

Vic Blundell

Champion of social justice, scourge of the half-baked orthodoxies

VIC BLUNDELL is a man inspired by an ideal. That inspiration has sustained him through more than forty years of campaigning and keeps his enthusiasm as fresh and infectious today as it was in the years immediately after the war, when he first devoted himself full-time to the Georgeist cause. No-one who knows him doubts that, had he chosen otherwise, his talents would have rewarded him richly in material terms. Instead, he chose to devote his life to that cause.

The story of Vic's contribution is one of conscientious professionalism. But above all, and before attempting to recount that story, it is necessary to understand the ideal which inspired him.

To Vic, land value taxation and free trade and their economic consequences were means, not ends. The real objective was social justice, and his true inspiration was a philosophy of human rights. From the postulate that each man has a right to himself, follows the propositions that each individual has a right to what he creates and the corollary that there can be no individual property rights in what has not been created by individuals. This chain of reasoning has clear implications for land tenure, but its true significance goes far wider. It is the basis of a philosophy founded upon social justice. It provides a coherent and satisfying solution to the fundamental problem of the relationship between the rights of man as an individual and his rights and duties as a member of a community.

Within this framework, the philosophy which inspired Vic Blundell was a philosophy of individual freedom. The contribution of the individual is his own and he should be free to use it or dispose of it in any way he chooses. Obstacles to free choice, whether by subsidies, tariffs or selective taxation, are infringements of individual freedom.

The basis of this philosophy is ethical, not economic, and its justification would stand whatever its economic consequences. But the economic ills of the 1920s and the 1930s were widely seen at the time as the product of social injustice. The solution favoured by many of Vic's contemporaries at the time was socialism. Vic felt intuitively that an economic system not based upon social justice would inevitably be unsound, but socialism for him lacked a coherent philosophy. He attributes to J. W. Graham Peace his first perception that there was a better answer. Encouraged by his elder brothers, he was soon reading *Progress and Poverty*. He was captivated by the clarity of its logic as well as the power of its appeal to social justice. Thus at the age of 18 Vic Blundell received the inspiration which was to be decisive in his future life.

But he soon found that he had much to learn. Addressing political meetings, he discovered that the ideas which seemed so simple and clear to him were remarkably difficult to convey to others. He came to appreciate the power of prejudice and the analogy which he developed then, and was to use later, was the need to remove weeds before a garden can be properly cultivated. Other beliefs had to be examined and their fallacies – if such they were – exposed. He became an avid student of economics and political philosophy and he developed his debating technique.

IN LIVERPOOL he learned of the existence of study groups based upon Henry George's teachings and later, in Nottingham, he started running classes himself. His drive combined with his natural gift of persuasiveness began making converts. The groundwork was being laid which in due course was to make him one of the best-informed and most influential members of the movement.

Before turning to the time when Vic formally joined the United Committee, something needs to be said about the history of the movement up to that time. Although it can scarcely be claimed that Henry

George's writings had captured the popular imagination, their influence among politicians had become considerable. Lloyd George's budget of 1909-10 (which provoked the famous confrontations with the House of Lords) had contained a provision for land value taxation – which, however, was never put into effect.

There were serious defects in the Lloyd George proposal, but with a great deal of help from the United Committee, the Labour Chancellor, Phillip Snowden, had introduced a well-formulated measure of land value taxation in his 1931 budget. This was not put into effect either. But neither measure had failed on its own merits; both fell victim to other political circumstances.

Thus, in the years immediately before the war, the leaders of the United Committee were understandably convinced that land value taxation in Britain was 'just around the corner'. There were strong pressure groups working for it within both the Liberal and Labour parties. The advice and support of the United Committee was widely sought by influential Members of Parliament and it also had considerable influence among local authorities. By 1939 over 200 local councils had been induced to pass resolutions petitioning Parliament for authority to levy rates on site values. "One more push", it seemed, was all that was necessary.

Profile by NICK GARDNER

BY 1947, when Vic gave up a successful career in retail management to work for the United Committee, all of this had changed. The land values group of the Parliamentary Labour Party had dwindled from over a hundred members to a mere handful, and new members of all parties were preoccupied with the Beveridge Report on unemployment and social security and the Uthwatt Report on Town and Country Planning. While the economic case for land value taxation was acknowledged to be valid by most, other problems had come to appear more pressing. The teachings of John Maynard Keynes had gained acceptance, and the key to social justice and economic progress without unemployment was thought to lie in the concept of the planned society. The task of weeding the garden had become a formidable one.

Those who had worked for the United Committee before the war viewed these developments with dismay and indignation. Former supporters had, in their view, abandoned the path of principle for a misguided pragmatism.

Half-baked proposals – such as the 'betterment levy' for dealing with the land problem – were gaining acceptance and ill-considered government regulation was being imposed on an unprecedented range of activities.

