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The Land Is Our Heritage

by RUSSEL CONKLIN

THE problem of reaching the public with our message boils down to three simple questions: What is our message? What means are available? and How shall we use those means?

First—our message. We are constantly mixing and often confusing such terms as single tax, land value taxation, ground rent, site value and publicly created values. These phrases undoubtedly have definite connotations for those using them, but are they understood or even heard by the uninitiated? Recently I was called upon without warning to fill in a program for our local bar association. My son was program chairman and he failed to appear at the meeting. The president informed me that I would have to make a speech, and when I asked, "what about?" he said, "why

don't you talk about that stuff you've been writing for the papers?" During a lull in the meeting one of the older and more respected lawyers quipped, "that single tax stuff went out 50 years ago."

"Single tax," a disparaged expression, an outmoded and discredited theory, was dismissed without consideration. How do we stop the public on the run long enough to show them how they are taxing themselves for the benefit of speculators? In my limited experience in trying to get the public ear, I found one word that always reaches home, and that word is "taxes." Nobody can conceive of *a tax*—it is always plural. And everybody thinks the way to tax is to put the burden on somebody else that

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can't escape. Whenever the subject comes up the listener is tuned to his own interest. How will this affect me? Not ultimately—he doesn't look that far—but immediately. Will I have to pay out more money now?

The idea that land is common property frightens Mr. Average Man. That sounds like communism. The collection of ground rent sounds absurd. Of course the rent belongs to the man who owns the land. Land is property. Who said it wasn't? No, you can't stop him long enough to explain. He denies your major premise and anything else you say is lost.

So I have tried the terms "speculator" and "tax on speculation," and even a good Georgist jumped to the conclusion that I was talking about the stock market. It's not popular to tackle speculation—everybody is in it or hopes to be. You're talking about taking away my chances to make a killing in the open market—my one chance to get rich.

My second question: "What means are available?" becomes moot unless we know what our message is. Let's assume then that we do know what we want to say and have devised a way to say it so that it will be heard, where then can we gain a forum?

My answer is: the means are unlimited. Let's take a look first at politics. Everyone who enters politics is given opportunities to speak about whatever he chooses. If he talks single tax he may not win, but he will be heard. Luncheon and service clubs are constantly looking for programs, and if the subject is taxes or government the audiences are eager. Toastmaster organizations are always looking for subjects on which to practice speaking. Women's organizations are interested in prices, inflation, taxes,

schools—a myriad of topics that lead directly to fundamental economics. Schools want speakers for assemblies and commencements. Newspapers like to print letters to the editor. Magazines will take short articles that are well written if not submitted for pay. Radio and television stations frequently interview individuals who have a message of current interest. City councils, community welfare groups, public forums are all open to those who are willing to speak up.

So we reach my third question: "How shall we use these means?" We must use the language and media people are accustomed to hearing. The average citizen does listen to politicians. He may not believe them and may not agree with their proposals, but he hears the catch phrases and clichés that are thrown out as solutions to problems.

We hear continuously that taxes are too high and should be cut. The solutions offered are usually to cut government costs and "spread the tax base," a very misleading phrase. In Montana the cry is for new industry—more capital to provide more jobs so there will be more people to tax. Somehow this is supposed to reduce taxes for those of us who are already there. Nobody seems to point out that more people and more industry will call for more government. There is no tax reduction here. Yet strangely enough the voter seems to hope that he will benefit. If we could only get some outside wealth to come pouring into our state, then we would all benefit in some mysterious way. So the promoters have coined a phrase, *Better Business Climate*. They even introduced a resolution in the last legislature to promote this. And the Chamber of Commerce is now sending out speakers to stump the state for *guess what?*—a sales tax, which we fortu-

nately so far have escaped. How a sales tax will create a better business climate is a mystery to me.

The other cure-all recently proposed in Montana was legalized gambling. An erstwhile Republican turned Democrat almost won the nomination for Governor on a gambling platform. The appeal was simple. Open gambling would attract millions of outside money (witness Nevada) and the gambling tax would run the state. Here was a "single tax" that caught on. Now the defeated candidate threatens to run as an independent.

The public is looking for a gimmick. Ours is the best one ever devised, but how do we sell it? The phrase "single tax" is an eye-stopper with strong listener appeal—let's use it. One tax instead of a hundred sounds good. It's a bit awkward to go through all the steps to explain land value taxation, but everybody knows the price of land is going up—so *tax land*.

The next most engaging word is "speculation." Let's be specific—*land speculation*. Examples of enormous prices paid by the state highway commissions for right-of-way for the federal highway program are plentiful. Legal stealing, some of us call it, and the moral implication is there. Change the law—how? Well, it's not easy to gain an audience, but I have tried the same methods others are using.

Politics offers me my best opportunity. Maybe the school can't enter politics, but I can, and its members

and graduates certainly can. Run for office. You might get elected. Then people listen to what you say. Politics lets me use the radio and TV. I can run ads and get news items in the newspapers. I can speak up at party meetings and, if elected, in the legislature or the city council. I write letters which the editor likes to publish.

Frankly, I can't get enough people to take a 10-session course to do much good. Instead of 10 or 15 students, I sometimes reach 100 or 200 people, more easily, and over the TV as many as 25,000 at a time. True the message is not complete, but a seed here and there falls on fertile soil. The point is I can sow so many more seeds that way. I am alone out there in Montana. There are 150 or so graduates of my basic courses, but I don't see them or hear from them. I've got to use the means at hand.

My conclusions are inconclusive, but here is what I recommend: use language and topics to which people are accustomed. The words *tax* and *speculation* have a much stronger eye-stopping appeal than community created land value. *Unearned income* sounds like something morally wrong but *legal stealing* brings it home. Politics is the best medium. Public speaking is next, and letters to newspapers and magazines will surely help. Something is wrong—everybody knows it—let's tell them what it is.

This land of ours! It's our only heritage. Let's claim it!