

Experience and the Future

By HON. JACKSON H. RALSTON

THOSE who may be classed as followers of Henry George have experienced a number of relatively slight advances and several severe checks. From the advances we have learned and can learn comparatively little. Our checks should be studied and they can teach us much if we examine them.

Following the apparently well-reasoned views of Henry George, those believing in his fundamentals have sought as the line of least resistance the gradual, or immediate, removal of all taxation from improvements and personal property and its transference to land values. In this way they have hoped to bring about equality in the gifts of Nature to all men. Acting upon this belief they have, in the United States, fought unsuccessful state-wide campaigns in Oregon, Missouri and California. In no instance have they come within striking distance of a favorable result. The last and perhaps most interesting attempt was in California in 1938. Into this recurrent condition let us make at least a superficial examination.

Are these failures the result of the groundlessness of the fundamentals for the recognition of which we have striven? None of us will accept this idea. As long as we continue to believe that all men have an equal right to life, we must recognize that the denial of such right must lead to human misery and the removal of existing wrongs as speedily as possible is righteous and imperative.

Accepting this hypothesis as indisputable, why then is not our proposition immediately accepted by the electorate, only a small percentage of which in any reasonable theory should oppose it?

Has such refusal of acceptance been due to want of education? Necessary as education in economics is, I do not think so. Better stated, I should say that I do not believe that any attainable degree of education will change the result. To illustrate, the number of men coming of age at any moment will, by an infinite number of times exceed the possible number which will take on education. (This will be entirely true unless we enlarge the meaning of the word "education" to include those who are instructed by their feelings and observation.) Useful as book-learning is, it is insufficient and a large percentage of such learners on an actual test will be swept off their feet by what they esteem to be their immediate self-interest. Education alone cannot be the answer.

In California we were opposed by every great interest in the State. With general unanimity the press, save for the Labor papers, fought us. As with one voice they spoke for their masters, the great financial institutions, the large landowners, the real estate dealers, Chambers of Commerce, farm organizations and all the bodies these could control, including the State and subordinate govern-

ments, women's organizations, service clubs, to a large degree, and others. The wonder is, not that we received only 372,000 votes, or about 18 per cent of those cast, but that we had such a large following.

But how came it that even the bodies of which I have spoken were able to mislead the electorate against the interests of the great majority? What appeal could they make to win success? Assuredly they must have made some appeal to large sections of the electorate.

From such examination as I have been able to make I believe the Opposition made a very successful play for the votes of the vast majority of householders and those they controlled. This one influence easily represented two-thirds or more of the electorate.

It may be asked how such an appeal could be successful in the face of the ultimate extinction of all taxation upon improvements and tangible personal property as proposed by us. The argument is this: "The Single Taxers say you will be relieved from house and certain other taxation. Very well. But where will the taxes rest? They will be laid on land values and wipe them out. You have worked hard to get the land on which to build. To all intents that land is to be taken from you and thrown into common ownership. This is near communism. Of what worth is it to you to be relieved from certain taxes if you are to lose your land?"

I need not stop to point out the shortcomings of this argument. The householder was in a panic of fear. With our success he saw all he had labored for taken from him, or at least his ownership rendered insecure. Nothing we could say or do could affect a mind impregnated with fear. Eyes and ears were closed against men who, they were told, would so wrong the home owner.

Again from the standpoint of a certain number our proposition seemed essentially immoral. In those cases the argument ran somewhat as follows: "People have invested their savings in land—perhaps buying for a home or for speculation, if you please. They have hoped thus to preserve their savings or, it may be, make some small profit. You Single Taxers come along and destroy all their hopes—hopes based upon the expected continuance of long-established relations for which every one in the community is responsible. This is wrong."

Again I shall not take time with the reply which seems to me conclusive. Those taking this position believed they were defending the cause of public morality and that we were antagonistic to human right.

Then the farmer. In many instances where the assessed value of his improvements was less than that of his land, his taxes, usually light in all circumstances, would be increased. He refused to look far enough to see that our plan would make a vastly better city market for his products than he now enjoys, this to his ultimate benefit. He thinks he is par excellence a land owner and for fifty years will refuse to see that his land values have been

and are being drained into the cities. With few exceptions he accepted the arguments of our opponents.

