

Poverty and the Dog in the Manger

A speech delivered by Ronald E. Johnson at the Association for Good Government Conference, Pokolbin, 25 July 2015.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Wonnarua people who are the traditional inhabitants of the land that we meet upon today. A people who lived directly from the land, belonged to the land and who (as far as we know) knew no poverty until European settlers arrived in the Hunter Valley in the early 19th Century. These settlers set about clearing and transforming the land, estranging the Wonnarua people from the land and monopolising the best land, including by largely cutting off the access of the Wonnarua people to the mighty Hunter River.

Tragically, the arrival of the Europeans also brought diseases such as smallpox that had a devastating effect and massively reduced the indigenous population in this area. There are also reports of significant armed conflict occurring between the two groups. If we put aside for a moment the effect of disease and conflict, we can consider that on its own, the European 'winner take all' approach to the private appropriation of land left very little room for the possibility of a peaceful coexistence between the two cultures. Indeed, it is this same system of land monopoly that had impoverished and driven the Europeans from their own country in search of 'free land'. It is this same system that continues to choke the life from our society today. This system works like a poison that is applied to and absorbed through the roots of the 'tree of society'.

I maintain the view that if we are ever to succeed in our quest to build a new society, grounded in justice, the 'freedom fighters' and 'land reformers' in the Henry George movement need to strive to learn more from our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters and their relationship with the land. We desperately need a society that enables us to live harmoniously and progressively with each other and also wherein we realise the depth, power and necessity of our economic and also our spiritual relationship with the land upon which we live. Righting our relationships and strengthening our friendships with indigenous Australians could also be a pathway to a broader and lasting peace and cohesion amongst all of the many diverse people in the Australian community.

I would like to acknowledge the great work of Faye and Richard Giles and Joffre Balce in continuing to steer the education curriculum of our association in a way consistent with the great principle of the equal rights of all people to land and hence to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In particular, I would like to acknowledge and thank Faye for her tremendous work in organising this conference on the very important theme of "the crime of poverty".

If we are ever to win the fight against poverty, I believe it can only be through a resolute adherence to the enormously powerful principles of the Golden Rule and the equal rights of all as enunciated by Jesus Christ, Henry George, Father Edward McGlynn, Leo Tolstoy and others. The leadership shown by Richard Giles through his absolute steadfastness in adhering to these principles, regardless of any difficult consequences that may arise, is not only the morally right way for our movement, it is also strategically the wisest. There is power in principle.

Towards the end of the 18th Century, the great anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce wrote as follows:

"I must confess equally boldly that my own solid hopes for the well-being of my own country depend, not so much on her navies and armies, nor on the wisdom of her rulers, nor on the spirit of her people, as on the persuasion that she still contains many who love and obey the Gospel of Christ. I believe that their prayers may yet prevail."

Henry George himself recognised that the great revolution that we seek can be carried by nothing less than the "religious conscience". In writing about the establishment by Henry George and Father McGlynn of the Anti-Poverty Society in New York in the 1887, Hugh Pentecost a Congregationalist minister of Newark at the time, is recorded as having stated that "what the apostle Paul had done to give direction to first-century Christianity, Henry George was doing in the present moment of history". One of George's biographers, Charles Albro Barker has explained that the anti-poverty campaigning work of George and McGlynn in the 1880's in many ways represents a peak in the fusion of the religious and the political in the Henry George movement.

I point these things out because in our modern society with all the marvels of spaceage technology and scientific advance, it is easy to forget the enormous power that the foundation principles of Christianity (which are essentially the same as the foundation principles of Georgism) potentially hold. In mentioning Christianity, I do not deny the possibility that other religions or loving and caring spiritual values may also have a similar capacity to destroy poverty and to bring peace and prosperity for all.

I point these things out also because - with 1.3 billion people in the world today living in extreme poverty, with 22,000 children dying every day due to poverty, with more than 800 million people in the world today with insufficient food to eat, with 750 million people lacking adequate access to clean drinking water, with more than 50 million displaced persons and more than 30 million people estimated to be living in slavery- I believe that it is time for our social and political discourse to once again become much more heavily infused with a love for and commitment to the great principles of the equal value and equal rights of all human beings.

