

The Farmers' Alliance: An Agricultural Protest Movement of the 1880's

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I

LAND tenure systems involve the distribution of property rights within a particular institutional framework. The relationship of landlord and tenant in nineteenth-century England was set within a framework of legal theory which had changed little since the Middle Ages. It is unnecessary here to describe in detail the full ramifications of this legal framework,¹ the implication of the concept of the law of fixtures is the major point of interest. As expressed in the maxim, "Quidquid solo plantatur, solo cedit," it was held that that which became annexed to the land became realty and not the property of the lessee. Thus "whatever improvements a tenant may make to his holding pass to the landlord."² The former might have increased the value of his holding by his own efforts but had no right of compensation at the end of his tenancy.

Such a maxim clearly entailed a major theoretical constraint to agricultural improvement on the part of the tenant. In practice, however, it is clear that such an unsatisfactory institutional arrangement was by no means incompatible with agricultural progress. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a remarkable change and growth in the industry, and F. M. L. Thompson has pointed to the large quantitative increase in capital investment on the part of tenants in the latter period.³ At the same time there has been a strong tradition of historiography which insisted (and still insists) that archaic institutions, perpetuated by the vested interest of English landownership in its own con-

tinued power and privilege, retarded this progress and entailed its impermanence.⁴ Plausibility is lent to this thesis by the unsure response of English agriculture to the very real problem faced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the degree of friction between landlord and tenant in certain periods, over the question of legislative provision of compensation for unexhausted improvements.⁵ One such example of friction was the Farmers' Alliance. At one point in the 1880's this organization appeared to command substantial support among English farmers. Further, it has been held to have played a considerable part in the passage of the Agricultural Holdings Act of 1883, the first major piece of legislation regulating the legal relationship of landlord and tenant.⁶ An examination of the history of the Alliance provides an illustration of the response of farmers to such a thesis when presented in a period of considerable economic distress.

II

The year 1879 was an auspicious one for the inception of an organization whose aims, despite the disclaimers of its founders, were essentially antagonistic to the established English agrarian structure. The economic distress of that year was the background to the growth of a considerable degree of disaffection among English farmers, especially in the south and in

¹ For these see A. D. Hargreaves, *An Introduction to the Principles of Land Law*, 3rd edn, 1952.

² C. S. Orwin and E. H. Whetham, *History of British Agriculture 1846-1914*, 1964, p. 153.

³ F. M. L. Thompson, 'The Second Agricultural Revolution 1815-1880', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., xxi, 1968, pp. 63-77.

⁴ The best statement of this thesis is made by O. R. McGregor in his introduction to the sixth edition of Lord Ernle, *English Farming, Past and Present*, 1961, pp. cxvii-cxxvii, which also provides an extensive bibliography of the tradition.

⁵ The prevalence of the theme in Irish history need hardly be mentioned. For an important reconsideration see Barbara L. Solow, *The Land Question and the Irish Economy, 1870-1903*, Harvard U.P., 1971.

⁶ See J. R. McQuiston, 'Tenant Right: Farmer against Landlord in Victorian England 1847-1883', *Ag. Hist.*, 47, 1973, pp. 108-13.

the east, with their traditional associates and representatives in the landlord class. The Alliance, its primary objective a measure of tenant right, could capitalize on this sentiment and on a sense of grievance against a Conservative government which had nothing, beyond a Royal Commission, to offer to those whose interests it claimed to have at heart. Further, the Alliance could claim to be the logical successor of an earlier movement which had sought to enhance the legal standing of the tenant farmer. This earlier campaign, conducted through the organization of the Central and Associated Chambers of Agriculture, had sought legislation to give tenants a legal right to compensation for their own improvements. A partial success only, the permissive Agricultural Holdings Act of 1875, had been won in the face of landlord opposition in the Chambers and in Parliament.⁷ It was the Alliance's objective to advance on this measure. Its role, it was argued, was made necessary by the later impotence of the Chamber movement,⁸ and its objective was more urgent than ever in view of the parlous state of agriculture.

At the same time the credentials of the Alliance as a genuine tenant-farmer movement were far from impeccable. Early associations with Irish tenant-farmer organizations were fervently disclaimed as the latter became synonymous with agrarian violence and terror, but were not easily lived down.⁹ Political bias was a further accusation just as difficult of refutation. The major leaders of the Alliance were either Liberal politicians or known sympathizers with that party. The first Chairman, James Howard, had been Liberal M.P. for Bedford from 1868 to 1874. The Secretary and Treasurer, William Bear, an agricultural jour-

nalist, always took a markedly Radical line in his writings. Other members of the original leadership were drawn from the Parliamentary Liberal Party.¹⁰ Even more significantly, the name of Clare Sewell Read, the major leader of the earlier campaign for tenants' rights, was conspicuous by its absence from the original committee which began the Alliance.¹¹

The known political sympathies of the Alliance leaders belied the claim to independence of party. The claim to represent tenant-farmers also accorded ill with the paucity of their number on the Alliance committee. All members had some connection with agriculture, but seldom of an intimately practical nature. Howard was well known for his progressive farming on his own Bedfordshire estate, but his major source of income lay in the manufacture of agricultural implements. Bear had failed as a farmer in Essex before turning to agricultural journalism.¹² The stated programme of the Alliance called for the better parliamentary representation of farmers by their own class, but otherwise had little to offer in the nature of the sort of concrete benefit most attractive in a time of economic distress.

