

Should Georgists abandon their quest for land value taxation and turn their efforts to the propagation of their faith in a philosophical and ethical concept that the individual is entitled to live his life in any way he chooses--as long as he does not infringe on the equal rights of others to do the same?

An affirmative answer to this question is offered by George Hardy, an Australian businessman and author in a speech celebrating George's birthday in Melbourne on September 21, 1976 (reported in Progress).

Mr. Hardy makes an eloquent plea for a new approach, but unfortunately he gives us little instruction about how to make it more effective than earlier efforts.

No doubt he is sincere in questioning why so many politicians have been willing to give lip service to George's ideas but have been unable to give them little practice. But Mr. Hardy seems unaware that in the course of his remarks, he answered his own question. For he is as stunningly aware of the ills of monopoly capitalism as he is of the treacherous allure of welfare economics.

Indeed, the Hardy analysis can hardly be faulted. No one who believes in the primacy of the individual and, therefore, accepts liberty as a *sine qua non* can fail to agree that George's antithesis to personal privilege--his anti-monopoly stance--is the "third way" between the extremes of *laissez faire* capitalism and socialism.

It is difficult to share his enthusiasm for an "anti-monopoly" campaign. As a slogan or as a banner, it is shopworn. Everyone is--has been for three-quarters of a century in the US--against monopoly. It is one of the graven sins of economics. And like most sins it is deplored and ignored. Everyone will solemnly agree that monopoly (everyone's except his own, that

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is) must be expunged and then will go on about his business as before.

Mr. Hardy properly faults welfare economics as productive inevitability of tyranny --either directly by intelligent socialists or as a consequence of bankruptcy at the hands of naive ones. History would suggest we are fated to suffer both.

Beyond recommending the reprinting of old tracts for recirculation and the convening of another seminar among the faithful, Mr. Hardy does not tell us how to go about imbuing a spirit of individual freedom and responsibility in a generation schooled in and by "the organization." How are we to get a working majority of people to understand that their liberty depends on "social justice based on rational and ethical considerations which are exactly the opposite of the more powerful emotional and power considerations" they've been taught? How do we sell this message to a population that has been brought up to "keep a low profile," "never volunteer," "don't make waves," and above all "get with

it"? "It", y'know, is the latest fashion in clothes, language, behavior and thought. How do we promote a sense of responsibility and ethical conscience in a people, the majority of whom want only to put in their time and collect their pensions?

Mr. Hardy says that convincing people land value taxation is superior economics to other forms of taxation leads only to another argument about the adequacy of the revenue to be gained thereby. True, the revenue bucket can never be filled if it is an elastic one, continually enlarged by ever-increasing presumed "needs." No amount of tax revenue will ever surfeit politicians who, in honesty or chicanery, offer to meet the supplications of voting blocs. But how successful can rhetoric about ethics and appeals against sin be in combatting such a condition?

The strangest part of this discussion is that these questions were understood and answered a century ago by Henry George. It is all very well to reiterate the famous quote that truth will prevail ultimately. But like Keynes--whom he anticipated--

George realized that ultimately we will all be dead.

A careful reading of "Progress and Poverty" would make clear that George offered his analysis of production and distribution based on John Locke's thesis of individualism for those who wanted theoretical backing for what he had observed to be true.

George was a crusading journalist, but nowhere does he exhort the preaching of a philosophy. What he does is urge action unequivocally: "We must make land common property." What admonition could be clearer?

Moreover, George was specific in his instruction as to how this was to be done. Shift the incidence of tax from the improvement to the site, he said. Then he went on to explain in some detail the multiple benefits that can be expected to flow from this act. To dispute where the emphasis should be is to argue with George.

If a public relations image is wanted, George supplied one. Among the benefits he saw accruing from land value taxation was the marked diminution of land speculation. Not only are the pernicious effects of such speculation acknowledged by economists of all persuasions, but land value taxation is accepted by them as a cure.

Here, then, is an image. Here is a villain to identify and to smite. On the theory that people vote "against" rather than "for", a well-mounted attack on land value speculation would have a better chance of success than any other approach. Certainly when even the promoters of the welfare state are openly questioning its efficacy, there is an opportunity to provide a scapegoat--and a bona fide villain, at that. It would be a shame to miss such a chance while quibbling among ourselves.
Stanley Sinclair

Letters