Like Vic, other members of the movement saw the need for the removal of weeds. But with their near-success in the pre-war years in mind, some were not disposed to be patient. Vitriolic attacks on the new dogma and its adherents occurred frequently in the press and in party assemblies. Whatever weeding was necessary could, they thought, be done with a flamethrower. These tactics alienated potential supporters and the influence of the United Committee was probably reduced. And the weeds flourished.

THE NEW TACTICS which Vic Blundell gradually introduced were based upon the technique which he had learned of building a case patiently from first principles, and illustrating his points by vivid analogies drawn from everyday experience.

Although an effective public speaker, he recognised that public meetings did not provide the best opportunity for applying this technique. The Henry George School provided the ideal vehicle, and at an early stage in his time with the United Committee he set about re-building it.

With the help of Wally Fox he took classes, recruited tutors and established new branches. At first he divided his time between the school and helping Arthur Madsen with *Land and Liberty* and then, for a time, he devoted himself full-time to the school, travelling the country to set up new branches until there were 21 branches handling up to a thousand students a year. The school became a vital part of the movement, constantly providing new lifeblood to its membership.

DONATIONS OF BOOKS REQUIRED

The Municipal Reform Group has recently commenced collecting books for a reference library. Books on Georgeism, Voting Systems and similar subjects are required.

Any Donations may be sent to:

Hon. Secretary,
129 Forest Road,
West Hobart, Tas. 7000



● VIC BLUNDELL surveys a desolate scene in the heart of London. He has spent a working lifetime exposing the social and economic costs of land held vacant by speculators.

The success of the Henry George School under Vic's leadership owed a great deal to its unusual style of tuition. From the beginning, students were encouraged to accept nothing on authority, but to think out every step for themselves. In the process, many found themselves abandoning preconceptions and discovering new viewpoints. In the classes themselves, tutors refrained from advocacy and encouraged free-ranging discussions within the broad agenda provided by the lesson sheets. Outside of the classes, over tea at the school or beer at the local pub, students and tutors would usually continue in vigorous debate on a variety of subjects.

Vic's personal contribution to all of this went far beyond that of a talented organiser. He was frequently to be found in the middle of a group of students and tutors, putting or contesting a point with infectious energy and disarming good humour. Some of the views which Vic expressed in these debates and in numerous articles in *Land and Liberty* and elsewhere seem less iconoclastic now than they did at the time. In the 1950s and 1960s, when Keynesian orthodoxy was seldom challenged, he was one of the few to attack it. He did not, like some of his predecessors, dismiss it as without foundation. But he exposed it as a palliative which would hold down unemployment only for as long as the money illusion lasted, and which would sooner or later lead through its monetary consequences to ever growing inflationary pressure. Long before orthodox economists paid any attention to the money supply, Vic was drawing attention to its rapid growth and to the consequences for inflation.

The United Committee continued in the meantime as a pressure group and a source of expert advice, particularly on site value rating. *Land and Liberty* continued its informed advocacy of land value taxation and free trade and attacked the numerous subsidies and infringements of personal freedom which were an increasing feature of the British scene. His period of full-time devotion to the school over, Vic Blundell played an increasingly important part in these activities and ultimately – after the death of Arthur Madsen – became their leading organiser.

Many of these activities were in the nature of weeding. There were plenty of weeds to attack. The over-zealous application of Keynesian policy by post-war governments; excessive deficits and irresponsible monetary expansion; subsidies to agriculture, first by UK governments

and then by the EEC; misguided attempts to restrain land speculation by development levies; all of these and others were tackled with vigour. Many of these weeds have since withered. Those responsible for post-war demand management have acknowledged their mistakes; the Egg Marketing Board – opposed by Vic and others at the time of its formation – has long since disappeared. The butter mountain remains, but with few defenders. The betterment levy, having produced the predicted absurdities, has been abandoned.

In retrospect, it is difficult to say how far the United Committee – and Vic Blundell as its leading spirit – can lay claim to success in its weeding activities. Many of them were transitory and easily forgotten and few brought the satisfaction of solid achievement. But solid achievement there was. The United Committee under Vic established itself as a sober and reliable source of advice on site value rating, gaining the confidence of such professional associations as the Rating and Valuation Association. By persistent argument, it challenged the accepted dictum that, though site value rating might be effective in theory, the problems of valuation would in practice be insoluble. Finally, in conjunction with the Rating and Valuation Association a trial valuation of Whitstable was commissioned. The results are on the record as conclusive proof of the practicability of site value rating.

If, as his seventieth birthday approaches, Vic feels disposed to look back over his time with the movement, he has every reason to do so with pride and satisfaction. He can take pride in the professional standards which he has set, and in the respect which the movement has earned as a source of information and advice. But his greatest satisfaction will come from his success in serving his ideal and in passing on his inspiration to so many others.

To quote his own words:–

"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 and 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."