land to the People!'

A report of the History Group discussion meeting in July, with Roy Douglas; by Malcolm Baines

Roy Douglas, author of *The History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970*, treated the History Group to a dissertation on the role and significance of land value taxation to the Liberal Party in the years to 1914.

He began by placing it within the agricultural context of the late nineteenth century in the four nations of the British Isles, pointing out that due to harvest failure in 1879, the UK had started to import grain and meat from North America and New Zealand. This had led to a permanent fall in food prices. The main victims of this fall were the landowners who increasingly were seen as economic parasites rather than as pillars of the community. This made them vulnerable as a class to philosophic and economic attack.

This attack was given shape by Henry George, an American philosopher and economist, in his book *Progress and Poverty*. He concluded that the cause of poverty was lack of access to land and that the community should redress this through a land value tax.

This was enthusiastically adopted by the Liberal Party and included in the 1891 Newcastle Programme. Events then moved swiftly on to the 1906–10 Liberal government, which did make several efforts to introduce land value taxation only to see them fall in the Lords. Dr Douglas then argued that it was the inclusion of a national survey of land values in the 1909 'People's Budget' which led to its defeat by the Lords. Even though the budget ultimately became law in 1910 the actual survey was not complete at the outbreak of war, and Dr Douglas could offer no convincing explanation as to why this was so.

Politically, however, Dr Douglas argued that land value taxation was electorally very popular, citing the Liberal victory in the August 1912 Hanley byelection in a Labour seat as evidence. It would, in his opinion, have been the issue on which the 1915 election would have been won. However, the war intervened, and like all the other great Liberal issues it was swept under the carpet in the interests of national unity. The Tory dominance in the inter-war years meant that, except briefly in the 1929–31 Labour government, it never reemerged as a live political issue.

A stimulating discussion followed in which the audience focused on the popularity of land value taxation amongst the working class, the Labour Party's toying with the policy and its significance in the Lloyd George split with Asquith. The discussion became steadily more like a revival meeting and Dr Douglas ended with a call to ensure the cause of land value taxation was communicated to the today's electors.

A lively and interesting meeting, Dr Douglas provided a basic grounding in the history of Liberals and land value taxation up to 1914 but did not develop for the sceptical sufficiently the economic justification for the tax. As a result the meeting suffered from being hijacked by enthusiasts towards the end, leaving the more historical members of the audience – including myself – rather bemused as to the relative strengths of the case for and against land value taxation in either the Edwardian period or modern times.

Malcolm Baines is a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee.

Keeping the Peace?

Book Review: A Military History of Ireland, edited by T Bartlett & K Jeffrey (Cambridge University Press, 1996; £45). Reviewed by Tony Little

No doubt, it is an unspoken tradition of reviewers to skip parts of books but I want to admit honestly that I only read around half of this heavyweight (in the literal sense) tome. The book is a series of essays which covers the interaction of armies and government from Celtic through to modern times. It is not limited to a detailed description of the bloody battles and atrocities which continue to breed mistrust between England and Ireland. In fact battles are, if anything, under-represented. Rather it shows the way in which armies developed and their equally tense relations with the civil powers and the local population.

I picked up the fascinating story with the Tudors, when determined efforts were made to conquer Ireland, and

followed the progress up to 1922 when the Free State came into being. England did not set out to secure full central control over Ireland until the scale of rebellions around the Pale demanded a reaction. Religious elements compounded local squabbles among powerful war lords until William III's defeat of Jacobite forces secured a Protestant domination. The spirit of the native Irish was never fully conquered and there was never an entirely trusting relationship between the British government and the Irish Protestants – the 1798 rebellion and the Irish Home Rule Party were both Protestant-led.

From the sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries,

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