To blame the victims or to pedal divisive slogans that are devoid of hope will only deepen our troubles. We don't need to be badgered with the negative bulldust that says let's all "turn back the boats". Instead, we need a positive vision to strive for. A good life is possible for all people on Earth. Those who look will see; what we truly need to do is to tear down the tollgates from this tollgate economy. If we tear down the tollgates (that is, abolish taxes and privileges and collect the rent of land for public revenue), we could very easily afford to give safe passage into Australia and a very happy new life to a great many more of the World's impoverished and displaced persons. We could also do so in such a way that our country would prosper much more from their presence.

Just as Henry George pointed out in his great speech of 1885, titled: “*The Crime of Poverty*”, poverty not only destroys the poor and the enslaved, it ultimately drags all of us into a kind of hell. George stated:

“The vice, the crime, the ignorance, the meanness, born of poverty, poison, so to speak, the very air that rich and poor alike must breathe.”

Can we ever truly enjoy eating a nice nutritious sandwich or drinking a glass of fresh clean water, if our neighbours are ailing from malnutrition or dying from starvation or diarrhoea caused by drinking dirty water? How can we enjoy a nice swim down at the beach while hundreds or thousands of innocent families with children struggle for their lives in leaky boats on the high seas? These are hard questions. Until these types of fundamental problems are resolved, such questions will continue to plague the lives and souls of those of us in more fortunate circumstances.

Henry George exemplified this point about the interconnectedness of all people, in *The Condition of Labour* in 1891, when he wrote:

“When Christ told the rich young man who sought Him to sell all he had and give it to the poor, He was not thinking of the poor, but of the young man.”

Earlier in 1897, in book 7, Chapter 1 of *Progress and Poverty*, George wrote:

The equal right of all men to the use of land is as clear as their equal right to breathe the air — it is a right proclaimed by the fact of their existence. For we cannot suppose that some men have a right to be in this world, and others no right.

If you can imagine that a man somehow successfully devised a way of taking more air than he could possibly breathe, legally transforming it into private property. Then if he were to hold that air out of use, preventing others from breathing the air that they needed to live, we would be astounded. We would insist that this man clearly was not morally entitled to take any more air than he needed to fill his lungs and sustain his health and that he was morally obliged to instead leave the remainder for his fellow human beings to use. To do otherwise, we could easily understand, would be a great crime against humanity.

Yet people do the equivalent of this with land every day and land is every bit as vital to the sustenance of human life as is air. Where is the moral outcry about the denial of the human right to use and enjoy land on equal terms? In mainstream social, political and religious discourse, it seems that it is more common to talk about just about every other human right, except for this most vital one of all. Yes, we do have other pressing social and moral problems in our society. However, relieving the damage wrought by land monopoly will do more to ameliorate those problems than any other possible approach. Trimming the branches of the ‘tree of society’ will not remove the poison being drawn up through the roots.

In his great speech “*The Crime of Poverty*” delivered in 1885, Henry George, referring to land hoarding, exclaimed:

"...if men only took what they wanted to use we should all have enough; but they take what they do not want to use at all."

Of course, this remains true today. The structure of our system of private property in land creates calamitous incentives for investors to buy up as much land as they can possibly afford (or borrow), regardless of whether this is more than they need for personal or productive use. In his speeches and in his books and articles, Henry George often used the very apt phrase "dog in the manger" to describe the practice of landlords or land speculators holding productive land out of use and preventing others from using it, even though they cannot, or have no desire to, use it themselves. This is a good example of the superb analogies that George often used to illustrate his arguments.

The story of the dog in the manger is commonly attributed as originally being one of Aesop's fables, though this is not certain. Aesop was a slave and story teller living in ancient Greece between 620 and 560 BCE. The story goes like this:

"A Dog, looking out for its afternoon nap, jumped into the Manger of an Ox and lay there cosily upon the straw. But soon the Ox, returning from its afternoon work, came up to the Manger and wanted to eat some of the straw.

The Dog in a rage, being awakened from its slumber, stood up and barked at the Ox, and whenever it came near attempted to bite it. At last the Ox had to give up the hope of getting at the straw, and went away muttering...

Moral: People often grudge others what they cannot enjoy themselves."

