

APPENDIX X

SPEECH MADE BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE HOUSING COMMITTEE TO THE BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL. ON PRESENTATION OF THE HOUSING COMMITTEE'S REPORT. 3 JULY, 1906.

I have to move: "That the Council hereby approve of the Housing Reform policy asset out in the present report of the Housing Committee, and expresses itself in favour of such legislation as is necessary to enable the same to be carried out."

My Lord Mayor.—It is often said that he is a bold man who prophesies, and yet I venture to predict that if this resolution is passed to-day, the vote given will in years to come be recognized as epoch-making in the progress of the City which we all love.

In barbaric times the greatest warriors were the greatest men; nowadays our greatest men devote their energies to saving life, improving health, and increasing the happiness of their fellow-citizens. That is the object to which we are going to devote to-day what abilities we may happen to possess. We are the first City Council to discuss in a practical, definite manner those ideas which all Housing reformers have in their minds. The Garden City idea, the Garden Suburb idea, have taken hold of the minds of Englishmen. We cannot hope to make Birmingham into a Garden City, although something can be done towards that end, but we can, if we will, create Garden Suburbs around Birmingham.

The report before us is voluminous, and therefore, will require a somewhat lengthy exposition. I pray for your indulgence whilst I get through that task as quickly as possible. For five long weary years the Housing Committee have been struggling with a difficult and complicated problem in face of the most strenuous and skilful opposition. They have had to fight a curious combination. More than once municipal socialists joined hands with property owners and their representatives in order to vote down those who dared to work at the solution of the Housing problem as well as talk about it. But pioneers must not complain. The Housing Committee did not complain: they stuck to their work, they stuck to their guns, and now to-day their work is generally applauded as well as approved by the vast majority of the citizens of Birmingham, as also by Housing reformers who come from all over the country to see what is being done in Birmingham.

In view of the cry for economy that has been raised, and let me say properly raised, it is perhaps not out of place to remind this Council and the public of Birmingham that whilst others

have been talking economy, the Housing Committee have been practising it. They have dealt with nearly 1,600 insanitary houses at the small charge of two guineas per house, plus a reasonable but not excessive compensation for obstructive buildings that have been removed. In addition to that, something like twelve acres have been added to the open spaces of the City, without the cost of a penny piece to the ratepayers. St Lawrence area, dealt with under Part I of the 1890 Act, would have cost the ratepayers of Birmingham at least £150,000. Other properties if dealt with under Part I, instead of Part II of the Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1890, as they have been in Birmingham, would also have cost the ratepayers large sums of money, but here the property-owners have been persuaded to put their houses right at their own expense, and it has been done with such reasonableness, and with such willingness, looking at the matter from the property-owner's point of view as well as from the point of view of the sanitary authority, that we may say the great majority of the property owners are working hand in hand with the Housing Committee. The result is that far more has been done than would otherwise have been possible. (Hear, hear.) There are, of course, a few unreasonable people, there always are, and those people have spent far more money than they need have done if they had been willing to accept the Housing Committee's help in doing what was necessary at the least possible expenditure of money. Courts have been converted into terraces at a very low cost, in addition to which, the rates have been relieved by means of a lower death rate and less fever, whilst the police will tell you that the change has also resulted in better supervision at a less cost.

Slum reform is now well in hand in Birmingham. There is a great deal still to be done, but the work is well started. To-day it is hoped a new departure will be made, a new era inaugurated. (Hear, hear.) To-day proposals are laid before you for preventing the creation of new evils as bad as, or nearly as bad as those with which we have to deal at present. The poorer classes are no longer condemned to sudden death without a fair trial, but they are still condemned to a slow death, and, moreover, to dreary unhealthy lives by the haphazard growth of our big cities. Some of the newer parts of the City and suburbs are almost as bad as the old courts in the centre. It is often said that housing conditions are due to the habits of the tenants. That is partly true, but it is not entirely true. Environment has a great effect on human

nature. Do you think that we should lead blameless lives (as, of course, we all do now)—(laughter)—if we were transplanted to the hovels in which so many working men in Birmingham exist to-day? It may be heresy to say so, but I do say that in my opinion even the Spartan virtue of this City Council would give way under the trials and temptations to which so many of the people who live in our slums are subjected. We cannot entirely undo the past, but we may control the future, and there is no work more important to the City, the nation, and the empire. The home of the individual is the most important factor in the prosperity of the nation, and the strength of the Empire. We can, if we will, arrange for healthy, wholesome surroundings for every Birmingham adult, and, even more important, give every Birmingham child the "light and air" that are so essential to its healthy development.