What conclusion is to be drawn from all this? We cannot undertake another campaign in California for a score of years, either by total or so-called "step-by-step" measures with the slightest hope of success. Past failures, of which I have spoken serve to confirm this belief. And the like situation, as I see it, prevails in every other State in the Union. The same forces and the same misrepresentations which have triumphed here will prevail elsewhere in like endeavors and this will, there, as here, hold for twenty years to come.

Does this mean that we are to remain hopeless and inert? I do not so believe, but it does mean that we have a lot more thinking to do as to the methods.

First, of course, methods of education in economics are to be cultivated.

Next we must develop popular government. Legislatures will be managed by adverse influences for a generation to come, perhaps several generations. The Initiative and Referendum must be materially revised and extended to new states. In California, for instance, it has become practically unworkable.

More importantly, we must study a new approach. I am sure that at some point the citadel of privilege will be found vulnerable. What that point may be I am not wise enough to say today. Want of success in our endeavors proves we have not yet struck the weakest spot.

It may well be that we should attack the great landed estates in city and country. The man who holds 10,000 acres imperfectly cultivated in the country or \$50,000 in land in the cities with only slum dwellings has few sympathizers.

Again there is a natural human feeling that every man is entitled to enough land to live upon and sustain his family. Shall we avail ourselves of this? Would this be departing in any degree from our basic principle of equality in human rights if we were to declare that thus much land every man shall enjoy without paying taxes to the state? Would this not be a true homestead exemption? It is interesting to remember that Lycurgus divided the lands of Sparta into equal holdings—with each man entitled to his own and with no right to transmit by inheritance.

It seems to me quite possible that on some such presentation our theories will offer a new appeal. Then at any rate it would not be said that we sought to take from a man the land on which his house rested. Only the pure land speculator would be left out in the cold.

The popularity of homestead exemption should suggest something to us. To extend its protection to assault from the State as well as to the grasp of creditors has much in its favor. This kind of proposition no householder would fear. Secure in the friendship of the home owner, our further advance should be repaid.

Land and Landless

THE following interesting information about land ownership throughout the world appeared in the December, 1939, issue of *Progress*, a Georgeist journal published at Melbourne, Australia:

"In Great Britain when the last survey was made some 40,000 people—one-tenth of 1 per cent—owned nearly three-quarters of the country. Some 44 millions owned no land whatever. In Scotland 96.4 per cent owned no land. Twenty-five landowners claim to own one-third of Scotland. In Wales recently the Marquis of Bute (Scotch) sold 117,000 acres, including half the City of Cardiff for £40,000,000. In Australia 85 per cent of the people are landless. In Italy more than two-thirds of the land is owned by less than 4 per cent of the landowners. One-half of one per cent possess 47 per cent of all the cultivated land. 40,000,000 own no land whatever. In Hungary one-third owns no land. The Esterhazy Estate of 223,287 acres includes 159 villages. In Poland 70 per cent are peasants in appalling conditions. One aristocrat owned 340,000 acres. In Czechoslovakia a land reform administration was appointed to function. Germany has crushed that advance. In Spain before the recent struggle 1 per cent owned 51.5 per cent of the land. 65 per cent owned only 2.2 per cent. Franco supported by Germany and Italy fought to retain these conditions. In Mexico in 1910 2 per cent owned 70 per cent of the land. In the United States 16 people own 47,800,000 acres of timber lands. In Manhattan (New York) 1 per cent own about 85 per cent of the island, valued at 4,022,000,000 dollars (1937). In the United States 75 per cent do not own their own farms. Denmark shows progress. In Denmark only 5 per cent of the farms are held by tenants. The Georgean Movement is strong there. Until interfered with by Japan it was growing in China. In Japan half the arable land is owned by about 1½ per cent of the total population. 22,000,000 try to exist on about one acre per household. The density of population is only half that of England. In Nanking, China, 12,000 delegates were to meet last September to discuss the policy of collecting economic rent and the abolition of taxation. The publication office of their paper was destroyed by the Japanese."

IF I am asked, what system of political philosophy I substituted for that which, as a philosophy, I had abandoned, I answer, "No system: only a conviction that the true system was something much more complex and many-sided than I had previously had any idea of, and that its office was to supply, not a set of model institutions, but principles from which the institutions suitable to any given circumstances might be deduced."

—"Autobiography," by JOHN STUART MILL.