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The Fels Fund Commission

UNTIL the beginning of 1909, that is, for the first four years of his connection with the Single Tax movement, Mr. Fels was content to work through the different organizations already in existence. He helped them time and again with funds, speeches, articles. Yet he was not altogether satisfied with their activity. The conviction grew upon him that the movement suffered seriously from decentralization and disconnectedness. It seemed to bear no obvious relation to movements akin to itself. It had economic, but not political significance. This, of course, was true mainly of the United States; in Great Britain the purpose of the United Committee had been the steady permeation of political parties. But in America, particularly since the death of Henry George, though Single Taxers had not lost any of their enthusiasm, Mr. Fels felt very

keenly that they had lost much of their direction. The movement tended to expend itself in the reading of papers, in colonization experiments, in social functions at which Single Taxers might discuss a coming golden age, which, for the most part, they did little or nothing to forward. The movement, in fact, seemed to have decreased both in vitality and in force. People in the United States did not discuss its principles as they had done in George's lifetime. Single Taxers were as prominent in opposition to socialism as they were in the advocacy of their own doctrine. Early in 1908, Mr. Fels began seriously to cast about for means to put a stop to what he called "the possibility of economic and intellectual dry-rot." Mr. Bolton Hall provided him with the opportunity he desired.

Early in January, 1909, Mr. Hall wrote to Mr. Fels and asked his assistance in a colonization movement in which he was interested. To that letter Mr. Fels replied from London as follows:

"Your letter regarding the use of the 'little lands' has just reached me, and I believe

it is a move in the right direction. For my part, I am a sincere believer in the taxation of land values, and while this 'little land' proposition of yours is not the most direct means to 'get back to land,' it works in that direction. Anything that creates land hunger must of necessity put before the public the unreasonableness of our present system of taxation, and the certainty that it must be reformed.

"And because of my belief that the time is ripe to spread information on land reform in general, you may draw on me for an advance of \$5,000 in that behalf, and I will agree to donate \$25,000 each successive year for the next five years towards a propaganda, provided others can be found to give an equal amount each year. In other words, I will spend \$125,000 altogether, to be under the charge of a committee of land reformers, provided others will contribute likewise.

"You can make the movement so broad that men like Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan, Mr. Andrew Carnegie, Mr. James J. Hill, and other equally conservative men can stand with us on the same platform."

This letter is the origin of the Joseph Fels Fund Commission of America. Mr. Hall showed the offer to a group of friends and they founded the organization which now bears Mr. Fels' name. An advisory committee, to which George Foster Peabody, Louis F. Post, then editor of *The Public* and now Assistant Secretary of Labor in Mr. Wilson's administration, Bolton Hall, Henry George, Jr., then a member of Congress, and Bishop Williams gave their adherence, was formed. In addition to this committee was the actual working Committee entrusted with the control and disposal of the Fund. To this belonged Jackson H. Ralston, Lincoln Steffens, most militant of American radicals, Frederic C. Howe, now Commissioner of Immigration in New York, and then in the famous "cabinet" of Tom L. Johnson, and Mr. George A. Briggs. Daniel Kiefer, probably, as Mr. Fels once said, the "most efficient mendicant in the United States," was appointed its chairman.

Two things must be emphasized. The Commission attached, despite his protest, Mr. Fels' name to its work, because they believed

that his position in the business world of America would give them a standing of practical importance. Mr. Fels himself neither in its origin nor at any other time played any part in the control or direction of the fund. He refused even to form part of the advisory committee. He preferred then as always to remain a freelance in the movement entirely unconnected with any organization. He stood to the Fund in no relation other than that of an important contributor who sympathized with its objects and always deeply admired the work it was able to achieve. He was, of course, often enough consulted on the plans of the Commission, though as often as not, he would refuse possibly to fetter its members by offering counsel. He simply stood to it from the outset in the relation of an interested spectator who cared profoundly for its success. Nor was he disappointed in his hopes of what it would achieve.