The Housing Committee, whilst attending to the reform of the slums that exist, have been continuously considering how best to prevent the creation of future evils. They very soon came to the conclusion that patch-work was no good; that a few nice cheap houses here and there were no good. They saw the necessity of going further and deeper: the necessity of finding some means whereby it is possible to provide nice cheap houses for every one. Having learnt the results of English efforts at housing reform there was nothing left for them to do but to find out what was being done in other countries, and with that desire they last summer sent a deputation to Germany.

It is now my duty to summarize the report of the Deputation.

In Berlin, we learnt the general principles on which town planning is worked, more especially the provision of open spaces and playgrounds before the land has become too expensive. We also saw a great mistake being made. Roads were being constructed wider and more expensively than was necessary, thereby forcing up the price of adjacent building areas, and causing the erection of huge blocks of tenements which would not, I am glad to say, be approved in Birmingham.

At Ulm, we found the opposite policy adopted—wide, well-made streets wherever necessary, but narrow, inexpensive streets in purely residential quarters, front gardens being provided in order to preserve a proper distance between the houses on either side of the street. Here we also learned how the corporation assist working men to acquire the houses they live in, thereby ensuring that the houses are well kept, as well as wellbuilt. Another in-

teresting feature was their far-sighted policy of encouraging manufacturers to build works in the town by letting them have land on favourable terms, and giving them every convenience. But most important of all is Ulm's municipal land purchase policy. A few years ago they owned three-fifths of the land within their boundaries; to-day they own four-fifths, an increase of $33\frac{1}{3}$ per cent. Whilst others have been explaining what every one knows—that the land question is largely at the root of the housing question—Ulm has been acting, and has been buying land with most satisfactory results. It is to be hoped that it will not be long before Birmingham is able and willing to carry out vigorously and judiciously a similar policy. (Hear, hear.)

In Stuttgart we saw more of the artistic side of town planning. We also learned about a most successful method of dealing with the tenant's side of the question. In that City, there are 120 voluntary inspectors who visit systematically all the houses, and who explain to the tenants in a friendly way the advantage it is to them to take care and be proud of the houses they live in. These inspectors, when necessary, report any repairs that are required to the Central Housing Office. Unfortunately, in Birmingham, there are too many cases where houses that have been repaired by property owners have, through neglect, or mis-usage, become almost as bad as they were before repair. I will not pretend that the landlords are not partly to blame for this, but there is a great deal to be said on their side, and I, at any rate, have long been of opinion that the corporation ought to show the way how to deal with that most important branch of housing reform, the maintenance of improvements that have been effected. We cannot suddenly introduce 120 housing inspectors, but we can make a start in the right direction, and Miss Octavia Hill has shown us how to do it.

Mannheim gave us another object lesson in the prevention of land speculation by a bold and judicious Municipal land purchase policy. Here also they give facilities to manufacturers, at the same time preventing annoyance to citizens and interference with the amenities of the City. Further, we saw here a most inspiring example of the application of town planning to existing cities. A few years ago they took in what was really a town in itself, but what they call a suburb. It was in a most unsatisfactory sanitary condition. They set to work and planned out how they would have liked it built, and they have gradually brought up this unsatisfactory suburb to their standard, with results

which were most encouraging and inspiring, as showing what can be done even in Birmingham itself with town planning.

Frankfort was perhaps the most successful of all in encouraging and assisting Public Utility Building Societies willing to provide healthy houses at the lowest possible rents. Here we also had a most impressive object lesson in the cutting of fine broad new streets through the older parts of the town. Birmingham has one Corporation Street, she could do with a few more, and with our experience of Corporation Street, and the experience of other cities, I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that the next Corporation Street need not cost so much as the last. (Hear, hear.) But, perhaps, the most distinctive lesson in Frankfort was the masterly method they have of dealing with the development of land where several different property owners are concerned. They plan it out as if it all belonged to one owner. After they have ascertained what land is available for building, and after providing for streets and open spaces, they give back to each original owner the same percentage of his original holding as the land available for building is in percentage to the total land laid out. The position of the new site is governed as far as possible by the position of the old site and by other considerations. There are, of course, in Frankfort, as in other places, a few quarrelsome and grasping people, but the methods of the corporation have been found to be so fair and reasonable that they have succeeded in getting special powers that enable them to bring into line the few people who used to make these redistribution schemes extremely difficult. Another most useful lesson in Frankfort was what we should call their Town Dwellings Improvement Trust. They buy up old insanitary slums and repair them in accordance with the requirements of the Local Authority.

