

Current Topics

The Wearin' o' the Green

Times have changed greatly since the bad old days when they were:

'Hangin' men and women
For the wearin' o' the green.'

Now, the Queen herself decorates the Irish soldiers with the shamrock, and the King has declared that the Irish troops have shown that Ireland's national emblem 'stands for loyalty, courage, and endurance in adversity.' His Majesty was pleased to enter into particulars. 'The King,' said a London cable, describing the celebration of the '17th of Ireland'—as the *Bulletin* humorously terms it—'inspected the Irish Guards, and paid a tribute to their achievements in the first campaign, whereby the high traditions of the brigade had been fully maintained. His Majesty recalled the heroism of the Mons retreat and the critical days at Ypres, when, as the Earl of Cavan wrote, "the survivors showed the enemy the Irish Guards must be reckoned with, however hard hit." After twenty-eight days' incessant fighting against heavy odds, the 1st Battalion came out less than a company strong, with a complement of four officers. It was a glorious tribute to the loyalty and endurance of the Irish. "You have shown that the shamrock stands for loyalty, courage, and endurance in adversity," said the King, in conclusion. "May it carry you to victory." There are sceptics and pessimists who still believe that Ireland will be jockeyed out of Home Rule. If the attempt is made, the obstructionists—in the face of the highly significant utterances and actions of Royalty and of highly-placed individuals such as Kitchener and General French—will have some difficult hurdles to negotiate. We will, at any rate, for some little time to come, be saved from the silly parrot-cry about 'the disloyal Irish.'

The House Rents Question

The New South Wales Labor Government have recently launched a daring attempt to establish an equitable means of adjusting the house rent charges in the city of Sydney on a basis that shall be reasonable and fair to all parties. They have passed a Fair Rents Act and set up a Fair Rents Court, charged with the duty of hearing and settling claims for the reduction of house rent within the metropolitan area. The court, which is presided over by a magistrate, was formally opened on March 13, and has been in regular session since. The principles by which the court is to be guided are sufficiently clear and simple. It has first to find the cash value of a property, and then it is directed by the Act to allow the landlord to charge rent equal to the rate for an overdraft at the Commonwealth Bank, which is, to an approved customer, at present 6 per cent. The court has also discretionary power under the Act to grant a further 2½ per cent., but so far the magistrate has shown himself reluctant to make this allowance and has declared that he will do so only in cases where the circumstances are really special. The court's view in regard to this allowance and its general method of computing the 'fair rent' in cases submitted to it were thus set forth by the magistrate in a recent judgment: 'Until substantial reasons were adduced to the contrary the court would continue to regard the 2½ per cent. as a differential rate to be applied only where special circumstances demanded it. The magistrate went on to say that his duty was to apply the principles laid down by the Act, and consider them in accordance with the evidence brought before him. At present he was adopting a definite formula to arrive at a fair rent. First he took the unimproved land value, to which was added the cost of erecting a similar dwelling to the one at present on the land, and deducting an amount for depreciation over the period it had been in use. To get the approximate value of the property as a letting

proposition allowance was made by the Act for a specified rate of interest—the current Commonwealth Bank rate—which all could compute. Then the landlord's outgoings were taken into account, and allowance made for them. If there were any special circumstances applicable to any particular case, part or the whole of the 2½ per cent. mentioned in the Act would be allowed to give the landlord a reasonable return for his capital represented in the property.' It may be added that the Act expressly contemplates that the court shall be used only for the purpose of reducing and not for the purpose of increasing rents, and its operations are at present limited to Sydney. Power is given under the Act, however, to extend the court's jurisdiction to other areas when such extension is deemed necessary.

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Needless to say, the court and its operations have met with plenty of opposition and abuse. The Act has been denounced as folly, in that it is an attempt to interfere with the sacrosanct principle of supply and demand; and as impolitic, in that it will discourage people from putting their money into legitimate building investments. A very serious decline in building, particularly of the residential type; the serious loss of employment of building mechanics, masons, bricklayers, carpenters, plasterers, plumbers, etc., as well as builders' laborers; a serious shortage of homes for the people in the near future; a serious decline in the sale of land; a blow to many working men who are accumulating small property holdings besides their homes, by wage savings, and upon which they have obtained advances; the diminution of employment in all the great building supply branch of commerce—these are but a few of the woes that are predicted for the community by the strenuous opponents of the new measure. The denunciations are being received with composure alike by the court and the Government, and there is every indication that the scheme will not be abandoned nor even seriously modified, until it has been given a fair trial. It may be admitted that attempts to fix prices by legislation, without regard to conditions of supply and demand, are open to objection as being arbitrary and unscientific, and for ourselves we have long been of opinion that the best way to deal with problems such as that under review is by direct State intervention in the particular business concerned. In New Zealand, for example, when farmers were paying too high a price for their money the Government did not attempt to bring relief by fixing the maximum rate of interest which could be charged. Instead, they introduced the Advances to Settlers Act, and the State took up, so far, the role of money-lender, with the result that the rate of interest was necessarily lowered all round. The Act was vehemently denounced at the time by a section of the press, one influential daily going so far as to say that 'it should be received with a howl of derision throughout the country'; yet it is now recognised, by common consent, as one of the most useful and beneficent Acts on our Statute Book. Similarly, where the rent problem is acute, if the State were to step in and buy or build suitable dwelling houses—so far as might be necessary and feasible—the supply would be brought into equation with the demand, and rent charges would automatically fall. In spite of the theoretic and doctrinaire objections to which it is open, the New South Wales scheme is at least worth a trial; and the result of the experiment will be watched with interest not only in the Commonwealth but beyond it. There are plenty of reasonable and fair-minded landlords in New Zealand, but—there are others. And the public ought to be protected from rapacity, in whatever quarter it may show itself.

Has the War Done Good?

We ask the question, of course, from the religious point of view. The consequences of a world conflict like the present are infinitely complex, and it is certain that, hideous though the struggle is, it has not been without its compensations. But taking it by and large, and on a rough and ready estimate, is it to be