

WHY I HAVE JOINED THE CONSERVATIVES¹

BY THE RIGHT HONORABLE SIR ALFRED MOND, BT., M. P.

[THE latest sensation in the British political world has been Sir Alfred Mond's transfer of allegiance from the Liberal Party, where he has been a leader for several years, to the Conservative Party. This break, though probably long impending, was precipitated by his opposition to Lloyd George's Land Policy. That plan looks to the virtual nationalization of the arable land of Great Britain and its assignment to actual cultivators under long-term leases so controlled by the authorities that tenures to farms not kept under reasonable tillage will be forfeited.]

BRITISH agriculture has been the stepchild of successive Governments. Though attention has recently been focused upon the problems facing it, by the launching of a land policy of far-reaching consequences, the country is really confronted with a problem that has behind it the experience and practice of many centuries, and no useful approach can be made, or any scheme be applied to the future, without a full knowledge of the past. The two basic considerations which face all agricultural reform at the present time are, first, lack of capital on the part of the landlord, which prevents him from providing the improvements and the adequate maintenance of his estate; and, secondly, from the point of view of the cultivator, a want of security. Because of these two impediments to progress it has become the fashion to

decry the British farmer as inefficient and out of date; yet, if agricultural statistics are considered, the British farmer is, on the whole, producing more crops per acre, has a higher state of cultivation on his arable land, and probably, on the whole, better stock and better meat than any other farmer on the continent of Europe.

As in all other directions, the modern tendency seems to be to increase the control of the State in agriculture without rendering the required assistance to the cultivator. Agriculture has a particular importance to national prosperity and national stability; but apart from providing that cheap credit to which agriculture is entitled, equally with other industries, and apart from providing a reasonable sense of security in the mind of the farmer, there is little that the State can do to assist the fundamental needs of agriculture besides the bestowal of advice, the promotion of research, and the development of education. For, whatever the tenure, the land is best cultivated with the greatest measure of freedom given to the man who knows what he is doing. It is opposed to the best interests of agriculture for the cultivator of the soil to be interfered with and directed on all the detailed points of his industry. The qualities of the land vary so much from one area to another, from one county to another, from one farm to another, and even from one field to another, that the best judge of the potentialities and possibilities of a farm is most often the farmer himself.

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There has always been in this country diversity of tenure. Under any system of land reform I object most strongly to either the exclusion of freehold tenure or any hostility toward or hindrance to the future development of freehold tenure. I am an unrepentant believer that freeholders will be the best farmers. There is a section of opinion in this country to which freehold is anathema, which considers the freehold farmer the worst farmer in the world, and which wishes to see the land owned by local authorities and managed by local authorities, and the farmer placed to a large extent in the position of remaining all his life in the status of a pupil, being carefully guided by superior official wisdom. I join a definite and permanent issue with this school of thought. I am a fundamental believer in freehold ownership, as the safest foundation of agriculture in any country. I consider that, both for the purpose of progressive agriculture and for the purpose of national stability, it should be encouraged rather than discouraged. Agriculture in those countries that are now held up to us as examples of efficiency and prosperity — for instance, Denmark, Belgium, and Prussia — has been established upon the development of freehold tenure. Similarly, agriculture in our great Dominions has been established upon freehold tenure; and I consider it vital that no impediment should be put in the way of increasing the number of freeholders, and that, upon the sale of an estate or a farm, the sitting tenant should have the first right of purchase under any scheme of agricultural reform. Indeed, in assuring this the policy would merely be carrying out modern practice, for to-day, at the sale of an estate by any reputable landlord, the sitting tenant is invariably given the option of purchase if he desires it. Moreover, the sitting tenant ought to

be able to buy the land on the same terms as those granted to any public body. He ought to be able to buy at a fair agricultural valuation, and he ought to be supplied with the necessary credit upon reasonable terms.