This was in fact a point on which the Alliance leaders laid some stress. Achievement of such aims as legal compensation for improvements, game law reform, and the abolition of the law of distress could bring little immediate succour of existing economic ills. As Howard put it, "without a return of more congenial seasons, no legislation will avail in restoring prosperity. . ."¹³ What the Alliance offered was a radical transformation of the English agrarian struc-

⁷ McQuiston, *loc. cit.*, pp. 105-8. See also J. R. Fisher, 'Public Opinion and Agriculture 1875-1900', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Hull, 1973, pp. 143-76.

⁸ *Mark Lane Express*, 11 November 1878, for a Farmers' Club paper and discussion on "The Need of Greater Unity of Action in the Agricultural Interest."

⁹ See *The Times*, 13 April 1880, for the claim of the (then) Parnellite M.P., Frank Hugh O'Donnell, to have founded the Alliance. See the *Mark Lane Express*, 13 April, 5 and 12 May 1879, for some confirmation of an Irish role at its inception.

¹⁰ The original Provisional Committee included three Scottish Liberal M.P.s and one (moderate) Irish Home Ruler. All four Englishmen were connected with farming but two, J. P. Sheldon and Henry Evershed, were best known as agricultural writers. See *Mark Lane Express*, 2 June 1879.

¹¹ See J. R. Fisher, *Clare Sewell Read: An Agricultural Spokesman of the late Nineteenth Century*, University of Hull, 1975.

¹² *Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression*, 1894, *Minutes of Evidence*, II, Qs. 27, 472-82. (References to the two Royal Commissions on agriculture in the late nineteenth century are hereafter given as R.C.: date of publication: particular identification of volume.)

¹³ *The Times*, 10 July 1879.

ture to enable the industry to meet the future on a more stable footing. Immediate success was out of the question, and Bear warned that "great distress will prevail until our system of agriculture has been adapted. . ."¹⁴ In two articles in the *Nineteenth Century* he developed fully the case for change from paternalism to a commercial system appropriate to the changing economic circumstances which agriculture faced. Acknowledging the complacency with which farmers regarded landlord paternalism, especially where this entailed rents below market value, Bear felt this arose from ignorance. Low rents entailed political dependence, the neglect of agricultural investment, restrictive covenants, and the acceptance of injurious game laws. A system which embodied true commercial principles would be to the benefit of tenant landlord, and consumer. Despite its admitted past progress, English agriculture still possessed a great capacity for growth in productivity; the views of the Earls of Derby and Leicester, and J. J. Mechi, were adduced in support of this claim. The major constraint was the lack of capital investment on the part of the tenant, and this would only be forthcoming if he was given security to enjoy the full benefits of his improvements. In 1879, Bear argued, the gloomy economic circumstances made his message imperative. Tenants' security would mean not only greater investment in agriculture but investment on a more rational pattern. He felt that it was already becoming obvious that those farmers who had suffered least were those with sufficient capital invested in the land. The ability which others possessed to meet the prevalent depression was nullified by the insecurity of their position.¹⁵

Bear presented the programme and philosophy of the Alliance in the press, particularly in his role as editor of the *Mark Lane Express*. It was Howard who took the message to the country. After an initial meeting in Birmingham, which confirmed the suspicions of critics

as to the movement's radical nature,¹⁶ he turned to East Anglia, to be met by crowded and sympathetic farmers' audiences.¹⁷ Here in the major area of commercial cereal production, which had suffered most from bad weather and foreign competition, considerable dissatisfaction was evinced with the traditional representatives of the tenant-farmer. Despite considerable remissions of rent there was a general feeling that landlords had responded neither speedily nor fully enough. There was a further feeling that remissions should have been permanent reductions.¹⁸ At the same time, landlords had failed in their political function. It was evident that the Conservatives, the party of the "farmers' friends," had nothing to offer by way of redress for their woes.

Such disaffection gave the Alliance the sort of local power base it needed to gain any sort of credibility as a real farmers' movement. Several provincial agricultural leaders, mainly traditional Conservatives, as Bear pointed out gleefully, joined the Alliance in 1879. Men such as W. Wing Gray and Robert Gardiner in Essex, William Manfield in Suffolk, and Robert Lake and H. Nethersole in Kent gave the movement (in the south and east) the local stature that it needed. When the first national conference was held at the end of the year it was East Anglia and Kent which dominated numerically, although representatives came from all parts of England.¹⁹ Despite a slashing attack by Clare Read on the Alliance as anti-landlord, a branch was also successfully established in Norfolk in 1880.²⁰

The chance for the Alliance to demonstrate its political effectiveness came with the general election of April 1880. Unfortunately, "the announcement of the dissolution of Parliament has come too soon to find farmers prepared . . ."²¹ and the Alliance could mount no concerted campaign. It was reduced to the endorsement of candidates who were prepared to

¹⁴ *Mark Lane Express*, 25 August 1879.

¹⁵ W. E. Bear, "The Public Interest in Agricultural Reform", *Nineteenth Century*, v, June 1879, pp. 1079-90, and vi, September 1879, pp. 571-84.

¹⁶ *Chamber of Agriculture Journal*, 11 August 1879.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18 August 1879; *The Times*, 21 October 1879.

¹⁸ The general view is succinctly presented in Ernle, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

¹⁹ *Mark Lane Express*, 29 December 1879.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 16 February 1880.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13 March 1880.

accept its major objectives; the overwhelming majority of these were Liberals. Nevertheless, the Alliance emerged from the election with considerably enhanced prestige.