George's use of the analogy of the 'dog in the manger' might be viewed by some as a story about greed or envy. But I don't think that was the point that George primarily intended. Rather, as he generally did, he was merely illustrating how the contextual circumstances or the *system* of the private ownership of land leads to unnatural and very unhelpful, inefficient and destructive behaviour by people generally.

In our society today, there is an increasing trend towards the 'commodification' of human beings and for society to prioritise the amassing of material wealth for a minority ahead of: the general preservation of human life, human dignity, happy families and healthy communities. In other words we have gotten things upside down. I think the analogy of the dog in the manger is still useful today to help to demonstrate this point.

The story of the dog in the manger is also referred to by Jesus in the in Saying 102 of the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas Jesus said:

"Woe to the Pharisees, for they are like a dog sleeping in the manger of oxen, for neither does he eat nor does he let the oxen eat."

Then also in the Gospel of Matthew, it is written that Jesus said (23.13):

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces; you do not enter yourselves, nor will you let others enter."

That is, Jesus was criticising the religious leaders of the day for imposing their false teaching on others and thereby denying people access to God's truth and all of the benefits associated with it.

This point is further exemplified in Matthew 15:1-3:

"Then the scribes and Pharisees who were from Jerusalem came to Jesus, saying, "Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." He answered and said to them, "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?"

Consider, if you are a person of faith- is it possible that the institution of private property in land and the private collection of land rent might also be transgressing the intention of the God of your understanding?

A nice succinctly written version of the fable of the dog in the manger is to be found in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (c.1390):

*"Though it be not the hound's habit
To eat chaff, yet will he warn off
An ox that commeth to the barn
Thereof to take up any food". (Book II, 1.84)*

In his speech, the "*Crime of Poverty*", George explains how a taxation system that punishes work and enterprise and rewards the highly unproductive activity of holding land out of use and making a private capital gain on its increasing value, is the exact opposite of the natural and obvious principle that we should all have freedom to work and are entitled to be rewarded with the full fruits of our labour.

George stated:

"...the man who makes land productive adds to the general prosperity, while the man who keeps land unproductive stands in the way of the general prosperity, is but a dog-in-the-manger, who prevents others from using what he will not use himself."

He then added:

"It is so all over the United States — the men who improve, the men who turn the prairie into farms and the desert into gardens, the men who beautify your cities, are taxed and fined for having done these things. Now, nothing is clearer than that the people of New York want more houses; and I think that even here in Burlington you could get along with more houses. Why, then, should you fine a man who builds one?"

Look all over this country — the bulk of the taxation rests upon the improver; the man who puts up a building, or establishes a factory, or cultivates a farm he is taxed for it; and not merely

taxed for it, but I think in nine cases out of ten the land which he uses, the bare land, is taxed more than the adjoining lot or the adjoining 160 acres that some speculator is holding as a mere dog in the manger, not using it himself and not allowing anybody else to use it. ..."

Neo-classical economists and vested interests promote the idea that virtually all investment is good for the economy and therefore good for the society. Yet we need to carefully distinguish between productive investment and parasitic investment, (as Joffre Balce has done in his excellent presentation here today). Land values only arise due to the presence, work and cooperation of the community. When we enable the selling of Australian land to speculators who derive a 'passive income' from rising land values, we are simply allowing these 'investors' to collect the value of the future labour of our community.

It is consistent with the teaching of Henry George to say that all people really have a moral obligation to do what we can to end poverty. All people who acquiesce to or support and promote a 'dog in the manger' system of land acquisition are responsible (wittingly or unwittingly) for the increasing polarisation of economic opportunity and wealth ownership and the entrenched poverty that society suffers so much from today.

For those 'getting drunk' on the 'property' (i.e. 'land') investment game, it should be sobering to realise that the private appropriation of land values is essentially the private appropriation of the labour of our children. This means that it is not really land usage that is being traded, rather it is the freedom of our children that is being sold out. Perhaps the question that should be asked at the outset of advertisements and programmes spruiking speculation in real estate is "Would you sell your children?"

The point that I'd like to finish on concerns the question of whether or not the failure of society to honour the inalienable rights of all people to use and enjoy land and to retain the full product of their labour really is the fundamental root cause of poverty.