The plans the Commission set before itself in the first year of its activity were commendably large. It assisted largely the progressive movement in Oregon which, under the leader-

ship of Mr. W. S. U'Ren, seemed likely to do work of permanent democratic value. Mr. U'Ren was promoting a Single Tax measure in that State and the Commission felt that they could do no finer work than assist it. Similarly, did they help in Rhode Island where, under Mr. Garvin, the Single Tax forces were highly organized, and in Missouri where the atmosphere was akin to, though less developed than, that of Oregon. A Press Bureau on an extensive scale was established which not only distributed material to a large number of radical journals, but also constituted a bureau of information in regard to the land problem all over the world. A depot of literature was created which distributed books and pamphlets, mainly free of cost, all over the United States. Publications either definitely or largely Single Tax were assisted in various ways. A beginning was made of what is now a remarkably complete directory of Single Taxers all over the world, a list which has proved of invaluable service as a means of propaganda, and must be of unique utility in any political movement. Experts were sent

out to work up special districts. Arrangements were made to supply clubs and organizations of every kind with speakers thoroughly acquainted with the economic philosophy of Henry George.

From the very first, in fact, the Commission served, as it now serves in an increasing degree, as the clearing-house of the whole movement. It gave the Single Tax a national status by providing it with a national organization. It focused the activities of the Single Taxers and then reflected them outwards where they could prove of the greatest service. In its mere collection of funds to match the money subscribed by Mr. Fels, it probably penetrated into quarters where the Single Tax had never before been known. For the first time it endeavored to distribute literature not only on an enormously wide scale, but in a thoroughly complete and scientific manner. The fundamental thing was the spread of Mr. George's own books. To this end, the Commission arranged for the publication of cheap editions of his works. At Mr. Fels' suggestion translations of *Progress and Poverty* into

Italian, Bulgarian, Swedish, Yiddish and Chinese were arranged. The machinery of Congress was skilfully utilized in conjunction with Mr. Henry George, Junior, to effect an enormous distribution of Mr. George's *Protection or Free Trade* exactly at that psychological moment when the revision of the tariff was being everywhere discussed. Nor was this all. It was realized that if the movement was to make an adequate appeal, regard must be had to the variety of men's interests. Some men were farmers, some manufacturers, some engaged in the process of distribution, a large number were wage-earners. Each naturally desired to understand the relation of the movement to his own special problems. For each, therefore, in addition to the large mass of purely general literature, a special series of reports began to be issued. The relation of Single Tax to farming, to manufacturing industries, to the wage problem, to trade unionism, were specially studied and short, pithy pamphlets published upon them. At the end of its first year's work, the Commission could fairly claim that at no time since Mr. George

himself had taken charge of the propaganda, had the movement been so widely discussed or so generally appreciated.

The Commission, as was natural, did not fail to meet with criticisms, and it is but right to explain Mr. Fels' relation to them. It was complained to him that the Single Tax movement was essentially a democratic movement, that he had had no right thus to foster the establishment of an autocratic and self-appointed body. His reply to this was sufficiently simple. The need of the kind of body his gift had brought into being was daily becoming more apparent. Every organization began by a number of men agreeing to foster certain aims and so had the Joseph Fels Commission commenced. As to its autocratic character, Mr. Fels was never very seriously concerned. It was, as he again and again pointed out to his complainants, always open to receive suggestions; and the main thing was efficiency. When its actual work was complained of, it would be time to discuss its methods and character. To a similar complaint that "his" Fund had no right to divert to itself all the funds

of the movement, Mr. Fels replied that there could be no greater test of the popular appreciation of its merit. "People," he told one such critic, "give either because they like what the Fund is doing or because they sympathize with the way it is doing it. No one gives to anything just because he wants to get rid of his money." Nor did he pay much heed to those who complained of the broad basis upon which the Commission had been established. Some complained of subsidies to papers not entirely Single Tax in their character. Others thought that the Commission had no right to divert its funds to movements like the Initiative and Referendum movement. Mr. Fels had no sympathy with either of these attitudes. He did not like papers that were solely Single Tax in outlook because he knew by hard experience that they preach only to the converted. He preferred to support an ably conducted radical journal which had an outlook sufficiently Single Tax to make its readers understand the potentialities of the movement. This, indeed, was the reason why the Commission particularly chose out *The Public* as

its organ. Courageously sustained and brilliantly edited by Mr. and Mrs. Post for many years, the paper had, as Mr. Fels put it, "the real root of the matter"; and if people read a radical comment from the Georgian standpoint on the problems in which they were interested, their sympathy was far more likely to be won than by a journal for the object of which they had at the outset no affection. "It isn't business," he wrote in his practical way, "there won't be readers, and there won't be advertisements." Time has shown that he was not mistaken in that judgment.