The general election was a triumph for the Liberal party, whether the cause arose from Gladstone's dramatic Midlothian progress or the general economic malaise. In the *Fortnightly Review* Bear claimed that there had been "A Revolt of the Counties," the traditional identification of Conservative party and agricultural interest was ending, and rural dissatisfaction had played a major role in the Liberal victory. There had been a gain of 43 members in rural constituencies, 27 of these being in England. Of 63 endorsed Alliance candidates 42 had been returned, only two of these being Conservatives. The way was now open for major agricultural reforms.²²

Contemporaries, both Liberal and Conservative, tended to accept Bear's assessment. W. Saunders quoted the same figures in referring to "the disappointment of the farmers' hopes from the Conservatives," and the disregard paid by the latter to the newly formed Alliance.²³ Disraeli, rationalizing his disastrous decision for a dissolution, referred to the "insurrection of our old and natural friends, the farmers," arguing that a later election would have entailed an even more disastrous result.²⁴ However, although there were signs of a movement away from the Conservatives in rural areas, the notion of a farmers' revolt, or of any significant role played by the Alliance, amounted to a considerable distortion of the situation.

The majority of Liberal gains in the English counties entailed the recovery of seats lost in the *débâcle* of 1874; these also entailed a resurgence of the traditional Whig interest²⁵ rather than the

emergence of tenant-farmers as a separate force in politics. The figure of successful Alliance candidates was misleading, to say the least. Interested as such Radicals as Joseph Chamberlain, Jesse Collings, and P. A. Taylor were in agricultural questions, they were unlikely to have relied on farmers' votes for election. In fact the Alliance made no contribution at all towards the implementation of its major objective, the increased representation of tenant-farmers in Parliament. Only two active members were elected: James Howard in Bedfordshire, and W. C. Borlase in east Cornwall. Both were landowners rather than tenant-farmers. Borlase recaptured a seat lost due to a Liberal split in 1874, while Howard's victory was based on his local prestige and influence. It came after a series of tortuous negotiations with the Bedford interest; the Duke was prepared to spend £500 to have him stand anywhere but in his own county.²⁶

Two independent tenant-farmers were returned in 1880: William Biddell and Thomas Duckham.²⁷ Neither had any connection with the Alliance, both being influential members of the Chamber movement. Finally and paradoxically, the Alliance was generally reckoned to have been instrumental in the narrow defeat of Clare Read in South Norfolk,²⁸ the man accepted, even by William Bear, as the "historical tenant farmer representative." Read certainly blamed the Alliance for a defeat which did no-

tance of the renewed Yarborough interest in the constituency in 1880. See also W. Saunders, *op. cit.*, pp. 123-8, for biographies of newly elected M.P.s. The majority of those in rural seats had impeccable Whig pedigrees.

²⁶ See Janet Howarth, 'The Liberal Revival in Northamptonshire, 1880-1895', *Historical Journal*, xii, 1969, p. 89. Lord Spencer refused to give the necessary endorsement for Howard to stand in South Northamptonshire, so the latter returned to Bedfordshire. Here he was elected at the head of the poll, the Duke's heir, the Marquis of Tavistock, being elected in second place.

²⁷ For William Biddell (1825-1900), one of four brothers farming in Suffolk, see G. E. Evans, *The Horse in the Furrow*, 1960. Biddell was elected unopposed in West Suffolk, partly as a result of local discontent with Conservative policies on local taxation. Thomas Duckham (1816-1904) was elected in Herefordshire with Liberal support. In 1880 he was Chairman of the Central Chamber of Agriculture but he later associated himself with the Alliance on some political questions.

²² W. E. Bear, 'The Revolt of the Counties', *Fortnightly Review*, xxvii, May 1880, pp. 720-5.

²³ W. Saunders, *The New Parliament of 1880*, 1880, p. 188.

²⁴ R. Blake, *Disraeli*, 1964, p. 719; Disraeli to Salisbury, 18 April 1880.

²⁵ The dramatic victory of an eleventh-hour candidate in North Lincolnshire, instanced by both Saunders and Blake as an example of farmers' effective protest, was in fact an illustration of this theme. See H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management*, 1959, p. 27, for the impor-

²⁸ *Mark Lane Express*, 12 and 19 April 1880.

thing to lessen his intransigent opposition to the organization.

However, the ineffectual nature of the Alliance as a political force in 1880 was to be further obscured by the seeming responsiveness of the new Government to the cry for agricultural reform. In the course of the election campaign, Gladstone, and other Liberal leaders, had promised further legislation to protect "the right of the tenant to the improvements which he makes."²⁹ The first piece of legislation enacted in the new Parliament was the Ground Game Act, giving tenants a concurrent right to destroy hares and rabbits on their own holdings. Later in the year, in the course of the Budget, the Malt Tax was repealed and replaced by beer duties. A perennial objective of Conservative agricultural spokesmen, this had seemingly proved impossible of achievement during their own term of office. With the Liberal party committed to various features of land law reform, even its usual antagonists admitted it seemed to be proving a "farmers' friend."³⁰

The Farmers' Alliance gained some credit from these initiatives, with Howard proving an effective spokesman in Parliament. At the same time its local organization was being extended, new branches being formed in the north-east, Cornwall, Hampshire, Lancashire, and Berkshire in 1880 and the following year. Other local organizations joined the Alliance and rapid progress was made, in particular in Kent, where farmers used it as a vehicle for agitation against the local grievance of the extraordinary tithe.³¹ The Alliance also won the plaudits of outsiders for its work on excessive railway rates, a subject of concern to numerous interests outside of agriculture.³² Its prestige was at its zenith in these two years.

