

Geoists in History

Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1836-1908) *by Karl Williams*

Born to a knight and a lord, he fell under the spell of Henry George's barnstorming tours of Britain in the 1880's to such an extent that he became known as "Britain's first, and only, radical Prime Minister". With the landed aristocracy standing over Britain with their boots in its neck, Henry Campbell-Bannerman was the class traitor who almost overturned the whole rotten system.

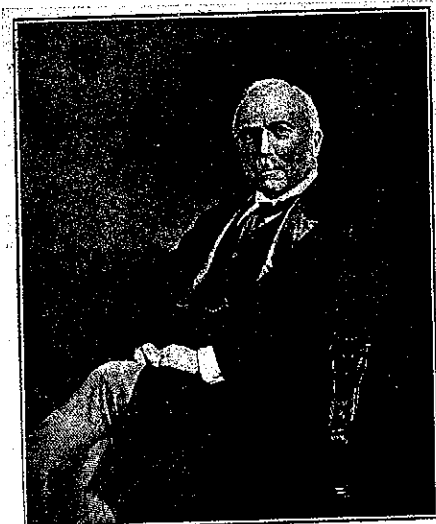
The youngest of six children born to Sir James Campbell, Lord Provost of Glasgow, Henry was schooled in Glasgow before going on to study at the University of Glasgow and Trinity College, Cambridge. He was an outstanding student and it has been speculated that it was his rich classical education made him more receptive to Henry George's message.

His family were aristocrats but not of the landed variety, which meant Henry had to go out and earn a living in the family drapery business in 1860. He customarily married early and chose well as his wife Sarah was a shrewd, intelligent and cultured woman who did much to help guide her husband's future political success.

Henry's father and only brother were conservative politicians, and Henry was expected to follow suit. No surprise, then, that Henry's increasingly radical policy platform caused a great deal of family opposition.

The other reason Henry's horizons were broadened way beyond typical aristocratic concerns for wealth and prestige was that Henry broke out of the jingoistic attitudes of his day when the British Empire was at its peak. He and his cultured wife travelled for months almost every year, and Henry spoke French, German and Italian fluently.

But if you want to change the world you have to get your hands dirty, and so Henry entered politics in 1868 as a member of the House of Commons. On the Liberal (i.e. progressive) side of politics, he served in the Admiralty and War Office during the first two Gladstone governments before being named secretary for Ireland (1884-85). He took on many other portfolios and became Gladstone's secretary for War, a cabinet post which he held throughout Gladstone's



third and fourth ministries.

On the back of Henry George's many speaking tours of Britain, it was in the late 1880's that George's influence on Campbell-Bannerman and his Liberal Party kicked in hard. In 1889 George became adviser and field-general in land reform strategy to the Radical wing of the Liberal Party in Britain. The Liberals adopted a land-tax plank after 1891 and came to carry George's policies forward under successive Liberal Governments of Campbell-Bannerman, Asquith, and Lloyd George.

In scenes utterly bizarre by 21st century standards, Henry was knighted in 1895. Queen Victoria's cousin, the Duke of Cambridge, had served as commander-in-chief of the British army for 39 years. He had earned a reputation for being resistant to reforms as well as for making promotions based upon an officer's social standing, rather than merit. Under his command, the British Army had become a moribund and stagnant institution, lagging far behind its continental counterparts. Enter Henry at the queen's behest, engaging all his charm and powers of persuasion to convince the duke to resign. Soon after the job was done, the queen was so grateful that it was "Arise, Sir Henry!"

In reformist Britain in the 1890's, the influence of Henry George was battling the simplistic appeal of socialism. Henry Campbell-Bannerman was convinced that George's proposals to address the root cause of injustice and economic stagnation through land and tax reforms were far superior. At the same time, he came closer to the ultimate reins of power when in 1899 he assumed Liberal leadership in the Commons.

In the early 1900's, British politics was dominated by the Conservative Party but turmoil and controversy led to the resignation of Prime Minister Arthur Balfour in 1905. Henry, as leader of the next largest party, was invited by the king to form a government. When the Liberals went on to win the 1906 election in a landslide under Henry's leadership, his power was consolidated. His government became known for being strong and efficient, and he skilfully ensured that it embraced all wings of the Liberal party.

Henry's cabinet include some mighty figures, including three future prime ministers who themselves were Geoists in History - Herbert Asquith, Winston Churchill and David Lloyd George. Also included was the first person from the working class ever to attain cabinet rank in Great Britain, John Burns.

Henry's personal beliefs were broadly those of the party's centre-left - that is, a belief in individual freedom, a desire to help the disadvantaged, an aversion to imperialism and support for Irish self-government. Gough Whitlam's reformist years from 1972-75 seem quite modest compared to what Henry achieved over a hundred years ago - and his geoist ambitions were even more revolutionary.

So during his time as Prime Minister, Henry supported such measures as safeguards for trade unions, old-age pensions, and urban planning to improve housing. He was a firm believer in free trade and Irish Home Rule. As far back as 1903, Henry had spoken of the intention of the Liberal Party to do something about the "twelve million people in England who were living on the verge of starvation". Despite these and other comments sympathetic to the poor and disadvantaged, Henry was not a socialist. He aimed to do more than to merely apply band aids.

Henry opposed most wars and imperial expansions. Probably the most shameful war in which the British ever engaged was the Boer War of 1899-1902, and Henry condemned it bitterly. In fact, he caused a public uproar by refusing to take back his remarks about Kitchener's "methods of barbarism" being used to win the war.

