

The Viable Society

By BETTY NOBLE

I REMEMBER being taught when a small child that most people don't reason but are brought up with prejudices for which they find reasons to support. This was considered very sad, and very bad, and I was warned not to fall into the same error. It is, therefore, something of a confession to admit that I was brought up as a Georgeist. It is also the reason that I take out my convictions more frequently than most people and dust and examine them critically for any flaws that I may have previously missed.

This process, over the years, has had very little effect: I find, on nearing the end of my first half-century, that although there have been many modifications, basically my important beliefs remain unchanged. Truth, justice, and human brotherhood, are, I believe, the three realities of life. By realities I mean that a society that does not recognise and strive towards these values is not a viable society; is not a creative society; is not a civilised society.

After the last war I helped with, and later ran, classes of the Henry George School of Social Science in Manchester. At the 1949 International Conference it was suggested to me that New Zealand was fruitful soil and that I might consider going there to start classes and, it was hoped, establish a school. At the time an old friend, Arthur Weller, said to me: "Only a fool has his eyes on the ends of the earth." I was a trifle dismayed—my ignorance and my hopes being in inverse ratio—but of course he was right. For things down under are much the same as up over. People are concerned with their jobs and promotion, their status in society, the comfort of their neighbours and family, and are no more inclined to a study of social philosophy than any other group as comfortably placed.

And we in New Zealand are comfortable—by world standards unbelievably so. Although only a small country, and an island, it is a prosperous country which since the war has had a steady demand and high prices for its main products. It is a good-hearted country, where people are friendly and helpful; a country without racial discrimination; a country which believes wholeheartedly that everyone is entitled to a good standard of living (no matter how small his contribution to the national product) and in a redistribution of the national income to ensure that he gets it. "Well, if it's not the best of all possible worlds, at least it's not too bad" would be Mr. Everyman's verdict.

Of course, the Spanish proverb "Take what you want, said God; take it and pay for it" applies here as elsewhere, and we do not lack those economic and social problems

that arise from a basic maldistribution of wealth. On the economic side there is inflation, high land prices, restricted importation, and so on. On the social side there are problems that at first sight appear to have no connection with the economic system but which I believe are secondary effects of it. Because under the present economic system it has been necessary, in order to maintain a reasonably egalitarian society, to transfer some of the proper responsibilities of the individual to the state, there is much confusion as to what is the proper rôle of government, and an increasing demand that "something should be done about it."

For those of us who are anxious to focus concern on basic matters, a major trouble in this outlook is that it results in increasing legislation and control, which frequently gives rise to fresh evils or anomalies. Thus people who have a social conscience are spread very thinly over a wide variety of concerns.

Happily, large gains have been made since 1945 in the collection of economic rent through unimproved value rating, and it is infuriating that these gains have to some extent been offset by whittling away (through higher exemptions, etc.) of the national land tax which was £1.1 million in 1938/39 out of a national budget of £43.4 million and only £1.2 million out of a national budget of £415.0 million in 1963/64. However, the amount of revenue that is collected through unimproved value rating has had, and continues to have, beneficial effects on the economy.

Unfortunately, in most cases the shift from rating on land and improvements to rating on land alone is motivated by a desire for lower rates on the part of the home owner—not because the principle involved is understood. This means that where, as in Wellington, large blocks of flats and office buildings are going up, there is a move to reverse the trend to universal site-value rating because the ratepayers think they see a way of "shifting the burden of the rates" from themselves on to flat owners and business premises.

It seems to me that the principles underlying the advocacy of land-value rating and taxation are best understood by those who are likely to make gains from land sales and speculation, while the vast majority of people, through indifference or pressure of other concerns, collaborate unintentionally with reactionary forces through their ignorance. I remember at the end of one course a student coming to me and asking whether, in view of what had been said, would I recommend her to withdraw her money from shares and invest in land! I was so appalled I can't remember what I replied. It wasn't however, for that reason I stopped running classes! I am now planning another attempt.

The road to a truly free society is a long one, but even the longest journey starts with a single step.