²⁹ *The Times*, 19 March 1880.

³⁰ *Chamber of Agriculture Journal*, 14 June 1880.

³¹ *R.C.*, 1881-2, *Minutes of Evidence*, I: and III, Qs. 56, 498-501, and 58, 883-5; evidence of Charles Whitehead and James Howard.

³² P. M. Williams, 'Public Opinion and the Railway Rates Question in 1886', *English History Review*, LXVII, 1952, pp. 37-73. See also the *Select Committee on Railway and Canal Charges*, 1881, pp. XIII, *Evidence*, Qs. 1-628 and 700-1003, for work of Professor W. A. Hunter on behalf of the Alliance.

However, the decline of the Alliance into obscurity was almost as rapid as its original rise. Essentially, its prestige and political effectiveness depended on the willingness of a Liberal government to undertake measures favourable to agriculture, and upon the ability of the Alliance leaders to influence the nature of these. Changes in the laws governing land tenure remained the primary objective of the Alliance, and it was on this issue that its impotence with regard to legislation, and its irrelevance to the essential requirements of its local supporters were finally clearly revealed.

In 1881 the situation appeared superficially favourable to the enactment of effective legislation in the interests of protecting the investment of English tenant-farmers. Although English legislation was indefinitely postponed by the government's obsession with Ireland, this was an obsession with the nature of land tenure. Its result, the Irish Land Act of 1881, conceded the demand for the three F's: fair rent, fixity of tenure, and freedom of sale (of tenants' improvements). This amounted to the creation of a dual ownership in the land. If such interference with property rights could be countenanced in Ireland, won as it was by violence, then it could be argued that there would be little objection on the basis of principle to less extreme changes in England.³³ Certainly by this time, landlord spokesmen in England were in favour of compulsory legislation on compensation, and had put forward Bills embodying this principle.³⁴ Or at least, as J. C. Morton put it, "whatever may be the unuttered resolutions of the great body of landowners in this country, all our public speakers among them are far in advance of the position they defended but a year or two ago."³⁵

It was in these circumstances that the Alliance leaders drew up their own plans for legislation. It had already been decided that merely making the 1875 Act compulsory was an inadequate

³³ *Mark Lane Express*, 17 January 1881.

³⁴ Two from Liberals, Sir Thomas Acland and Edward Heneage; two from Conservatives, Henry Chaplin and A. Staveley Hill. See *ibid.*, 14 May 1883, for Alliance views on their respective merits.

³⁵ *Agricultural Gazette*, 5 December 1881.

method of protecting the tenant; on the other hand it was recognized that Irish principles would not be suitable in England. There was certainly no call for dual ownership from English tenants, and the principle had become associated with obnoxious Irish methods to the degree where it would have been vigorously opposed by many outside those directly affected in the landlord class. In particular, considerable distaste, among farmers and landlords alike, had been evinced for the notion of Land Courts providing a rent-fixing mechanism. However, rejection of Irish principles left a hiatus over one particular problem which had become of increasing concern to the Alliance leaders: the question of how to protect the sitting tenant who had his rent raised on his own improvements. The provision of compensation, however adequate, at the end of a tenancy would be of little value to a man in this situation. At most he would possess only a rather tenuous bargaining point.

In practice it was difficult, if not impossible, to safeguard the sitting tenant without adopting Irish principles; the crux of the matter was the extent and nature of outside interference in contractual relations between landlord and tenant. The final form of the Alliance's Land Bill, based largely on the proposals of J. W. Barclay,³⁶ leader of the Scottish Farmers' Alliance, attempted to disguise its Irish origins with little success. Its major provision centred around the right of the tenant, at the end of his tenancy or faced with a rise in the rent, freely to sell the value of his improvements to the incoming tenant or to the landlord.³⁷

Although it was emphasized that rents were to be negotiated normally between landlord and tenant it was obvious that freedom of action for the former would be circumscribed to the degree to which the latter would be able to

claim compensation. This in turn, given that no satisfactory arrangement could be reached, would depend on outside intervention. Here the spectre of Land Courts was raised and the implication, if Irish precedents were accepted,³⁸ that the tenant's compensation would be related to the whole increase in value since the beginning of his occupancy.

Both implications, of course, were seized upon by opponents of the Alliance for adverse comment. More ominously, they proved unacceptable to earlier sympathizers of the movement. As Morton pointed out, they struck at a fundamental theme in English agriculture, the role of the landlord in providing capital investment. If "the whole of the increment in value (is) to belong to one,"³⁹ then landlord investment in permanent improvements would come to an end. Howard might disavow any Irish precedent in the Alliance proposals,⁴⁰ Bear might claim that landlords still received adequate recompense in terms of higher land values;⁴¹ those who would determine the actual content of English legislation on the question, the Liberal leadership, proved unresponsive to such arguments.

The government's English Agricultural Holdings Bill did not appear until eighteen months after the Alliance had made public its proposals. In the interval those Liberal leaders most intimately concerned with the nature and passage of Irish land tenure legislation made clear their view on its appropriateness in the English context. Early in 1882, Gladstone spoke on the fundamental difference in the position of English and Irish tenant-farmers. As to the former, they themselves possessed their own remedy to any problem: they were not Irish peasants chained to the land.⁴² A year later, Shaw-Lefevre, rejecting an invitation to preside over a local Kent branch of the Farmers' Alliance, described the

³⁶ J. W. Barclay, Liberal and Liberal Unionist M.P. for Forfarshire, 1868-92, shipowner, agricultural merchant, and a major investor in American land companies. His own keen interest in tenants' compensation could be explained by his experience as an improving farmer; see R.C. 1881, *Evidence*, II, Qs. 42, 998-43, 061, and the *Farmer*, 30 May 1887.

