

# Geoists in History

## Rolland O'Regan (1904 – 1992) *By Karl Williams*

He was a prominent surgeon, famous campaigner for racial equality and a great activist on a number of other fronts. But with the exception of Henry George, nobody who's ever walked this Earth has, almost singlehanded, brought about a greater degree of understanding as well as implementation of geoist principles on a national scale as Rolland O'Regan did. But then, in his dying days, he bore witness to the treachery of vested interests who obliterated his life's work.



Rolland's life was deeply influenced by his father, Patrick O'Regan, a largely self-taught, hardworking country lad who progressed from farm laboring to journalism to becoming the youngest elected New Zealand MP at the age of 24, fired up by the writings of Henry George he'd discovered three years earlier.

Rolland's father went on to become a prominent lawyer and judge of the Arbitration Court resolving industrial disputes which afforded him some opportunity of applying his geoist principles.

As all cat-seers invariably do, we pass on our understanding of economics to our children through our mothers' milk, so Rolland saw society through the geoist paradigm right from the get-go. Brought up in New Zealand's capital city of Wellington, he applied his considerable talents at school and further studies, becoming a prominent surgeon and eventually president of the Cancer Society.

Rolland mixed in all strata of society, marrying a Maori woman and going on to become a great campaigner for racial equality. But his passion and his life burned for an even greater cause – that without regard to race, religion, class or gender, every person has an equal and common right to land and natural resources.

The history of New Zealand, in terms of the battle for a rightful system of land tenure, is nothing short of enthralling. It had been partly settled on the principles espoused by convicted kidnapper and land dealer Edward Wakefield – namely, that land be sold at "sufficient price" to keep workers servile. George Grey

(1812–1898), as a great supporter of the ideas of Henry George, proved to be Wakefield's (and many others') nemesis.

George Grey was to be knighted, twice appointed governor of New Zealand and later premier. Grey actually met Henry George and in 1878 (a year before *Progress and Poverty* was published) introduced land value taxation (LVT), with improvements exempt.

Undoubtedly fired up by Henry George's barnstorming tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1890, NZ's Liberal Party took up the baton in 1891 by starting the process of enacting a graduated land tax aimed at breaking up the great land estates and capturing at least part of the increase in land value. But legislative gains made while parliament does not fully understand geoist principles are gains made on shaky ground, as we'll see.

The aristocrats of the appointed upper house – rather like their British counterparts – fought tooth and nail for three years to block these Liberal reforms which weren't enacted until 1896. Rolland's father was in the Parliament at this time.

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*"You will never amount to anything unless you devote yourself to something larger than yourself"*

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The Rating on the Unimproved Value Act was also passed around this time, allowing a petition to demand a poll on the issue at the local government level. As long as the people understood the importance of the ratings system, their future prosperity lay in their hands. The major cities of Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin were all built on site value (unimproved only) rates. When

ratepayers were given a choice of rating systems, they would always choose site value rating and, soon after the polls began to be held in the early 1890's, 80% of municipalities were using site value rating.

When Rolland O'Regan started campaigning in the early 1920's, at a national level NZ's LVT accounted for 10% of the budget. Continuing his father's work, he instead focused hard at a local government level. To this end, at least every three years to coincide with the local elections, he would post information packs to local business people, with the merits of LVT explained along with the means of getting it in their area by poll.

Rolland was an accomplished writer and prepared countless pamphlets and booklets discussing more complex and topical rating issues which were especially targeted at the mayors and councillors of every local authority in NZ. When opportunities arose, he prepared submissions to governments on financing options.

When WW2 came along, Rolland applied his surgical skills serving on hospital ships. At the end of the war he succeeded his father as Chairman of the then NZ League for the Taxation of Land Values Inc. At this time, to rectify the ageing membership of his father's time he arranged for Betty Noble to run the Henry George School in Wellington, and held public meetings to examine topical issues. The post-war boom, public apathy and the apparent security of the welfare state denied these ventures the success they deserved despite the hundreds of students who passed through the school.

Rolland probably achieved more public recognition in the field of rugby union for leading the campaign against the racially-selective All Blacks' tour of South Africa in 1960. Elected as chairman of Citizens' All Black Tour Association whose object was to combat racial discrimination in the selection of the 1960 rugby team to tour South Africa, his group demanded the abandonment of the tour if absolute equality of treatment could not be assured. Their slogan "No Maori - No Tour" attracted massive publicity.