If some one who has money to spare were to take up that idea in Birmingham it would not only assist housing reform very much, but it would be a sensible relief to those people who unfortunately, through no fault of the Housing Committee, now have to suffer in some cases more than is necessary from the present condition of their property. Some of these people have no money to spend on repairs. It is extremely difficult and trying to the Housing Committee to insist on the work being done, but having been told to carry out Part II it is their duty to do it. They do everything they can to make the burden as light as possible for these unfortunate owners, but there are cases where even they cannot do all that is required, and some such Town Dwellings

Improvement Trust as that which they have in Frankfort would be a great relief to some of the poorer property owners of Birmingham, and expedite slum reform.

In Cologne we saw the mistake of thinking that people will live in suburbs without cheap and efficient tramway communication. It is quite evident that Housing reformers to be successful must be in close touch with the tramway development of their district. If a Municipal land purchase policy is to be carried out it would be the duty of Housing reformers to buy the land first and put the tramways down afterwards. At the present time, the local authorities are forced into the position of putting the cart before the horse. The tramway is put down and the value of the land is sent up against any people who wish to buy for housing purposes.

We also learned something about the system of levying a tax on the increased value of land over the price at which it was last sold.

In Cologne they guarantee large sums lent by Public Trusts to Public Utility Building Societies which, as already explained, have to undertake to provide good housing accommodation at the lowest possible price.

Dusseldorf, the last town we visited, was a striking example of how an intelligent system of town planning will make a city attractive. Although it is on the borders of the Black Country of Germany, rich men go to live at Dusseldorf because it is a pleasant city to live in. I never heard of any rich Englishmen going near our Black Country because it was pleasant to live in. Factories are encouraged and assisted, but they are not allowed to injure the town. The corporation is also extremely active in Municipal Land Purchase, and in assisting and encouraging the erection of houses in every possible manner.

These are the principal lessons learnt last summer, encouragingly corroborative of the general line of policy so often indicated by your Housing Committee. The policy of Town Planning and Municipal Land Purchase is delineated in a masterly manner by Mr W. H. Lever, on pages 119 to 127 in the report we have before us. Mr Lever is no hot-headed youth; he is a Housing reformer who has done something real and substantial towards the solution of the Housing reform problem. He is a life-long trade-unionist, and a most successful business man.

The policy advocated to-day is neither idealistic nor untried. It has already been successfully carried out at Bournville by a private individual. Is this City Council going to say it will fail

where Mr Cadbury has succeeded? Is this City Council going to declare itself inferior to City Councils in Germany?

The other day Alderman Clayton seemed to be afraid that the Housing Committee wanted to spend a lot of money. There is no need for that if corporations had the power, subject to proper safeguards, to pay for land with corporation stock secured on the land bought, and bringing in the same income as the land was earning when it was bought. The landowner would not be justified in complaining, because he would get the same income as before, with the added security of the City rates, and the rate-payers would not suffer even in the initial stages from land purchased by this method, because the interest from land purchased would pay the interest on the stock issued. This patent like all good patents, is quite simple; but, no doubt, Alderman Clayton will be able to improve upon it. The Council will no doubt forgive me for making a further quotation from the same eminent authority. Alderman Clayton, commenting on a proposal to reduce the Housing Committee's Estimates, said: "If there is one member of the Council whom we can trust not to spend money unnecessarily it is Councillor Nettlefold." Such a testimonial as that from the most energetic critic on the Council should, I think, inspire some confidence in the financial methods of the Chairman of the Housing Committee.

With the rising rates already on us, and others threatened, the policy of Town Planning and Municipal Land Purchase is worthy of the most careful consideration. In Baden there are 121 Local Authorities which have no rates whatever, owing to their income from land. In Bavaria, there are no fewer than 526 in a similar position. One local authority in Germany not only has no ratepayers at all, but it actually pays a dividend of £15 a year to those who in other cities would be ratepayers. (Laughter.) It will be a long time before Birmingham gets to that happy state, but in this, as in many other ways, we can make a start in the right direction.