³⁷ For a detailed presentation of the Alliance Land Bill see *Mark Lane Express*, 10, 17, and 24 October 1881.

³⁸ See Solow, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-81.

³⁹ *Agricultural Gazette*, 14 November 1881.

⁴⁰ McQuiston, *loc. cit.*, p. 111. Howard to Gladstone, 8 November 1881.

⁴¹ W. E. Bear, 'The True Principle of Tenant Right: A Reply to the Duke of Argyll', *Contemporary Review*, 41, April 1882, p. 655.

⁴² *Agricultural Gazette*, 21 January 1882. Annual speech at the Hawarden Tenantry Dinner.

Land Bill of the latter as too extreme in English conditions.⁴³ In the event, the official Bill, introduced in May 1883, was "to a considerable extent the former Agricultural Holdings Act (of 1875) made compulsory."⁴⁴ It differed in providing for compulsion, and in providing for "the measure of . . . compensation . . . to be the value of the improvements to the incoming tenant."⁴⁵ Although these aspects could be welcomed by Alliance leaders, in no way did they represent any concessions to the principles of that organization. Rather, they were in accord with the changes called for by farmers in the Chambers movement from 1875 onwards.

The stance of the Liberal leadership was made perfectly clear during the debate on the second reading of the Bill. Shaw-Lefevre, generally considered its major architect,⁴⁶ took the opportunity to stress that during the discussion of Irish legislation he had always pointed to "the great distinctions that lay between the case of the Irish tenants and that of the English tenants, and he frequently said that it was both impolitic and unjust to apply the system then proposed to England." As far as he was concerned, "one F involved the three Fs."⁴⁷ Members of both parties joined in condemning Alliance proposals on this score; Gladstone was seen to intimate his assent when Sir Walter Barttelot, noted mainly as a Tory obscurantist, claimed that its Bill "contained provisions for fixity of tenure, and for the establishment of Courts for the revision of rents, which he hoped would never become part of the law in this country."⁴⁸

Howard fulminated in vain against the in-

adequacies of the Bill; even his fellow Alliance member, W. C. Borlase, gave him little assistance in his attempts to gain fuller protection for the sitting tenant.⁴⁹ Nor was support forthcoming from the Radicals, previously regarded as being sympathetic to Alliance proposals. Thorold Rogers, noted for his rhetoric against contemporary landlordism,⁵⁰ echoed conventional orthodoxy on landlord investment in the Committee stages of the Bill.⁵¹ Of greater importance, Jesse Collings, Chamberlain's major adviser on agricultural questions, repeated earlier condemnations of the Alliance's Land Bill as making insufficient provision for land held by agricultural labourers.⁵² Although Collings was quite happy to see the judicial regulation of rent, he noted that the Alliance did not seek to extend this to small holdings of less than five acres, nor did they appear interested in encouraging a trend towards owner-occupancy. In 1883 Radical interest in farmers' problems was declining in proportion to an increasing concern with the agricultural labourer and the prospect of his enfranchisement in the near future. The first article of the series which was to become known as the Radical Programme had appeared in January in the *Fortnightly Review*.⁵³

The complete lack of influence of the Alliance was demonstrated most markedly in the Committee stages of the Bill. The only interest evinced by the Radicals was Collings's attempt to extend its provisions to cover the leasing of labourers' allotments; he warned that such questions were not receiving the attention "they would get in three years' time."⁵⁴ The rest of the Liberal party, including the leadership, seemed completely uninterested in the Bill's progress.⁵⁵ Accordingly, Tory county members, with a direct interest in its nature, were

⁴³ *The Times*, 19 January 1883.

⁴⁴ *Agricultural Gazette*, 25 June 1883.

⁴⁵ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., cclxxix, 10 May 1883, c. 512. J. G. Dodson, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, introducing the First Reading. The 1875 Act provided for compensation on the basis of the tenant's outlay over a number of years.

⁴⁶ G. J. Shaw-Lefevre (1831-1928) held posts in all Liberal governments between 1868 and 1895; in 1883 he was Postmaster General with a seat in the Cabinet; voluminous writer on land questions, chairman of the Commons Preservation Society, and chairman of the Royal Commission on Agriculture appointed in 1893. See also his article on 'The Agricultural Holdings Act, 1883', *Nineteenth Century*, xiv, October 1883, pp. 674-94.

⁴⁷ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., cclxxix, 29 May 1883, c. 113.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, c. 1111.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, cc. 1116-26.

⁵⁰ For example, see J. E. Thorold Rogers, *The Economic Interpretation of History*, 1901, pp. 174-81.

⁵¹ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., cclxxxi, 17 July 1883, c. 1695.

⁵² *Daily News*, 7 October 1881. See also J. Collings and F. L. Green, *Life of the Right Honourable Jesse Collings*, 1920, pp. 123-6.

⁵³ [T. H. S. Escott] 'The Future of the Radical Party', *Fortnightly Review*, xxxix, January 1883, pp. 1-11.

⁵⁴ *Hansard*, 3rd ser., cclxxxii, 24 July 1883, cc. 386-7.

