

## Mary Lehmann's plan for Georgism

Sir, Mary Lehmann (*L&L*, Spring, 2001) gives for our consideration a wide-ranging reform to Georgism. One argument, if I have it correctly, is that we should not use the word "tax" but "rent" because, she says, this "ideal revenue source" is not a tax but "a fee for service received, that of renting". She argues that the service involved in the "fee for service" is "for keeping the brigands out". Now, since that most basic of services is performed by "the sovereign", we should hand over the rent to the sovereign. Adam Smith argued in a similar way that the sovereign created the good order needed for everyone to enjoy the quiet habitation of houses and, thus, a tax on the ground rent of houses was justified.

Yet this argument is incomplete. First, rent is not paid simply for the maintenance of order; or indeed for any other action of government, it arises through the presence and activities of the community of which the state is just one part and the agent of collection. Even the quiet enjoyment of land is secured far more by the good habits of the community than it is by the police or army. Second, even assuming that it is the state alone which provides this protection to production, the rent paid is for differential advantages to land and the service of keeping others out is one and, arguably, an equal not differential service provided to land.

It may be said that without the protection of the state none of these other advantages would occur. But the same argument that it is the protection of the state which makes all else

possible could justify the state laying claim to payment, not only for site advantages, but to what is produced on the site itself.

But, more significantly, Mary Lehmann suggests we should not underpin the collection of rent by talk about equal rights to land. We should focus instead on the "fee for service" argument for rent collection. Why?

She argues this would make the payment of rent more understandable and easier for people to accept, and maybe it would also get us closer to what George really wanted(?), land nationalisation. In other words George's philosophical teachings do not help his case politically.

But George said that he was not calling for a "mere fiscal reform". He was calling for the "regeneration of society". Since the time of Tom Shearman c.1900 we Georgists have been prone to ceaseless appeals to self-interest and individualism. I pick up almost at random the latest pamphlet sent to me. It is the old tax argument with all the public promises we are accustomed to make. "Birthright" is there but this soon becomes the promise of free land. "Justice" is there but it soon becomes the argument that you won't be taxed on what you earn.

What a pity that we try to "sell" Henry George by arguing for a tax regime that will yield the most for "me"! Instead, at the very least, we should be cultivating the concept of the most for "us".

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