

THE STRUGGLE FOR HONEST EDUCATION

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[The following address was delivered before the Fourth Henry George Memorial Congress held in Pittsburgh, Pa., Sept. 23-25 and also formed the basis of a talk given over Radio Station WCAE.]

It is a deep pleasure to me, as I am sure it is to you, to visit this historic city of Pittsburgh—this city where the Henry George idea, at least so far as our own country is concerned, has secured its strongest foothold. It is a greater pleasure yet to be permitted to listen to the many men and women who have come to tell, out of the experience of their own lives, how the Henry George idea can be still further advanced.

I want to talk to you for a few moments, however, about what I am convinced is holding back the single tax idea in the United States more than anything else. It is not because the veteran disciples of Henry George, one by one, are passing away. It is not because funds for the carrying on of the work is difficult to get. And it is not because there is anything inherently defective in the single tax theory itself. The single tax idea, in my opinion, is being held back chiefly because our public schools and colleges—those institutions which we have naturally expected would teach the truth after it had once been definitely established—are being captured by the interests opposed to the single tax, and the textbooks used in these public schools and colleges are being loaded with propaganda against it.

At the International Conference on the Taxation of Land Values held in Edinburgh some two months ago, Mr. John J. Murphy of New York, as some of you may know, spoke on "The Progress of Henry George Ideas in the United States." After giving an excellent account of this progress Mr. Murphy went on to say—

"So far I have dealt with what may be called the credit side of the work. It would be disingenuous to ignore the existence of hostile forces. These may be divided into two main groups, the business and the intellectual.

"As might have been anticipated, the prevalent craze for organization and centralisation in the United States has brought into the field Chambers of Commerce and Real Estate Boards which have begun to direct public attention to what they call the overburdening of real estate, and have opposed the laying of additional taxes on land values. So far they have not had any very clear purpose except the protection of property in general from what they dimly diagnose as socialism.

"The intellectual group is more dangerous, because it better understands our purposes and is working to poison the wells of knowledge by injecting into the textbooks of the schools and colleges of the United States false doctrines, upholding the claims of monopolies, not only in land, but in the various public services and power franchises now constituting the most burning questions before the people of the United States. Propaganda was but dimly understood before the war, but since the cataclysm it has assumed undreamt-of proportions. I do not know that any computation has been made of the money cost of the propaganda industry, but it is of huge proportions like secret service money used by governments; it is used surreptitiously and insidiously, and hence its proportions are difficult to gauge. It is the most serious menace that popular government faces today. As long as government was based upon honest public opinion, even though mistaken, there was hope that democratic institutions would correctly solve popular problems. But if the very basis of popular government, which well-informed public opinion is, be attacked, where shall we look for salvation?"

Mr. Murphy is entirely right. If the very basis of popular government, which well-informed public opinion is, be attacked, where shall we look for salvation?

Some years ago I took occasion to examine a large number of college and high school textbooks which had been in use during the last fifty years and I found to my utter amazement that the average amount of space devoted to a favorable discussion of the single tax was steadily declining. I do not mean by this that all the authors of these textbooks were unfriendly to the Henry George idea but the big majority of them were and the average amount of favorable discussion in all of the books was slowly but surely tending towards smaller proportions.

Similarly, I recently went through all of the economics textbooks found on the approved list in the city of Chicago and I again discovered to my great distress that practically every one of them was hostile.

Let me now give you an illustration how all this is brought about.

One of the high school textbooks on the approved list in Chicago is Ely and Wicker's "Elementary Principles of Economics,"—a textbook that is not merely found in Chicago, but in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Milwaukee and hundreds of other cities throughout the United States.

Now this textbook is not only opposed to the single tax idea but favors those measures and policies which many thoughtful people are strongly against, such as the taxation of sales of goods, the private ownership of public utilities, etc. And yet the very ideas that the author now favors he was absolutely opposed to up to about eight years ago!

What has caused the senior author—Prof. Richard T. Ely—to change his views? The answer is precisely to be found in what Mr. Murphy has suggested—special privilege and monopoly.

A few years after the close of the world war Prof. Ely—who up to this time had been an outstanding opponent of sales taxation, the private ownership of public utilities, and the like—organized in Wisconsin University his privately-financed "Institute for Research in Land Economics and Public Utilities." This institute had from the very beginning the support of the National Association of Real Estate Boards, the private power companies and similar corporations. Whether these corporations went to Prof. Ely first or he went to them is something that we may never know; at any rate from the time that their financial support began Prof. Ely's views began to change.

