

A Word with You

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New York City is going through a terrible financial crisis. In this big, rich, fabulous city, they can't find enough money to provide decent schools, patrol doubtful neighborhoods, pay civil servants a living wage and keep the streets clean.

Everybody is very unhappy about it, from the Governor of the State to the humblest street cleaner, but they don't quite know what to do about it, except blame one another.

I'll tell you right now what I think ought to be done—start increasing the tax on land values and start getting rid of nuisance taxes and taxes on improvements. I had the opportunity to express myself thusly to some high-up people, though I'm not sure of immediate action. But what concerns me at the moment is the citizenry.

It's the old story. Nearly everybody wants lower taxes—and more or better government services. And hardly anybody will take the trouble to exercise his powers and prerogatives to do anything about either. The New York budget hearings are attended only by special interests.

Community Action?

The other day I heard a similar sad story from a community leader in Levittown, where they're striving to create a real town-meeting democracy. Folks are hollering for schools for the growing child population, and grumbling about taxes and corruption. After an intensive campaign in which every voting adult was impressed with the fact that the decision on what to do was directly in the hands of each one of them, a little more than one per cent showed up to make the decision.

Well, what's the trouble? Don't we yet get the idea that ours is the responsibility, from our own substance come the things we want, there's no such thing as "free lunches"?

Maybe this idea would be easier to get across, if throughout the ages there weren't conspicuous personages who seemed to thrive wonderfully without doing any work, thus setting a beautiful example. Even the mechanism of a democracy can be corrupted by unearned income—in more ways than one.

What is needed is a more widespread realization of the possibility of a decent society, where all citizens are peers in actuality. This would surely stimulate the kind of democratic action that would lead us out of the mess we're in.