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Mine, Thine & Ours

WE THINK we know what we own as private property.

Since the 17th century philosophers like John Locke and Adam Smith have sought to define the limits of society: the point at which a person becomes a sovereign individual.

It had become necessary to reassert the rights of the individual, but NOT because of the tyranny of an overbearing society. Rather, it was because a few people had hijacked the power of the community. They did so because they wanted the privilege of determining how to finance the public sector. Not because they thought they were wiser; rather, because they wanted to privatise the natural source of public finance, which was – and remains – the rent of land and natural resources.

With the power over the taxable capacity of the community came the power over the police, and policy in general. Civil wars were necessary to try and curb that power.

John Locke's project was to define each person's natural rights to life, liberty and land. Unfortunately he neglected to offer an equivalent account of the community's property rights. Outcome: an inordinate emphasis on private rights. Essentially, what I produced with my labour was my property, and what you produced was your property. Locke implicitly isolated what was OUR property (that which was not mine or yours), but this needed to be underscored with a red pen.

WE NEED to understand the nature of social property.

The principles on which our collective rights are grounded must be articulated and agreed upon. Without this project, the abuse that is inflicted on us daily by government – and by those who have benefited from the privatisation of public value – will continue unrestrained.

Government is supposed to represent our collective interests. But it does so without the benefit of the wisdom that beams light into the sphere of individual rights.

One result: the arbitrary approach to public finance. Governments exercise naked power and political guile to snatch and wheedle resources out of citizens. It is not surprising that discontent with the public sector corrodes the cultural glue that is supposed to bond society.

Politicians preach from their pulpits as if they were the sources of wisdom. In truth, their declamations are based on shallow notions inherited from previous generations of failed politicians and philosophies.

FOR MORE than a century, *Land & Liberty* has sought to foster clarity in political philosophy.

In that century its correspondents have chronicled the social experiments that flowed from the failure to recognise the legitimate boundaries between me and mine, thou and thine, and us and ours.

A rich permutation of socialism and of fascism has left its indelible mark on history: people banished, tortured and killed in the name of ideas that were not founded on natural

justice. Now we embark on a new century, one that could redeem the human species. This will happen only if there is democratic agreement on the boundaries that set limits on the rights of government to appropriate the income that people generate to support themselves and their families.

But in return for protecting private rights, people have to accept their social obligations. They have to contribute to the common fund that nourishes culture and pays for the administrative functions of civil society.

There ought not to be ambiguity about what we owe to the common fund. It is a value that we freely give in return for the use of the resources that we did not create by our labour – the riches provided to us by nature.

That value is created by the community, and not by any one individual. Classical economists called it economic rent. Other concepts also designate this value. They have in common the fact that they represent a community-created flow of resources that do not morally belong to any one individual. Until this reality is enshrined in our constitutions, governments will continue to abuse the rights of the individual.

THE TIME has surely come to devote as much interest in community rights – and obligations – as we devote to private rights?

The US Constitution, for example, declares that no person shall be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law; and just compensation shall be paid. *There needs to be an equivalent provision for public property.*

The failure to underpin our social rights and activities with unassailable principles means that we will NOT solve the profound personal and public problems that appear to be insoluble.

The starting propositions of a new analysis: western society is (1) not grounded in natural justice, and (2) will continue to betray the ideals of humanity until every penny and red cent of rent is collected for the common good. For only then will it be possible to unshackle people from the intrusive demands of governments that shamefully appropriate people's earned incomes.

"Rent" – the "surplus" material resources produced by communities – has been the taxable product of society ever since the Neolithic age. *The major ruptures in society have been driven by the pathological desire of a minority to privatise that surplus.*

We have now reached the point where practically all of that surplus is privatised. That is a measure of the scale of the challenge that we bequeath to the 21st century. That community surplus has to be re-socialised. And our personal income has to be privatised.

That awesome project may appear to be beyond achievement. At the turn into the last century, that's what most people thought about the prospects of abolishing slavery.