⁵⁵ *Agricultural Gazette*, 25 June 1883.

able successfully to move various amendments which limited its scope considerably.⁵⁶ Howard's own amendments were defeated easily and with a minimum of discussion, being unacceptable to government and county members alike.

However, the lack of consideration given to Alliance proposals now owed as much to its poor credentials as a representative of tenant-farmer feeling, as to the unacceptability of its principles. In the debate on the second reading of the government Bill, speaker after speaker, from both sides of the Houses, denied its right to speak on behalf of English farmers. By 1883 the general accuracy of this contention had been well established.

The electoral record of the Alliance between 1880 and 1883 laid bare the superficiality of its role in the Liberal success of the earlier year. The major test had come in January 1882 in a by-election in north Yorkshire, where the local Liberal party selected Samuel Rowlandson, founder and chairman of a local Alliance branch, as its candidate. A farmer on 5,000 acres, and long a regional figure in agricultural politics, it was considered by the *Mark Lane Express* that, "as out of 20,212 electors nearly ten thousand are farmers, Mr. Rowlandson's success ought to be certain."⁵⁷ However, despite the financial support of local Liberals,⁵⁸ and the oratory of James Howard and other Alliance leaders, Samuelson was defeated by a Tory opponent whom enemy and ally alike agreed in describing as pleasant but ineffectual.⁵⁹ Later

by-elections in 1883, immediately before and after the introduction of the Agricultural Holdings Bill, confirmed the impotence of the Alliance as a force in rural elections.⁶⁰

At the same time local support in the southern and eastern counties, where originally the situation had seemed most promising, was fast ebbing. By 1883 the irrelevance of the major demands of the Alliance to the real economic problems of farmers in this region had become evident. The traditional alliance of landlord and tenant, political and economic, although severely tried in the early years of depression, began to emerge triumphant again.

Superficially, a major reason for renewed acquiescence in the traditional alliance seemed to lie in the fall of money rents after 1880;⁶¹ the decline in the Schedule of Income Tax Returns reflecting the belated, perhaps enforced, realization by landlords that the change in economic circumstances affecting agriculture was likely to be permanent, and that temporary rent remissions would have to become permanent. However, rent reductions were by no means of any great significance by 1882,⁶² and rents were to fall to much lower levels by the end of the century. The understandable reluctance of landowners to grant permanent reductions rather than remissions had not yet been overcome.⁶³

To this extent, the Alliance case for a change to a commercial system in agriculture might still be said to hold good, especially if it could be shown that rent levels and landlord intransi-

⁵⁶ For example, see *Hansard*, 3rd ser., cclxxxii, 31 July 1883, c. 1170, for the successful amendment put forward by Sir Michael Hicks Beach. "There shall not be taken into account as part of the improvements made by the tenant what is justly due to the inherent capabilities of the soil." This was to prove a fruitful source of contention in many cases brought under the eventual Act.

⁵⁷ *Mark Lane Express*, 9 January 1882.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 24 April 1882. Rowlandson's campaign cost £5,599, a discouraging sum for those who sought for a politically independent farmers' movement.

⁵⁹ A. E. Pease, *Elections and Recollections*, 1932, p. 60. Pease, Liberal M.P. and son of a wealthy Quaker ironmaster turned landowner, explained the choice of Rowlandson, in a seat traditionally held for the Liberals by a scion of one of the great families of the region, in terms of the exodus of Whig magnates from that party over Gladstone's Irish legislation.

⁶⁰ *Mark Lane Express*, 19 March 1883, for a defeat in Mid-Cheshire; J. W. Lowther, *A Speaker's Commentaries*, I, 1925, p. 153, for a defeat in Rutland.

⁶¹ For example, see R.C. 1882, *Report on the East of England* by . . . Mr. Druce, pp. 28-9, and R.C. 1894, *Report on . . . Essex* by . . . R. H. Pringle, pp. 40-1, 87-90.

⁶² For estimates of the fall in money rents, see R. J. Thompson, 'An Enquiry into the Rent of Agricultural Land in England and Wales during the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, LXX, 1907, pp. 596-602. It is worth noting that real rents in this period did not fall, while rents as a proportion of factor income in farming fell only after 1883. See Colin Clark, *The Value of Agricultural Land*, 1973, pp. 80, 92.

⁶³ The lag in the fall of permanent rent values can be held to be as much a result of the realization of the difficulty of raising them again as a reflection of the uncertainty of long-term agricultural prospects.

gence were major obstacles to rational adaptation. But the more basic factor behind the change in attitudes would appear to be that local farmers had no real interest in tenurial changes, in particular of the radical type envisaged by the Alliance.

Evidence given by three local Alliance leaders, including the future Liberal candidate for north Yorkshire, to the Richmond Commissioner in 1881, tends to bear out this point. All three were landowners, albeit on a minor scale, as well as being farmers; little pressure from the Royal Commissioners was necessary to elicit the fact that their dissatisfaction was over general conditions pertaining to agriculture rather than specific questions of land tenure. William Manfield admitted that ownership of his holding gave him no advantage over his neighbours who rented land.⁶⁴ J. S. Gardiner and Samuel Rowlandson both rented land under leasing arrangements which afforded them no permanency of tenure and made no provision for compensation for improvements. Neither had any complaint to make of their own respective landlords.⁶⁵ Rowlandson himself let out 536 acres on a six-month lease which contained no provision for compensation. Queried by the Commissioners as to this seeming inconsistency, Rowlandson replied rather lamely that it was "the general custom in the district."⁶⁶