The main objects of any land policy should be the advancement of agriculture — by aiding the development of undercapitalized estates and undercultivated farms, by the application of cheap credit, by giving greater security to the farmer as a tenant and greater facilities for the farmer to become a freeholder, by giving greater opportunities and greater rights to the laborer to obtain, in the form of either allotments, small holdings, or family farms, a progressive ladder by which, if he has the ability, he can himself advance to independence in agriculture. Apart from this brief statement, there remain such important questions as rural housing, rural education, agricultural research, improvement both in stock and in plants, the development of coöperation, particularly in marketing, and the study of the problems of the stabilization of agricultural prices — these are the matters which seem to be essential to revive the agricultural life of the country. Many, if not most, of the objects can be achieved by administrative action, within the scope of present Acts of Parliament. Many others could be achieved by slight amendments of Acts of Parliament relating to agriculture already in force. Any scheme that would strike at the roots of the fundamental principle of freehold; that would increase, rather than diminish, the sense of insecurity in the farmer; that would add to the burdens and complications of local administration; that would create inspired dictators in agriculture in each county; and that would burden the State with the overwhelming toils of a financial experiment, at the present time, should be

most strongly opposed as against the best interests of agriculture and of the community.

As one who has all along definitely taken a firm and convinced stand as an exponent of individualism as against Socialism, there was no honorable course to pursue, therefore, but to break my lifelong association with the Liberal Party. I therefore decided to coöperate in future with that Party that adheres to the fundamental principle of individualism. The Lloyd George Land Policy was and is the nationalization of agricultural land. No striving after compromise, no endeavor to entangle in masses of detail, no plan of evasion, equivocation, or vagueness can disguise this fact. I have always believed and I still believe that the best interests of British agriculture can be promoted and will be promoted by the free man on his own land, rather than by the controlled tenant on publicly owned land. In other words, I remain a convinced and sincere individualist.

My declaration of political faith throughout my public career has been based and established upon the principle underlying this statement. In Socialism I see to-day, as I always have seen, the degradation of the individual, the deterioration of the community, and the downfall of the State. The State has definite functions, and a definite relation to society, and to the component parts of the society, whether they be industrial, commercial, or agricultural. There are definite limits, well determined and easily defined, beyond which the application of State control or State intervention can do no good, but rather may achieve tremendous harm. In view of the evolution of the political theory to which parties or political leaders have recently subscribed, I have come to the conclusion that the Conservative Party, under its

present direction, is the national anti-Socialist Party.

Looking round on the political and economic horizons, — if both horizons are not the same seen from a different angle, — I find that the problems that confront Great Britain are so diverse and serious that, unless a united effort is made by all people of equal purpose, equal desires, and equal determination, there is a considerable danger that Britain will be unable to maintain her proud position in the world of to-day. There are pressing and portentous problems that brook of no delay. The world has not yet stabilized its financial, economic, or political position after the upheaval of the Great War. It is, therefore, all the more essential that in Europe particularly there should be some great stabilizing force. Traditionally, historically, and actually Great Britain is the one power that can occupy that position. It is true that she has her own peculiar domestic problems, but compared with the disintegration and chaos on the Continent they seem insignificant.

In Great Britain itself the utmost concern is rightly felt about the industrial situation. Industry has been depressed, our export trade has been damaged, our unemployment returns have been abnormal if not appalling. The whole problem comes back to one of cost of production. There is no short cut to reduction in the cost of production. To whatever extent the present industrial situation may be due to war-time experience and social experiments, one fact remains clear, and that is that before British industry can reclaim its pride of position all must get down to basic considerations.

Mr. Baldwin has frequently appealed with great force for the consideration of our industrial problems in a new atmosphere. I am in entire agreement that what is required in industrial

affairs is the application of a new psychology and consequently the adoption of a new phraseology. For there are items in industry that no accountant can put into a balance sheet, and that can never appear in a profit-and-loss account. Who can tell in pounds, shillings, and pence the value of willing service? I have long been in sympathy with those earnest appeals of Mr. Baldwin, and as far as I have been able I have endeavored to second and support his efforts. I now hope in coöperation to devote my time and energy to the creation of the new atmosphere that is so essential.