Rolland accused NZ rugby officials of committing "an act of gross and indefensible racial discrimination against the Maori people". While the 1960 tour did go ahead, the public stink Rolland and his committee kicked up led to subsequent NZ tours being abandoned for 10 successive years until Maori player participation was accepted in 1970.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, in 1966 with a view to consolidating and furthering his gains, Rolland narrowly failed to gain the Wellington Central Parliamentary seat. He later topped the poll in Wellington City Council elections and was for nine years Chairman of the Town Planning Committee and the Wellington Harbour Board. His strategy was to be able to more effectively relate LVT theory and practice to real-life situations, defending and promoting the cause with first-hand evidence.

In 1973 while still on Council and Harbour Board, he wrote "Rating in NZ". This recorded NZ's experience of over 100 years of LVT in one form or another, even before Henry George. For the benefit of geoists around

the world who ardently, in vacuo, advocated LVT he set out the practical difficulties and political hazards. With local government councillors, officials and related professionals in NZ it was a sell-out. It also served as a blueprint for any Minister of Local Government who might have the will, if not the wit, to rationalise the interaction of local government rating and central government valuation.

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*"Maori society could have survived land confiscations but it could not survive the evils a fundamental change of land tenure were to bring ..... Freehold land tenure caused the death of Maori society as it had been."*

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While LVT at a national level had been under attack for decades, at a local government level Rolland's endeavours meant that by 1985 90% of all municipalities had by poll adopted Land Value Rating which accounted for 80% of Local Govt. revenue. His quiet expectation was that, given a devolution of function from

central to local government, more and more land values would be absorbed with accordingly less and less taken from income taxes. At that time he calculated that without the land value charges then in place land prices would be half as dear again. Nor was Rolland stuck in the times of Henry George - he was also aware of those other natural resources like minerals, water-rights, airwaves, some forestry, fishing, electricity generation for which LVT was unsuitable.

But Rolland had little support in the form of a large membership base, and the dark clouds of vested interests were looming ominously on the horizon.

At local government levels, despite the rapid success thereafter at the hands of ratepayers, there remained a crafty opposition that constantly tinkered with it, confusing even the most assiduous student. In any straight contest between Capital Improved Value and Site Value Rating, the latter almost invariably won because improvements were exempted (the homeowner's particularly) and because the majority of ratepayers (homeowners again) gain a reduction in rates at the expense of the numerically fewer who owned relatively underdeveloped commercial properties.

The first assault came in 1987/88 when the new Labour Minister for Local Government removed the traditional right to a poll on rating - whilst at the same time propounding the merits of "local decisions locally made"!

The second assault was in various ministerial forms of promoting a reversion to Capital Improved Rating wherever possible. The minister sealed the deal (and the fate of his soul!) by proposing that wherever Capital Improved Rating had been or was ever adopted, it would be irreversible.

Once the right to a poll was abolished, the final phase of the war was launched with the introduction of user pays charges in the form of fixed levies for specified services (sewerage, storm water, water, community facilities etc.) replacing property rates. Without a poll and the statutory information that came with it, ignorance and apathy lose out to vested interests and the gullible “soak the rich” ideologues.

The change to Capital Improved Value in his beloved Wellington especially devastated Rolland. His shining example to Auckland and the world, of urban renewal; of a city united, cleanly and honestly run without faction, division or strife; rescued from partial to complete Land Value Rating in 1927 by his own father reversing the Council's endeavors; now sold out, clumsily, illegally, arbitrarily, contrary to popular input and with a knighthood for the perpetrator! The wonder is that they didn't find Rolland in the wilderness, swinging from a rope.

In Auckland particularly, higher population from immigration, northern drift and tourism nowadays sees land prices rocketing and roads and sewers clogged. So the search inevitably turns to the means to pay for the solutions – petrol, people, tolls, users, anything but the related land values that have almost become a sacrosanct industry, openly promoted for the tax

advantages now and later.

It's easy to be an active campaigner when progress is discernible, but Rolland was facing the worst of possible worlds. Ninety years of progress, every step democratically achieved, was now vandalized. The rot had set in much earlier on a national level, with the share of national finances due to LVT steadily atrophying to about 0.4% in 1987.

How can we pull a happy ending out of this tale? Rolland died in 1992 soon after the collapse of his life's work, much loved and admired by all who knew him. His son (with his Maori wife) Tipene himself did his father proud, becoming a great Maori leader himself and was knighted two years after his father's death. His geostatist disciple whom he mentored for years, Bob Keall, continues Rolland's tireless work.

Next issue: the great reformist British prime minister of the Victorian age, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman.



Aerial view over Evans Bay, Wellington, ca. 1930s