Henry visited France in April 1907 and met the Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau. Clemenceau believed that the British would help France in a war with Germany but Campbell-Bannerman told him Britain was in no way committed. Henry was certainly not responsible in any way for the European tragedy that came to pass six years after his death. Following the 1906 election victory, Henry atoned for the Boer War by restoring independence to the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, both parts of South Africa. This led to the Union of South Africa in 1910.

Henry's social reforms were sweeping. His government allowed local authorities to provide free school meals and strengthened the power of the trade unions with their Trade Disputes Act 1906. The Workmen's

Compensation Act 1906 gave some workers the right against their employer to a certain amount of compensation if they suffered an accident at work. The Probation of Offenders Act 1907 was passed, which established supervision within the community for young offenders as an alternative to prison. Under Campbell-Bannerman's successor, H. H. Asquith, much more far-reaching reforms were implemented.

These were high times, when the relative absence of trash media, porn, gambling and computer games left time for people to read real books and to debate at town hall meetings, mechanics institutes, guilds and bible discussion classes. Tomes such as HG's "Progress and Poverty" were read by rich and poor alike, and HG's lofty ideals were inspiring the English-speaking world.

Enter, stage left, the villain. The mighty defender of privilege then was the House of Lords, where undemocratically elected hereditary land barons dominated. The Lords pushed back against Campbell-Bannerman's land reforms, just as they were to push back against those of Asquith and Lloyd George. These outrages were to be the undoing of the Lords and led to the reforms of the House of Lords, but not before the Great War ruined the nation and laid waste a whole generation. After this, Britain had lost its appetite for reform as it licked its wounds. Thus the whole surge in geoist understanding and appetite for reform was to fall victim to horribly unlucky timing.

Henry had actually foreseen this battle with the House of Lords and tried to shackle the lords at the outset. The reform of the House of Lords was to later become the dominant issue of the 1910 elections, initiated by Henry's proposals in June 1907 that the Lords enjoy purely ornamental ancient privileges and be deprived of all real legislative power. He also proposed that the Commons, if they ever suffered for a few months the futile criticisms of the Lords, would be empowered by mere lapse of a brief fraction of a year to ignore the very existence of a second chamber, and to proceed to pass their statute on their own authority, like the ordinances of the Long Parliament during the English Civil War. In essence, he maintained that the predominance of the Commons must prevail, without any appeal to the constituencies in a further general election. It was nothing short of revolutionary, and perhaps overly ambitious so early in Henry's tenure.

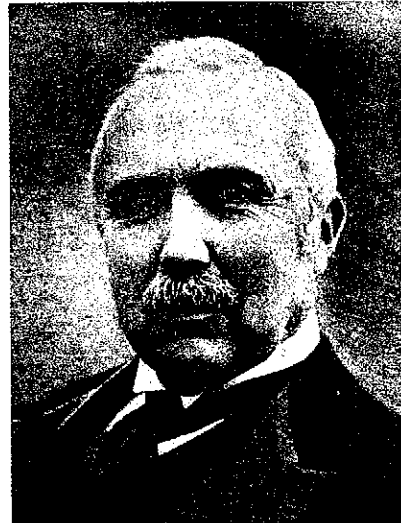
"We desire to develop our undeveloped estates in this country - to colonise our own country - to give the farmer greater freedom and greater security in the exercise of business - to secure a home and a career for the labourer who is now in many cases cut off from the soil. We wish to make the land less of a pleasure-ground for the rich and more of a treasure-house for the nation."

While Henry still achieved a good deal despite the hostility of the House of Lords, he paved the way for a lot more. He oversaw the introduction of sick pay and old age pensions. More children were given access to free medical care. He brought about labour unions being granted considerable legal freedom to strike. The Old-Age Pensions Act 1908 introduced pensions for those over 70. Health and unemployment insurance were introduced. The Agricultural Holdings Act, passed in 1906, allowed farmers to farm their holdings without interference from landlords.

Alas, here Fate intervened, and Henry's health began to seriously fail in 1907 with a serious of heart attacks. But he was riding the crest of a wave, and so remained in office as long as he could. The curtain was drawn rather quickly, with Henry resigning on 5 April 1908, and dying 17 days later.

John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Nationalist Party, paid tribute to Campbell-Bannerman by saying that "We all feel that Ireland has lost a brave and considerate friend". Henry's immediate geoist successor as prime minister, Herbert Asquith, told the

"Let the value of the land be assessed independently of the buildings upon it, and upon such valuation let contribution be made to those public services which create the value. This is not to disturb the balance of equity, but to redress it. ... There is no unfairness in it. The unfairness is in the present state of things. Why should one man reap what another man sows? We would give to the landowner all that is his, but we would prevent him taking something which belongs to other people."



House of Commons, "He was singularly sensitive to human suffering and wrong doing, delicate and even tender in his sympathies, always disposed to despise victories won in any sphere by mere brute force, an almost passionate lover of peace" and then passed this observation on Henry's great geoist ideals, "In politics I think he may be fairly described as an idealist in aim, and an optimist by temperament. Great causes appealed to him. He was not ashamed, even on the verge of old age, to see visions and to dream dreams."

David Lloyd George, who was to have the geoist baton passed on to him by Asquith, remarked, "I have never met a great public figure since I have been in politics who so completely won the attachment and affection of the men who came into contact with him. He was not merely admired and respected; he was absolutely loved by us all."

Henry Campbell-Bannerman's last words were "This is not the end of me". Too true, Blue.

Next issue: the man behind the building and financing of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, James Bradfield

"The mere abolition of rent would not remove injustice, since it would confer a capricious advantage upon the occupiers of the best sites and the most fertile land. It is necessary that there should be rent, but that it be paid to the state or some body which performs public services; or, if the total rent were more than it required for such purposes, it might be paid into a common fund and divided equally among the population."

— Bertrand Russell 1897-1970
