

Taxation Problems, Municipal and State

J. FRANK COLBERT, MINDEN, LA., FORMER MEMBER OF
THE LOUISIANA TAX COMMISSION, AT THE HENRY
GEORGE CONFERENCE, AT MEMPHIS.

MY subject, "Taxation Problems, Municipal and State," is a serious problem to all of us, and I think that perhaps all of you here agree with me that it is appalling and threatens the destruction of our civilization, unless we adopt the proper course and follow it. Half-way measures and makeshifts will not avail to save us, for it is not a theory but a stark naked fact and condition which America and most of the other nations of the earth are facing.

The great body of the people of this country, weighed down by the ever-increasing burden of taxation, seem helpless in their efforts to solve the question, and are floundering about from one petty scheme to another in their mad desire to find relief. Led, as they are in many instances by demagogues concerned chiefly for their own security and gain, and by others more honest and conscientious, yet ignorant of the true remedy, or else too indifferent or timid to make an honest investigation of the whole subject matter, we are indeed in a sad plight. Various schemes have been enacted to meet the situation, and others are proposed, but they are leading us nowhere, except into further confusion and disaster.

Taxation, in the conception of the public mind, is a necessary and unescapable burden on industry, and the constant effort is to shift as much of the load as possible to the shoulders of the other fellow and on to the other industry, thus relieving ourselves and the industry in which we are most vitally concerned. This view has a tenacious hold—a death-grip—and is difficult to remove once it becomes entrenched in thought. "Ability to pay" is the popular slogan and is held by nearly all so-called "tax experts" and leaders generally in politics and government, and the people as a mass seem blind to its guile.

That taxation, properly based and put into operation, is not a burden on industry at all, but is a great instrumentality of liberation for all industry, great and small, both individuals and corporate, and of every degree and nature, is a truth that must find lodgment in the minds of a vast number of American voters, if we are to halt our downward course and put the feet of America on the high-road to a great destiny. What a sorry spectacle it is to see the greatest nation of modern times suffering as acutely when much is produced as when little is produced! It is no excuse to say that other nations are suffering also. France and Denmark are not suffering as we are, and some of the other nations are not, and even if they were that would not absolve us from blame. Is it not true that land monopoly has enslaved us just as it enslaved and destroyed Rome.

"To the creator belongs the creation," is more than a figure of speech; more than a reference to the deity and His creations, and more than an abstract proposition concerns our existence on this planet and the lives we live here. If you by your exertions, or I by mine, make an article of wealth, it is ours—separately of course—to hold against all the world—to give, to sell, to bequeath. If we make the article jointly, it belongs to us collectively. Land value is made collectively by the people; therefore all the people who participate in the making of the value have equal interest in that value. That is self-evident and cannot be contradicted. All land is not valuable. The Sin Tax proposes to tax only valuable land, and to tax only that value which industry and the presence of population makes valuable, leaving sacredly inviolate, that is, to be free, all improvements made by the exertions of human labor, and would extend such exemption to all the fruits of industry of whatever kind, whether produced by individual labor or by the employment of the machine, property and servant of man.

The only incentive for land speculation is the prospect of its future increase in value. Remove that incentive by a system of taxation which puts the increase into the public treasury for the use of the public who created it and to whom it rightfully belongs, and we would have no more land speculation and no more "cornering" of land. The unemployed of today could employ themselves, receive the full fruits of their labor—which is the natural right of labor—or work for the other man upon the basis of value; they could earn working for themselves. Not equality in possessions but equality of opportunity is the goal we would attain. In other words, open a new frontier, not some remote region, but everywhere—in New York, Ohio and California and Louisiana, and here in Tennessee. The shoe would then be on the other foot and there would be no surplus of men and scarcity of jobs, and this one-sided civilization of ours would change to a better one. The depression would melt away like the mists of the morning and there would be no recurrence of such times as we are now experiencing.

Until the time comes when we cease to tax the products and processes of labor, and tax the unearned increment of land values upon the basis of its annual value for its use, thus sounding the death-knell of land speculation and consequent land monopolization, just so long will famine stalk in the land and greed and avarice be the symptoms of a decaying civilization.