In so far as they condemned existing tenurial arrangements it was clear that this was with regard to the injustice of the legal presumption that all improvements which contributed to land value should go to the landlord.⁶⁷ Bonamy Price, expounding the "principles of abstract political economy (with) all their unmitigated authority,"⁶⁸ had little difficulty, even with James Howard,⁶⁹ in showing the disturbing

logical implications of the implementation of Alliance principles. All agreed that the outgoing tenant ought not to gain unduly at the expense of both landlord and incoming tenant. Further and significantly, for Gardiner and Manfield at least, compulsory legislation on tenants' compensation had little to do with their major concern, agricultural depression. The causes of the latter were firstly, foreign competition, secondly, poor seasons.⁷⁰ They evinced little interest in agricultural adaptation as a response to depression; they did agree that greater security for tenants would promote more investment in agriculture, but observed too, paradoxically, that those who farmed with adequate capital in existing circumstances had lost just as heavily, or more so, than those less well off.⁷¹ It was clear that such men would not have accepted William Bear's contention that "the really permanent remedy for agricultural depression will have to be looked for in an improved system of tenure."⁷²

It was remarkable, certainly, how frequently farmers who had once been local Alliance leaders were later to be found figuring prominently in Protectionist movements.⁷³ In this, however, they were merely reflecting a virtual unanimity of agricultural opinion in the south and east, noted by the second Royal Commission on Agriculture,⁷⁴ as to the real answer to their economic problems. By the end of 1884, the Alliance, which had earlier denounced Protection as "a delusion and a snare,"⁷⁵ had lost the vast majority of its local members to such causes. Despite the interest in land reform, including that of land tenure, created by Cham-

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Qs. 50, 006, 53, 346.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Qs. 35, 471; 50, 049-53, 53, 843.

⁶⁶ *Mark Lane Express*, 31 May 1881.

⁶⁷ Manfield and Gardiner were both members of the Fair Trade League. W. Nethersole introduced the major Protectionist motion at the great Agricultural Conference of December 1893. As M.P. for Maldon from 1886 to 1892, Wing Grey was notorious for his Protectionist speeches.

⁷⁴ *Final Report of the Royal Commission on Agricultural Depression*, 1897, p. 161. The Final Report also noted that the belief in Protection as the only remedy for agricultural depression was often combined with a belief in its political impossibility.

⁷⁵ *The Times*, 13 September 1881.

⁶⁴ *R.C. 1881, Evidence*, II, Qs. 49, 981, *et seq.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, Qs. 35, 481; 53, 584-91; 53, 646-51.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Qs. 35, 497.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, Qs. 35, 300-14; 50, 221-3; 53, 521-49.

⁶⁸ Gladstone's description of Price's contribution to the Richmond Commission's investigations into Irish land tenure. See the entry on Bonamy Price (1807-88), Regius Professor of Political Economy at Oxford, in *Dictionary of National Biography*, XVI, 1921-2, p. 323.

⁶⁹ *R.C. 1882, Evidence*, III, Qs. 59, 611-75, for a confrontation between Price and Howard.

berlain's "Unauthorised Programme," the Alliance was a negligible factor in the great debates of 1885. It maintained a lingering existence as an annual forum for Liberal politicians interested in land tenure reform until 1888 when it disappeared.

III

The Agricultural Holdings Act has often been regarded as a significant milestone in the changing relationship between landlord and tenant which resulted from new economic circumstances in the age of industrialism. C. S. Orwin and H. C. Taylor, doyens of agricultural economics in Britain and America respectively, dwelt on the importance of legislation which contributed to the growing independence of the tenant-farmers.⁷⁶ As the argument has been put most recently: "Tenant right transcended the ordinary channel of agrarian dispute to facilitate and to advertise the disintegration of the long-honoured connection between landed proprietors and their farmers."⁷⁷ The last source also remarks that with "the Liberal Bill of 1883, the victory of the Alliance and Howard received the accolade that could not be questioned (*sic*)."⁷⁸ However, whatever the importance of the Act as a symbol, perhaps a portent, of later change, its immediate concrete relevance to English farmers, as with the Alliance, was almost nil.

In the two decades which followed the implementation of the Act few outgoing tenants utilized its machinery, and those who did ran into a variety of problems. Essentially its importance was limited to temporary improvements classified under its third schedule.⁷⁹ Based as it was on the Lincolnshire Custom, the Act here proved to be inflexible and, arguably, ill drafted. Valuers tended to base their assessments of compensation on a rough schedule which

took account of purchased inputs and the time over which they were expected to operate. Despite the principles of the Act, no account was taken of value added by stock fed from on-farm inputs, or of the value added to a holding by conversion of land from arable to pasture. However, while the tenant's claim to compensation was strictly limited on such lines, the Act imposed no such bounds on the landlord's right to dilapidations. Some landlords took full advantage of this position, aided, it was claimed, by the susceptibility of valuers to the interests of the stronger party.⁸⁰ The costs of a settlement of a dispute under the Act were a powerful disincentive militating against the use of its machinery.⁸¹

Some of these difficulties had been considered before the Act came into consideration. For more than a decade, J. B. Lawes had been pointing to the inadequacies of customary procedures in evaluating inputs as a basis for compensation. Both in 1875 and in 1883 Lawes presented tables based on his own scientific investigations, which gave, he considered, a more precise estimate of the value added by various inputs.⁸² It was also argued that compensation should not be limited by the value of the tenant's specific outlay on purchased inputs. John Clay, a member of the Richmond Commission, proposed that compensation be extended to "include fertility and value arising from skilful and thorough cultivation of the land, and its being kept in high condition." He made no precise suggestion as to how this should be assessed.⁸³

⁸⁰ For the most famous case, see the complaints of Clare Read against both landlord and valuer to the Norfolk Chamber of Agriculture in *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 15 January 1890.