The creation of a new atmosphere alone will not produce fruitful results unless it is supported by practical measures and means. The country has confronting it to-day a coming crisis in the coal industry. There is no industry in which the creation of a new atmosphere is more essential to national prosperity. Mr. Baldwin's endeavors in the general field have during the last few days been strengthened in this particular direction by the wise and useful declaration of Lord Londonderry. Lord Londonderry has faced the facts, and thousands throughout the country are following his lead. There is a general desire both within the industry and without, whatever action official bodies from either side may take, or whatever views they may promulgate, to find a solution to the difficulties rather than carry on the controversy. In times of political serenity and industrial prosperity, controversy, dialectics, and debate

may be the salt of the earth to many people. But in times of financial stringency, economic restraint, and political confusion that salt loses its savor.

It is because there is useful national work that must be done, it is because I find that the whole force of my political ideals is best represented to-day in the attitude and policy of the Conservative Party, that I have taken the course I have. I come as a recruit eager to coöperate, willing to help, having no ambition more than to be of service to my country. I have shed political allegiance, dissolved political friendships, and invited and received personal rancor and recriminations, because I believe that it is by the coöperation of those who are seeking the same goal, have the same fundamental political principles, and are straining every sinew and nerve toward the achievement of their object, that Britain can be rescued from her present plight. The issue to-day, as it will continue to be in the future, is between those who believe in the free functioning of the individual conscience and individual action by which Britain has achieved her position in the world, and those who believe that a dragooned and driven population in industry or agriculture, obeying the solemn orders of some high priest of Socialism, can achieve in some Utopian empire something better than has been gained in the British Empire. Precedent broadening into precedent is to be preferred to passing from confusion to chaos.

A REPLY TO SIR ALFRED MOND¹

BY W. McG. EAGAR

WHEN Sir Alfred Mond puts forward in the pages of a famous Conservative journal his reasons for disagreeing with the policy now under consideration by the Liberal Party, a welcome opportunity is created for explaining to Conservative readers what that policy really is.

A great policy has to be viewed as a whole. Those who put it forward have seen it built up bit by bit, and they may be pardoned their regret that controversy should first rage round points of minor importance, or often of sheer misunderstanding. Sir Alfred Mond's article illustrates this very clearly. He reiterates some economic premises that are fully recognized in *The Land and the Nation*; he ignores other premises, both economic and political, that must be used in conjunction with them. Moreover, he fails to apply even the premises he accepts. He admits, for example, that the State has certain functions in agriculture, such as the provision of cheap credit, and of a 'reasonable sense of security in the mind of the farmer'; but the kind of credit he envisages is apparently only for the purpose of enabling farmers to buy their land. What agriculture to-day really requires is a system of credit supply analogous to that created for agriculture in other countries. Moreover, in practice he maintains that a reasonable sense of security is to be engendered in the farmer's mind only by an absolute right to do what he will

with the land he occupies. He does not even suggest how the State should provide the limited kind of cheap credit he has in mind, and he leaves out of all account the community's right to see that the land is fully used.

All this is not very helpful. It is, at any rate, a virtue in *The Land and the Nation*, that is the 'Green Book,' that it not only sets out, in a form that has not yet been challenged, the functions that the State can and ought to exercise in relation to agriculture, but works out in detail the way in which those functions could be exercised at the present time.

The real answer to Sir Alfred Mond lies in a study of the actual proposals made by the Land Committee. But first the field must be cleared of inaccuracies and misstatements. Sir Alfred Mond says that there is no desire among the agricultural community that the State or local authorities should acquire the agricultural land of the country. He does not say that it has been proved up to the hilt that there is no desire among farmers generally to buy the land they occupy. The percentage of occupying ownership has leaped up since 1917 from about ten to about twenty-five per cent. It is notorious that this increase is due mainly to sitting tenants being compelled to buy their farms at prices out of all relation to their true agricultural value and with results often disastrous to their farming. Sir Alfred Mond's implication is that the growth of occupying ownership is a good thing in itself.

¹ From the *Saturday Review* (London Baldwin-Conservative weekly), January 23