

*NOTE ON DR. WALLACE'S PAPER.*

BY PROFESSOR NICHOLSON.

SINCE I wrote my paper I have read the scheme offered to the Conference by Mr. Wallace. It seems to me to be an example of the 'good despot' fallacy—that is to say, the 'knowledge and integrity' demanded from the assessors and umpire on the one part, and the obedience and contentedness demanded from the labourers, farmers, and landlords on the other, are more than can be expected of rural human nature at present. Even on starting the scheme, a conflict of claims would arise, which it would be very difficult to settle equitably with the highest knowledge and integrity obtainable in the kingdom. Nothing short of an executive commission could ever undertake a redistribution of land on the scale proposed.

Again, suppose the plots have been distributed, and that in any case the labourer cannot pay the rent, will he at once dispose of his holding and depart, or will he require a legal process? With the rule, one man one plot, will he be able always to sell his holding? If he cannot sell it and cannot pay his rent, what will become of the

land in the meantime? How are the plots to be inherited or bequeathed?

I think on reflection Mr. Wallace will find that he has only got rid of State management and land laws by assuming a simplicity that does not and cannot exist, and I am quite certain of one thing, that such a scheme, so far from settling the Highland land question, would make matters much worse, by creating a number of additional holdings of the size that has been universally condemned by landlords, farmers, crofters, and the Royal Commission. Where there is real agrarian distress in the Highlands, it has arisen from the informal adoption of Mr. Wallace's plot system. The people have been their own assessors when the landlords have not been strong enough to prevent it, and now they appeal to Government to extend their holdings. What the crofters wish for and demand is a good deal more than these small plots. There is a general desire on the part both of landlords and crofters to increase the size of the holdings, but the practical difficulties in the way are very great. In some quarters, *e.g.*, Lewis, emigration, or at least migration, is inevitable. The Crofters Commission made an elaborate attempt to provide for the extension of holdings, but their scheme is generally considered unworkable.

It is true that Mr. Wallace does not pin his faith in his plan to the particular method adopted, but my contention is that from the nature of the case nothing but an elaborate system of law and judicial machinery could make such a plan tolerable. Everyone may approve of cultivating ownership in the abstract, but the real difficulty is, how can it be attained? It seems to me that the ideal of land law reform ought not to be to abolish the hire of land, which in all ages has been found useful, but to make contracts for the hire of land equitable—not to eliminate the landlord from the social economy, but to make him feel his responsibility and perform his natural functions.

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