

Truth Still Eludes Easy Acceptance

POLL TAX: The Tax that Sank a Government by *Fernando Scornik Gerstein, Esq., London, The Land Policy Council, £3.50. Review by Lindy Davies*

It's not easy being ahead of one's time. History is full of examples — they make, indeed, some of our finest stories — of people who understood difficult truths and tried to put them into practice. Such individuals become heroes after the fact, but they probably weren't great at dinner conversation. With their fingers in the dike holding back a gigantic social flood that no one else even suspected, they may have seemed, in daily life, a bit preoccupied, perhaps even eccentric. It took quite a while, after all — a whole long, lavish parade — before anyone could be found to say the Emperor was naked, though everyone knew it. It took the Quakers in North America — who make all their corporate decisions by consensus — over 150 years to issue a unified denunciation of chattel slavery, and yet they were the first religious group to do so. I often think of the patience of those early Friends, unshakably knowing the truth and what must be done, waiting, waiting for their fellows to come around. Obviously — in 150 years — many died before their goal came in sight.

These are the kinds of thoughts that came to mind as I read Fernando Scornik Gerstein's booklet, ostensibly on Britain's Poll Tax, but taking the opportunity to share an articulate meditation on human nature, public finance, and 20th century history. Mr. Gerstein's work is the latest in a long series of similar works, lucid, passionately argued pamphlets relating the timeless truths of the single tax to the hapless efforts made in their times to deal with social problems. Georgists, I think, can find inspiration in such tracts; they can admire their eloquence or debate minor theoretical chestnuts; they will find little, however, in the way of new information. But that is by no means to say that such efforts are not worthwhile — they are desperately needed, and the Land Policy Council is to be commended for committing such a capable new Georgist commentator to print.

For readers who aren't familiar with the politics of the Poll Tax in Britain, Gerstein provides an account of how it was adopted, and how it helped to sink Margaret Thatcher's government. From that starting point, he takes the reader on a heady tour of public finance strategies that move from supply-side all the way to marxism. Gerstein argues that this impressionistic sweep is needed, so the reader can understand how such a seemingly (continued on page 28)



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cockamamie policy as the poll tax could find support in the first place. Starting from the same ideological place, I see what he means, and I think everything he has to say is relevant. But the proof of any Georgist presentation is not in how a colleague reacts but in the light-bulbs it switches on over uninitiated heads.

Thanks to Mike Curtis

This pamphlet, credibly (if modestly) presented (except for one unfortunate typo on page 23), has a better chance than most to accomplish its objectives. Mr. Gerstein's thoughtful and well-researched words should be widely discussed, in Great Britain and wherever the burning questions of private and public property have yet to be resolved. Yet I fear, alas, as with the writings of those early Quakers, that many years will have to pass before the mass of readers will encounter them and see how right they were.