

Both feet on the ground

In this essay, first published in the May 1957 issue of **Land&Liberty** as part of the article series 'Personally Speaking,' **Vic Blundell** describes how 80 years ago he first came into contact with the ideas of Henry George.

If my early environment had been the deciding factor in the formulation of my philosophical and political outlook I would have been a Socialist. My friends and associates were nearly all Socialists and all around me was 'evidence' of the failure of capitalism. There was bitterness and anger among the working classes as they lost their independence in the dole queue and their self-respect under the "Means Test." They took it for granted that because unemployment and other social ills existed within the framework of free competitive enterprise, the latter was responsible for the former. Private enterprise, they were told, produced the wrong things; instead of houses, clothing and food for people in need of them, there were motor cars, smart hotels and all kinds of luxury goods for the rich. It was necessary to plan so that the right things were produced. The factories, machinery, shops, etc, were built by the workers and, therefore, it was argued that they should be nationalised. My would-be political educators believed that not only was this a matter of simple justice but that it would end the exploitation of man by man.

In the late twenties, while still in my teens, I was a regular visitor to open-air meetings in Finsbury Park, North London, where audiences filled and overflowed the large recreation ground. Squeezed in among the main political parties were small groups battling for attention and when I grew tired of listening to the mob orators, I would invariably finish up as one of a small group around JW Graham Peace, leader of the Commonwealth Land Party. From him I learned of the rights of man, economic rent, land speculation, free trade and all the ramifications of free enterprise and social justice. Urged on by my elder brother, Stanley, I began to read *Progress and Poverty* and as I came to understand the philosophy of Henry George more clearly the defects of Socialism became more apparent.

I addressed my first public meeting at the age of 18 and felt the keen edge of



Vic Blundell 1911-2003

Vic Blundell has died at the age of 92. For nearly half a century Mr Blundell ran the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values - the predecessor of the Henry George Foundation. He became the vital bridge between the roots of the movement which grew around Henry George at the turn of the last century, and those who are carrying forward the inspiration and ideas into the twenty-first century.

In the thirties Mr Blundell trained as a salesperson and then became the manager of several branches of Littlewoods shoe shops in London. After the end of World War II he came to work with Arthur W Madsen, secretary of the United Committee.

Mr. Blundell was a driving force behind the Henry George School evening classes, where many later reformers found their cause. He became Mr. Madsen's successor in the late fifties - and held that post until his 70th birthday. He was also one of the longest serving editors of *Land&Liberty*.

Mr. Blundell was tireless in his debating of economic arguments, and steady in his championing of the truth virtues of the reform which had been set out by Henry George.

Mr Blundell is survived by a son, Jon, who lives and works in Japan.

the tongue of the experienced heckler. Often I got into arguments that left me the loser. It hurt, although I knew that my case was sound. Then I remembered my training as a salesman. The first thing a salesman has to learn is his stock. He must know every line thoroughly and be able to recite its qualities, construction, advantages, etc. As a young and raw economist the trouble with me was that I 'did not know my stock' In the years that followed I had to learn the answers to many questions on the economics of Henry George. The moral basis and the clear logic of the Georgist case were the twin forces that maintained my faith in what many tried to tell me was a lost cause.

I shall always remember one of my early mentors, Mr EO Edwards, dealing with an obstinate heckler. Patiently, tactfully and with great skill he demolished one by one every argument his opponent put forward. In the end the questioner, shrugged his shoulders and turning away said: "All right, but you will never do it." Then I saw the fire blaze in the eye of the speaker who up to that moment had maintained his remarkable self-control. Pointing an accusing finger at his heckler, he cried: "You will never do it, but don't you dare tell me I will never do it!"

The question that worried me most was not an economic one. It was "Why is so fundamentally simple a proposition difficult to 'put over'?" I came to realise that one cannot sow seeds in a garden overgrown with weeds and expect them to take root. Much of the work of those who seek to influence others lies in pulling up the weeds of prejudice. After all if we were right then all political parties were wrong! An over-simplification, no doubt, but not an easy position to escape from and not a good point at which to start an argument.

I moved to Liverpool and there met the late Mr EJ McManus from whom I first learned of the existence of study classes based on Henry George's

teachings. Subsequently I conducted classes myself in Nottingham.