Consider that, in essence, poverty arises from a lack of adequate wealth. That is, clean water, nutritious food, adequate shelter and clothes, medicine, books etc. Wealth can only be created in circumstances where labour has access to and is applied (usually in conjunction with capital) to land. There simply is no other way!

How can hungry people survive and be adequately nourished if they are denied the option of growing their own food by the exorbitant entry price to access suitable land? How can people earn a decent wage when our system of land monopoly forces the general level of wages down to the least that people will accept? How can workers survive or support a dignified lifestyle if they are not able to keep or fairly trade the full product of their labour due to the burden of regressive taxes on labour and exchange?

The answer is that when people are stripped of their right to use land on equal terms and of their right to retain their rightful wages, they are vulnerable to unemployment, exploitation, homelessness, usury, sickness and death and are often forced to seek charity. Sadly, charity does not always reach them. Charity is a blessing but cannot be a substitute for the lasting benefits that are entailed in securing social justice.

Our current system of land ownership fosters a type of social violence on par with the warfare that is conducted with bullets and bombs- though somewhat more insidious because it is not so easy to discern. (It is also a major cause of further conflict and warfare). If a soldier places his hands on your throat and prevents you from breathing air, this will surely imperil, damage and eventually kill you. So too, government laws (backed up by force of law- and police or military if necessary) that deny people their natural right of equal access to land, will endanger, impoverish and ultimately destroy society.

Consider some of the consequences of denying people their right to access to land on equal terms and the associated phenomena of the private appropriation of land rent and high land prices. Consider all the inefficiencies and troubles that arise from: placing the burden of taxation upon labour, involuntary unemployment, unaffordable shelter, workplace exploitation, increased crime and social conflict, poor community health, financial stress and family breakdowns, the sale of natural monopolies to the private sector, the negation of genuine economic competition, and the thwarting of innovation and progressive ideas that do not fit with an economy built on monopoly.

Henry George explained how thus our energy can be wasted or consumed through unjust systems that entail excessive and unnecessary maintenance and conflict. In *Progress and Poverty*, when outlining his famous 'law of human progress', he wrote:

“Mental power is, therefore, the motor of progress, and men tend to advance in proportion to the mental power expended in progression—the mental power which is devoted to the extension of knowledge, the improvement of methods, and the betterment of social conditions. Now mental power is a fixed quantity—that is to say, there is a limit to the work a man can do with his mind, as there is to the work he can do with his body; therefore, the mental power which can be devoted to progress is only what is left after what is required for non-progressive purposes.

These non-progressive purposes in which mental power is consumed may be classified as maintenance and conflict. By maintenance I mean, not only the support of existence, but the keeping up of the social condition and the holding of advances already gained. By conflict I mean not merely warfare and preparation for warfare, but all expenditure of mental power in seeking the gratification of desire at the expense of others, and in resistance to such aggression.

To compare society to a boat. Her progress through the water will not depend upon the exertion of her crew, but upon the exertion devoted to propelling her. This will be lessened by any expenditure of force required for bailing, or any expenditure of force in fighting among themselves, or in pulling in different directions.

Now, as in a separated state the whole powers of man are required to maintain existence, and mental power is set free for higher uses only by the association of men in communities, which permits the division of labor and all the economies which come with the co-operation of increased numbers, association is the first essential of progress. Improvement becomes possible as men come together in peaceful association, and the wider and closer the association, the greater the possibilities of improvement. And as the wasteful expenditure of mental power in conflict becomes greater or less as the moral law which accords to each an

equality of rights is ignored or is recognized, equality (or justice) is the second essential of progress.

Thus association in equality is the law of progress. Association frees mental power for expenditure in improvement, and equality, or justice, or freedom—for the terms here signify the same thing, the recognition of the moral law—prevents the dissipation of this power in fruitless struggles.

Here is the law of progress, which will explain all diversities, all advances, all halts, and retrogressions. Men tend to progress just as they come closer together, and by co-operation with each other increase the mental power that may be devoted to improvement, but just as conflict is provoked, or association develops inequality of condition and power, this tendency to progression is lessened, checked, and finally reversed.

Thank you.