

Eco-tax campaigner's success

IT IS encouraging to read about an activist who really preaches the gospel of Georgism and understands how to carry it into the next century. James Robertson is one such.

Readers of *New Internationalist* will have spotted his article in the April 1996 issue on a radical green approach to taxation. He writes persuasively and with flare. Green taxes - or Eco-taxes, as he calls them - will reduce bureaucracy, help to save the environment from pollution and other horrors, and make prices reflect true costs. One obvious example: if eco-taxed, the burning of fossil fuels in power stations which cause acid rain across Europe would be replaced with sustainable energy sources such as wind power, wave motion or solar energy.

But green taxes are seen as a wider restructuring of the whole tax system, as described in his several books¹. At Oxford James Robertson studied history, philosophy and classics. From 1953 he worked as a British government policy-maker in Whitehall, then in the Cabinet Office. After three years in management consultancy and systems analysis he led a research organisation for British banks. Such a rarefied background has stood him in good stead for his present work as a writer and thinker on alternative futures and economic social change, and what it may mean for lifestyles, work, health, for public policy locally and internationally, and for ethical and spiritual values.

With his wife, Alison Pritchard, he edits the international newsletter *Turning Point 2000*. Together they helped to set up *The Other Economic Summit (TOES)* and the *New Economic Foundation*. He is now a trustee of the *New Economic Foundation* and a Visiting Fellow at *Green College, Oxford*.

So what is he seeking to do?

Green taxes must be part of a larger package of taxes which will enable users

to pay for using *common* resources. The most important will be a rent on the value of land, "proposed by the American economist Henry George a century ago and opposed by wealthy interests ever since."

He also proposes taxes on the use of radio frequencies, space, and the oceans. If green taxes are successful they will reduce the wholesale destruction of natural resources, he explains. Robertson's vision extends to an international application of these things. Each nation, for example, should pay *pro rata* for its emissions of carbon dioxide, the revenue to be recycled to nations on a *per capita* basis. Will United Nations take this on?

As part of his radical package there is also a proposal to introduce a citizen's income (CI). Writing in *The Political Quarterly* last year he discussed how the present complicated package of welfare benefits could be transformed by a tax-free income paid by the state to every man, woman and child as a right of citizenship. The amount would be tied to the cost of living but would be unaffected by their other income, wealth, work, gender or marital status. CI for children would replace today's child benefit, and CI for the elderly would replace today's state pensions. It could also replace all other existing social benefits and allowances, housing costs and education grants. Surprisingly, the idea is not new: Tom Paine put forward an embryonic scheme to combine a citizen's income with a tax on land two centuries ago, in 1797².

The simplification of welfare benefits and the rag-bag of tax allowances would release an army of accountants and tax experts for more productive work. To finance CI the nation would collect the rental values of all land, values created by society which at present slide into private pockets. The built environment would be virtually free of tax and thus all improvements would be unhindered

by considerations of heavy charges. What is paramount, he points out, is that a comprehensive approach based on a small number of major taxes and benefits would provide incentives throughout all aspects of economic life.

Local economic self-reliance would enable people to work locally, using local resources to meet local needs, thus cutting down on travel to and from work and the long distance transport of commodities.

Currently James Robertson's work is gaining friends and influence, in Europe and beyond. Economic studies in Germany, the United States and Switzerland, as well as in the UK, and policy statements by the European Commission, are making it clear that shifting taxation off 'goods' and on to 'bads' can provide a double economic dividend - reducing the harmful effects of existing taxation while providing financial incentives to use natural resources more efficiently.

Towards this end the Robertsons together conduct intellectual seminars at their Old Bakehouse, in Cholsey, Oxon, designed to explore old and new ideas. Discussions range over such subjects as ethical investment, organic agriculture, poverty and wealth, or socially responsible business. These seminars, open to the public, provide opportunities to learn, communicate and consider how to take things forward.

REFERENCES

1. *Future Wealth: A New Economics for the 21st Century*, Cassell 1990; *Future Work: Jobs, Self-Employment and Leisure After the Industrial Age*, Gower/Temple Smith, 1985; *The Sane Alternative*, Robertson, 1983
2. In 1797, in *Agrarian Justice*, Tom Paine argued that every proprietor of land should pay a ground rent to the community. From the national fund so created, every person should be paid £15 on reaching the age of 21, "as a compensation, in part, for the loss of his or her inheritance by the introduction of landed property". Every citizen over 50 should receive a pension of £10 a year.

JULIA BASTIAN