⁸¹ *Agricultural Gazette*, 31 December 1894, for a case where the counterclaim was reduced by 90 per cent but where the costs of the case were a third of the eventual compensation granted. For a summary of the most important actions brought under the Act see R.C. 1897, *Appendices to the Final Report*, pp. 111-21.

⁸² J. B. Lawes, 'On the Valuation of Unexhausted Manures', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society*, 2nd ser., XII, 1875, pp. 1-37. *Agricultural Gazette*, 25 February 1883.

⁸³ R.C. *Final Report*, 1882, pp. 39-40. *Supplementary Memorandum* by John Clay.

⁷⁶ See C. S. Orwin, 'The History of Tenant Right', *Agricultural Progress*, xv, 1938, p. 151; H. C. Taylor, *Introduction to the Study of Agricultural Economics*, New York, 1905, pp. 311-13.

⁷⁷ McQuiston, *loc. cit.*, p. 112. ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁷⁹ The first two schedules of the Act covered permanent and semi-permanent improvements. Permission from the landlord was still required in these cases.

In principle, the 1883 Act did allow for compensation on such a basis. That assessment did not take this form could be attributed partly to the conservatism of valuers, but also, it should be stressed, to the lack of interest of farmers, certainly in the case of their major spokesmen. Clare Read was one who preferred traditional and concrete methods to concepts whose amorphous nature would involve radical changes of uncertain benefits.⁸⁴ Others pointed out to Lawes the extent to which his scientific evaluations failed to correspond to accepted practical observation.⁸⁵ Finally there was the problem of establishing the difference between "continuous good farming" and a standard norm of farming; attempts to draw up arbitrary benchmarks again raised the spectre of an intrusion upon the rightful sphere of the landlord in investment. Significantly, the concept of "continuous good farming" as a basis for compensation did become accepted, to some extent, in Scotland, where the landlord played a smaller role in the provision of agricultural capital.⁸⁶ In England a Committee of the Central Chamber of Agriculture spoke for most in concluding that the benefits of change were insufficient "to warrant our advising a departure from established custom."⁸⁷

In conclusion, it can clearly be argued that the concern expressed by a few contemporary agriculturists, and some later historians, on the inadequacy of land-tenure arrangements in England in the late nineteenth century was hardly of great relevance to the great changes

affecting agriculture. The very conditions of agricultural depression, which may be held to have been a vital factor behind the spectacular but brief career of the Farmers' Alliance, was also the cause of changes in the market for agricultural holdings, favourable to the farmer,⁸⁸ which made the proposals of that organization irrelevant. As Parker Norfolk, a Yorkshire land agent, put it in 1896: "It has never paid so well as in the last twenty years to be a popular landlord."⁸⁹ Further, the Irish experience in this period would appear to show that Alliance land-tenure proposals would have ended landlord investment on any scale⁹⁰—a result which English farmers, who did not share the Irish desire for owner-occupancy, would not have relished.⁹¹ On the other hand, it should be pointed out that many adherents of the more moderate demand for compensation for tenants' improvements were fully aware of the lack of relation between their cause and the major problems of agriculture. Men such as Clare Read always emphasized that their campaign was for justice for the farmer, the end of a blemish on, and not the radical change of, the land system. Legislation was needed to prevent a small minority of landlords from pursuing policies contrary to all interests including their own.⁹² As such, in the last resort, the campaign was probably of greater value to English farmers than many of the other political causes, such as Protection, pursued with zeal in the late nineteenth century.

⁸⁴ C. S. Read, 'English Tenant Right', *National Review*, 1, 1883, pp. 628-9.

⁸⁵ *Agricultural Gazette*, 3 and 10 March 1883. See Sir E. John Russell, *A History of Agricultural Science*, 1967, pp. 171-5, for problems encountered by Lawes at the Woburn Experimental Station. The scepticism of farmers was not surprising in view of the state of agricultural science at the time.

⁸⁶ *Farmer and Stockbreeder*, 24 March 1890, for the Midlothian case of Riddell v. Macfie, described as the first where compensation awarded on the basis of "accumulated fertility." Also R.C. 1897, *Appendices to the Final Report*, p. 129.

⁸⁷ A. H. H. Matthews, *Fifty Years of Agricultural Politics*, 1915, p. 185.

⁸⁸ In this context it is interesting to note that the only other agricultural tenure reform association of this period arose in 1892 to 1895 in the north-western counties. The Federation of Tenant Farmers' Clubs also received its impetus from a combination of bad weather and falling prices, this time for livestock produce, while money rents were initially maintained at close to historic levels. See R.C. 1894, *Evidence*, 1, Qs. 9, 338-607, 9838-10, 388, for evidence of William Smith, M.P. for North Lonsdale and Chairman of the Federation.

⁸⁹ R.C. 1896, *Evidence*, IV, Q. 60, 915.

⁹⁰ Solow, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

⁹¹ C. S. Orwin, 'Land Tenure in England', *Proceedings of the First International Conference of Agricultural Economists*, 1929, p. 7.

⁹² Read, *loc. cit.*, p. 631.