

ECHOES OF "IT'S A TAX - IT'S NOT A TAX"

DOES IT MATTER? By V. H. BLUNDELL (President, International Union for LVT & FT)

The controversy over the use of the term land value taxation has, to my knowledge, been going on for at least fifty years and is not likely to be resolved now - and does it matter?

No social reform or political policy has ever been "sold" on its name alone. The policy must always be explained to get it considered. If the economic and ethical reasoning is understood, then the name used to describe the reform is not important.

What, for instance, does Social Democracy mean? What is an unsocial democrat? Can an agnostic or atheist belong to the Christian Democrats in Germany? Do our Conservatives wish always to conserve? What is Social Credit? The words in no way describe the philosophy of the party that enjoys the name in Canada; I cannot think of a more vague and unattractive name, yet millions of people elected them - on their policies. And what of the new German Party, the Greens? We boil them and eat them in Great Britain, not vote for them.

Take the words "Incentive Taxation." Does this mean the taxation of incentives? Indeed, "incentive tax" is worse. And yet the policy can be well understood when it is explained and that is all that matters.

About fifty years ago the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values met to discuss a change of name. The discussion went on for hours. Every one was weary as midnight approached. Then a member stood up and said: "Mr. Chairman, I have the ideal name. It describes perfectly our aims and objects without fear of misunderstanding. I propose that we call ourselves 'The Society for the Establishment of Heavenly Bliss upon Earth'." That ended the meeting!

On another occasion, some thirty years ago, three Georgist organizations were amalgamating and we used proportional representation as a method of arriving at the best name out of the twenty proposed. By the constitution of the main organization, which we had agreed to adopt, the winning name had to have a two-thirds majority. Despite our impeccable democratic procedure, when the result was declared, the new name, "The Land and Liberty League", failed to get the required support, there not being a two-thirds majority for it! The name, "The Land Value Taxation League", was then adopted (it was the name of one of the three organizations).

Vic Saldji (in GJ No. 38) makes a valid point about defining our terms, but I wonder whether he is confusing the scientific consistency required for the study of the science of political economy with the consistency, which is apparent by its absence, in the everyday use of words. Whatever the original meaning of the word "tax", it has a number of synonyms, such as "licence" (dog licence), "duty" (stamp duty), "levy" (import levy) and "charge" (development charge). And, as Henry George demonstrated, the word "profit" is ambiguous when used in economic analysis. But what Georgist has not found this a useful word in everyday language? Any person who wishes to be understood conforms as closely as possible to usage. If he does not, he will have to resort to that well-worn phrase, "What I mean to say is..."

If all the energy devoted to arguing about a name had been put into active campaigning for the cause, we might have seen better results - and now I'm guilty of it!

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(Many of us dislike the term "single tax", but it's the only name for our reform that has found its way into reference books. Webster's Dictionary defines it as "a tax to be obtained from a single source, esp. from a levy on land and natural resources, as a substitute for all other forms of taxation." - Ed.)