In case any member of the Council is still unpersuaded as to the wisdom of the Housing Reform Policy advocated in the report I would remind him that voting for the resolution commits him not one jot or tittle further than to the general approval of the proposed scheme that Birmingham should have statutory powers to plan undeveloped districts; to plan the existing city as it ought to be, and to buy land without specifying the exact purpose for which it is purchased. It is impossible to settle details to-day;

we cannot do more than settle on the general principle as to whether or not Birmingham should have these powers. Beyond that no one is committed. When the powers are obtained, and only then, will the question arise as to how to use them, if at all. Surely, there can be no objection to having powers that have been successfully exercised elsewhere. You are not even asked to spend so much as one penny of the ratepayers' money on a Local Act. The Housing Committee are too economical, too business-like, for that. Their method is to put the cost of legislation on to other shoulders. But you are asked to remember the deplorable way in which the suburbs of Birmingham and other large cities are being developed to-day. The lack of public control over this development is laying up serious trouble in the very near future for those responsible for the public health and happiness.

The Public Works Committee's cartoon which hangs on the wall over my head, and which Sir James Smith has kindly allowed me to use this afternoon, gives an interesting example of this very thing. Here (pointing to the cartoon) you have a main street, wider than it was, but yet not as wide as it ought to be, and side streets wider and far more expensive than is necessary. You and I know the sort of houses that are likely to go up there. In addition to all that, a vote was passed at the last Council meeting putting a charge of nearly £12,000 on the ratepayers, which ought to have gone on to the adjacent building areas. This was no doubt the very best possible arrangement the Public Works Committee could make under the powers the Corporation now possess, but we see from this example how inadequate our present powers are to prevent the creation of possible slums.

Only this morning I made a little tour of inspection. First I came to a typical modern suburb. True, the houses were in accordance with modern by-laws, but they were almost one on the top of the other. Fine trees had been cut down which could not be replaced in fifty years, no playgrounds or open spaces had been provided, and the building materials were already beginning to show signs of decay, in fact, "they had done all those things which they ought not to have done, and they had left undone those things which they ought to have done." Near by was Bournville, laid out as you all know, with trees and open spaces, and cheap as well as good cheerful houses. They can be made cheaper still if we can get power to allow narrower streets where the present minimum width of street is not required.

My Lord Mayor, in considering a matter of this sort, it is

necessary to avoid being emotional, but it is nothing less than heartrending to look at the suburbs now being created under the present by-laws, especially when one knows how it could be done well and cheaply with cheaper house-rent, if only we had the power they possess in other places. Careful investigation shows that on the lines advocated to-day houses can not only be built better, with more cheerful surroundings than at present, but actually cheaper. On Municipal land wisely bought and leased to Public Utility Building Societies, houses can be provided at about 5s. per week, without any charge on the rates. On the contrary, the rates can be relieved. There is no reason why we should not have Bournvilles all around Birmingham instead of the dismal distressing working-men's quarters that now exist, and are being daily increased in numbers and extent.

That, My Lord Mayor, brings me near to the end of my task, the result of much careful study and hard thinking. Details must be considered later on; to-day I have not attempted more than to outline the general policy.

It may be suggested that Town Planning and Municipal Land Purchase are no use unless the City boundaries are extended. (Hear, hear.) No doubt that would be helpful, but it is not essential. There are 10,000 acres of land in Birmingham, of which 3,000 are still uncovered. We might at least see that that 3,000 are properly developed. For myself, I would like to see the City boundaries extended, but, as a sensible man, I suggest that we should not try to do too much at once and risk making a total failure; and it must not be forgotten that there is an alternative to the extension of the City boundaries, and that is, the creation of scientific areas for dealing with housing and similar problems.

The Municipal house builders will probably object to the corporation leasing land that has been bought instead of itself building the houses. There are many objections to "Municipal" House Building, the chief one is, that £1 spent in land goes at least seven times as far as £1 spent in house-building towards the solution of the Housing problem, and we want all the money we can get for land purchase alone. At the same time, the report clearly and intentionally leaves it open for the Council to add Municipal House Building to Municipal Land Purchase if it ever so decides. The Housing Committee's views on this subject remain what they always were, as does their promise to build as soon as they are instructed to do so.

I would respectfully suggest, nay, I would invite those who

believe in Municipal House Building to bring up their scheme at some time most convenient to themselves, but I do ask them not to vote against Town Planning and Municipal Land Purchase (that is, if they agree with it), merely because Municipal House Building does not happen to be included. The principles of Town Planning and Municipal Land Purchase are already being considered and discussed, and sooner or later they will be adopted by the whole country. I am very proud to belong to the City Council which is the first to discuss in a practical definite manner this important proposal; I shall be prouder than ever to belong to Birmingham if she decides to take the lead in this, as she has done in so many other Municipal reforms. (Applause.)

The resolution was carried by thirty votes to sixteen.