There is no mystery in how industry and population cause land value to rise, for its value is always proportionate to the growth of industry and population. If we take the soil of Memphis and carry it to some remote section of Tennessee or even to portions of Shelby county, we see how much of its value is left. Or depopulate Memphis and remove her industries. How much would be the value of the lot on which this building stands? The answer is obvious and there is no suggestion of mystery about

The owner of this lot does not even have to live here to give it value. He might live in a foreign land or in some other section of this country, but the lot would still be valuable, because of the presence of other people and the industries of this city.

One of the greatest obstacles to presenting the Single Tax philosophy is the fear that enough revenue might not be raised to support the government. My answer is that that is a matter for future determination—a bridge to be crossed when we reach it—and should it not prove sufficient, an additional way will be provided to meet the deficit. Every survey made of which I have any knowledge has demonstrated that a tax on land values alone has always been found ample to meet all public needs—and more than enough. We cannot escape the responsibility of doing what both justice and expediency demand because there is some doubt about the fund from this source proving adequate. We have too much government anyway, and too much racketeering in government and politics. And we will continue to have racketeering in both so long as equality of opportunity is denied and many people feel they cannot make a decent living without a government job, and some cannot even exist without government food and government loans. They will band together and plunder the government to the last penny. Under the conditions now prevailing, so much attention must be given to self-preservation that we have not the time to give thought to self-sacrifice.

As a member of the Louisiana Tax Commission for six years, and previously as a member of the legislature, I learned to be practical in taxation matters, and I know we must be practical in urging the Single Tax as the solution of our vexing problems, if we would gain ground. It is my opinion that the public will the sooner gain a true comprehension of what we stand for, thereby beginning in earnest the solution of our taxation problems, if the smaller units of government were given "home rule" in taxation, clothed with complete authority to raise revenue for local purposes in the manner and from the course they deem proper, without hindrance from the larger unit, that is, the State, itself. What I hope for in gaining local control in taxation is that the good seed of a righteous system may be planted somewhere and a practical demonstration of the Single Tax philosophy put into operation. In this way a little leaven may leaven the whole lump.

If we could get concerted effort from all who appreciate the importance of the question in urging some State, or several States, to alter and liberalize their constitutions and laws so as to permit units to be self-governing in taxation, we would have achieved a great victory and reached a turning point of supreme moment.

The Pittsburgh graded tax plan is a demonstration in part of what we should strive for. If they succeeded in inducing the State of Pennsylvania to give them more authority, I am sure they can and will give a better demon-

stration of its practical workings. Right here in Tennessee might be another good place to make a start.

Henry George in "Progress and Poverty" and in his other books and writings, does not present a fragmentary theory, but a science as exact as physic and chemistry, or any other science, and as provable.

The Henry George School of Social Science

MESSAGE OF OSCAR H. GEIGER READ BY JOSEPH DANA
MILLER AT THE HENRY GEORGE CONGRESS.

Friends and followers of Henry George:

I HAVE been asked to talk about the Henry George School of Social Science. May I be permitted to confine my words to the aims, the hopes and the possibilities of the School rather than to its achievements? These, in the short time that the School has functioned, have given assurance to those whose efforts and assistance have made the School possible, that the work it has undertaken is feasible, its methods fruitful and its purposes attainable.

It is thirty-five years now since Henry George left this sphere of life. Those who knew his philosophy while he lived are all now on in years and few are left to carry on the work that he began. Those who did not know his teachings while he lived are on in years and burdened with cares, and comparatively few of these have more than heard of him or of his books. Those who have come upon the scene since he has gone have had little chance and very poor advantage to learn of the great truth which he made clear and which alone can make men free.

The materialistic outlook of this civilization, the acquisitive precepts inculcated by our present economic conditions and our modern methods of education, the lack of vision on the part of our leaders, our preachers and our teachers, the paramount need of securing the necessities of life and the consequent fear, or ignorance, or cupidity, of those in high places, all combine to obscure the teachings of Henry George.

If we to whom the vision has been brought are to do our part in bringing the light to others—as surely it is our duty to do; if we are to do our part in leading mankind out of its economic and spiritual darkness; if we mean to share in the task of making this world a better place to live in, and the human race really a brotherhood, it is for us to supply the vision, the leadership and, above all, the *teaching* that is lacking today.

Where better than in the minds just opening to the realities of life, where better than at the age still on the threshold of life (that yet unspoiled age) and where better than in those who are still preparing themselves for the tasks of living and doing, can we find the soil that is as ready