He believed, too, intensely in the promotion of the Initiative and Referendum. Together they constituted a formidable weapon against the holders of monopoly. Often enough it was the constitutional expedient necessary to secure the passage of a Single Tax measure. In that event, it was as he thought, the necessary incident of the ideal, and he supported it with all the enthusiasm at his command. Indeed, to him the Initiative and Referendum were measures fundamental to any democracy. Their absence was due mainly,

as he conceived, either to fear or to distrust of the common people, and both of those sentiments appeared to him entirely without basis in fact. It seemed to him the merest stupidity not to trust the people. Confidence enough and to spare had been placed in the benevolence of an aristocracy and the sense of a legislature's responsibility, and in both events they had proved to be misplaced. He urged continually that no finer check than these existed upon the possibility of legislative misdemeanor.

Of one curious type of criticism a word may be said, and it is his own word. When he began to devote large sums of money to the Single Tax, he was criticized by the capitalist press in an amusing variety of ways. Sometimes it appeared that he was supporting an exploded fallacy. Sometimes he was told, as in a famous New York paper, that he had, like Mr. Carnegie, grown tired of his wealth and had chosen what he deemed the most fit method of its restoration. Point was supposed to be given to this type of comment by his own remark that he, in common with every

wealthy man, was virtually a robber, since he had batted on the monopoly the law had enabled him to maintain. A paragraph, "The wicked wealth of Mr. Fels," gave him the occasion for a pointed reply.

"I believe," he wrote, "as I said in my speech, that the fortunes acquired by many people, are largely due to unjust economic conditions, and from the moral point of view, these conditions are responsible for what is practically a system of robbery. You say that it is 'impossible to work up complete sympathy with the moral distress of Mr. Fels. He can divest himself of his stolen goods if he so much wishes, and thus re-establish his soul-cleanliness.' But surely this would solve no problem, nor remove the cause of distress from any sympathetic mind. No efforts of mine can repair the mischief which is wrought by the unjust distribution of wealth. I cannot discover the men, women, and children who have been wronged by being deprived of what they have produced with hard and exacting labor. Even if I could discover them, and if I were to restore to them the wealth, or a small part of the

wealth of which they have been unjustly deprived, they would offer gratitude to which I have no just claim, because the wealth was not really mine. This relationship would be bad for them and bad for me. There is only one method, therefore, of curing the evils that spring from the unjust distribution of wealth, and that is by putting a stop to the injustice.

"In your editorial you associate me with Mr. Carnegie, who has gained a world-wide reputation as a philanthropist, and thus suggest that his motives and mine, in discussing this subject, are the same. There is a mistake here. There is a clear distinction between our motives as well as our methods. Mr. Carnegie has generously endowed universities and libraries for the better education of working-people. I appreciate such work, but I would point out that this is not what the working-people are most in need of at the present moment. There are hundreds of thousands of well-educated men in Europe and America who cannot get reasonable scope for the application of their labor. The land of this world in some shape or other is the subject on which

every man must exercise his labor. Much of the land is held up by private individuals against the men who are willing to use it; and for more of it men have to pay too high prices or rent. The result is that we have vast armies of unemployed men in every civilized country. I venture to affirm that, whether as a matter of business or of justice, what these men require is not more education, but more freedom of access to land. The education they have received is rendered useless, and they are denied opportunity of developing and educating themselves further.

"I object to land being held out of use as it is, under the laws of most countries. This policy prevents men from helping themselves, and forces them into the miserable and humiliating position of accepting and soliciting charity. I object further to land being used by one man as a means of exacting from another part of his earnings. A tax on land values according to the principles of Henry George would bring the land into use and enable the tax authorities to exempt buildings and improvements from the burdens that now fall

upon them. This system would abolish poverty by stopping that form of legal robbery for which the laws of the country are responsible. I am willing to spend money to introduce this system; I invite others to join me. It is a more reasonable task to do what one can to prevent the waste and ruin of human life and happiness than to stand by while men are broken, even if we attend with bandages and ointment to bind up their wounds. This movement has taken root and is growing rapidly in the United States, in Great Britain, in Canada, in the leading European countries and in Australasia. In a few years we shall realize a large measure of our aims."

There is no more succinct statement of the Single Tax. The Commission was simply his commentary on its aims.