As soon as his institute was formed Prof. Ely proceeded to launch

one of the most ambitious programs for influencing public opinion in favor of the corporations back of him that has ever been conceived. He laid plans for the writing of fifty text and reference books of which some sixteen have already been completed, he started a large quarterly journal, he began post-graduate courses for the training of teachers, he established connections with colleges and universities from one end of the country to the other—all for the purpose of advancing the ideas he had previously opposed and of opposing the ideas he had previously advanced—the most amazing prostitution of the human intellect in behalf of special interests of which our history, probably, has any record.

We discovered the program that Prof. Ely was launching about five years ago and we were frankly afraid. For, as Mr. Murphy has well said, "if the very basis of popular government be attacked—if our public schools and colleges be corrupted for the benefit of privilege and monopoly, where shall we look for salvation?"

So after thinking it over carefully for several months we decided to expose the professor. We wrote books, pamphlets and circulars about him and sent them throughout the nation by the thousands. We asked various teaching bodies to investigate him and two of them did investigate—their findings harmonizing completely with our own. The net result was that Prof. Ely had to move his Institute out of Wisconsin University where he had been for more than thirty years. However, he is now in Northwestern University and although his reputation has been badly damaged he is still going strong.

But the fight is not yet over. Last winter we discovered the fact that Ely's "Elementary Principles of Economics"—a high school text which had not been used in Chicago for many years had suddenly been placed upon the approved list. Since this textbook has lately been changed by Ely to fit the views of the corporations back of him our Education Protective Association addressed an Open Letter to the Superintendent of Schools, William J. Bogan and in a 26-page printed pamphlet filled with quotations, charts and documentary evidences of all kinds, laid the case carefully before him, requesting at the same time that the book be dropped from the Chicago schools. Supt. Bogan promptly referred the matter to a committee of teachers for investigation. What has this committee done? Fearing evidently that the issue contained dynamite and that the dropping of this one textbook from the Chicago schools would discredit the whole Ely organization, the committee has done everything it could to postpone action and to hush the matter up. In the five months since the committee was appointed it has not asked our Education Protective Association, either by letter or by telephone for a single extra copy of its 26-page pamphlet or for any further facts or information bearing on the subject which it has in its possession.

On the other hand the Association has received letters from certain leading teachers in Chicago—teachers who have professed to be very friendly to it but who we have good reason to believe are members of this committee—pleading with the Association to cease its opposition to the poisonous Ely and Wicker text.

Last week, therefore, the Education Protective Association took the matter up with President Caldwell of the Board of Education practically charging a conspiracy on the part of the committee and requested him to give the matter his own personal attention. What President Caldwell will do we cannot say but if he takes no action after a reasonable length of time we shall, provided our friends stay with us, take another step which we believe will bring the matter nearer to a close.

It has been a long and bitter fight as you can well imagine. But it is a source of great satisfaction to say that we have received the full moral support of those whose judgment we value the highest. Here, for instance, is a letter—typical of many others—which has recently been received from a man whom we all hold in the highest esteem—Sir George Fowlds, President of the Auckland University College in Auckland, New Zealand:

AUCKLAND UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
Auckland, N. Z.

From the President,
The Hon. Sir Geo. Fowlds, Kt. C. B. E.

13th July, 1929.

Dear Mr. Jorgansen:

I am deeply interested in your fight for the elimination from the approved list of the Chicago High Schools of Professor Ely's propaganda text book "The Elementary Principles of Economics."

Your fight in Chicago is the world's fight to prevent the prostitution of the sacred cause of Education to the interests of private monopoly and exploitation in all its varied forms.

Your exposure of the mutilation of Professor Ely of the earlier editions of his book to meet the demands of the monopolistic interests reveals the most base surrender of mind and learning to material interests which I have ever known.

It will be a reflection upon the honour of American Scientists and Educators if they fail to rally themselves to the fight to redress this great wrong. Your success means the liberation of the mind of man in the field of Education, your failure means the enslavement of the race for a lengthened period, giving a great instrument and impetus to the revolutionary forces of the World.

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Wishing you every success in your great work, I am,

Yours sincerely,

(Signed) GEO. FOWLDS.

Such, then, is what we believe is holding back the single tax movement in the United States more than anything else and such is what we are trying to do to overcome it. It has been, we assure you, a long and bitter fight. It has tried our patience to the utmost and we feel sure it has greatly tried yours. But it is a fight that none of us dare to lose. For, as Mr. Murphy has truly said, if the very basis of popular government be attacked—if our public schools, colleges and universities on which we most depend for the dissemination of truth, are to be captured by the monopoly interests and used against us, where shall we look for salvation?