I became a member of the United Committee in 1945 and in 1947 was invited to join the staff at Great Smith Street to assist Mr Madsen in the many aspects of his work and in producing Land&Liberty. The School, starting as a spare-time

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activity, grew to absorb the greater part of my time and with the help of ex-students who have built up classes in their own areas or became tutors themselves, it has expanded year by year.

The School is not an end in itself but one of the roads that leads to our objective, and it has been of special interest over the past few years to watch and follow the development of thought in the minds of students as they go through the course. I have witnessed dogmatic political ‘sectarians’ emerge after three courses as quite different people.

There is no uniform approach to those we are seeking to influence. In the classroom, attention must be paid to every individual student and it is something of a challenge to the tutor when he is charged with the task of harmonising by the tenth lesson the outlook of personalities whose political outlooks spring from diverse origins.

It is an accepted maxim in advertising, as in window-dressing, that the first job is to capture and hold the attention of the person one wishes to interest.

The principles taught by Henry George and the many who preceded him cannot change with the passing of time but we must be ready always to adopt our methods of presentation so that we gain the respect of all with whom we come in contact. People today are more sophisticated than ever, more suspicious of radical change, less responsive to the emotional appeal, and more than ever conditioned to the planned economy mentality. Where possible we must meet people on their own ground or we will not be heard at all.

Let us face it. The ordinary voter

understands very little about economic theory - has little desire to understand it - does not regard it as particularly important, and has no inclination to do more than pass judgment on superficial issues or on mere political slogans and catch-phrases. Many vote from habit, prejudice, fear, or from a mere consciousness of belonging to a certain class. Yet Keynes’ ideas of full employment (monetary manipulation and inflation) have never been understood by the masses of the people; these ideas were introduced from the top and not from the bottom.

So that the fact there are few opportunities for nationwide publicity need not give a rise to pessimism - it is not a condition of success. The instigators of, and agitators for, a local income tax, a turnover tax, capital gains tax and other specifics are not waiting for, or seeking the support of the broad masses of the people. They are busy lobbying in the realms of local and national Government, among trade associations, unions and the many varied spheres of political influence. The same techniques are open to us. The objectors to the Egg Marketing Scheme were a mere handful of people - not more than ten in one million of the adult population of Great Britain, yet they came within an ace of success.

We, too, are a force out of all proportion to our numbers and we are winning the support of people who have the will, ability and opportunity to shape policy in the political parties.

This is not to under-rate the value and effectiveness of reaching the general public

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when the opportunity offers. For example, a small group of ex-students of the Welling Henry George School, now banded together as the North West Kent Branch of the Land Value Taxation League, recently collected more than two thousand signatures to a petition calling upon their local council to set up an enquiry committee to examine the

merits of site-value rating. The Council has agreed. Generous publicity has been and is being given by the local press and it would be fairly safe to assume that two years ago hardly anyone in that area had even heard of site-value rating. There is room for all approaches, the individual doing that for which he is best fitted and for which he has

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the best opportunities. The Henry George Schools are charged with the special task of ensuring that those who can be persuaded to join us know the case thoroughly, for any weakness in understanding shown by those responsible for leadership will correspondingly weaken our effectiveness. The Schools are an instrument of policy - not the policy itself; complementary to other forms of action - not an alternative. My experiences at Great Smith Street over the last ten years have shown me the need to be always ready for changes in the general political scene so as to grasp opportunities as they arise, to be flexible in outlook and not wedded to one approach.

Henry George said that the truth he tried to make clear would find friends - it has. We have had, and still have, in our movement all over the world, people with knowledge, ability, personality and buoyant enthusiasm - people who have succeeded in educating, training and winning the support of others. Yet the credit is really due to the power of that truth which Henry George made clear. Nothing can obscure the force of it and nothing can enslave it. The seed once sown becomes independent of the sower. It is a great joy and satisfaction to me to listen as I often do to one of my ex-students explaining a particular point or summarising our philosophy in a way which shows he is speaking from his own mind or heart; that the seed is sown, that there is an understanding and feeling in what he says far and away removed from the mere parrot-like repetition of lessons learned by rote. It is the crowning joy of all to realise that he is captured, not by myself but like myself, with a Great Idea. **L&L**