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Is the Single Tax Movement Making Progress?

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I AM aware that to those not interested in a reform any claims of its progress made by its friends will seem, in the absence of visible signs, to be attributable merely to the natural enthusiasm of the zealot. While the tendency of the advocate of a truth to magnify what is trivial or incidental may be admitted, yet I think it nevertheless true that the advocate actively warring for a principle is no more likely to be deceived than the individual who watches the phenomenon unsympathetically from without. For the latter will be impressed only by such incidents as are large enough to receive popular or newspaper recognition; the lesser minutiae of happenings, the gathering volume of smaller occurrences, possessing cumulatively a significance, are more than likely to be lost upon him. To these latter, who are of course the great majority, the progress of the single tax movement will no doubt appear to have been arrested by the death of Henry George in 1897, and to have ceased altogether with the decline of popular interest in the theory.

Yet I venture to assert that the principle of the single tax is to-day more widely accepted than at any previous time in its history—that not alone is this evidenced in the altered attitude of thoughtful minds toward its advocates, at whom the epithets of anarchists, communists and confiscators are no longer hurled, but is to be observed in many legislative measures enacted and proposed in this country and abroad. It is true that the indefatigable search for new objects of taxation has not been abandoned, and that the bewildering ingenuity of the foes of wealth, who labor by fines and penalties to make its production and conservation more difficult, still continues; nevertheless there has been in many high places a sensibly increasing appreciation of the fact that the efforts to tax personalty are unavailing and result in the

minimum of revenue with the maximum of inequality, fraud and perjury; governors no longer propose new and drastic measures for its enforcement; and along with this tendency has traveled an increasing disinclination to accept the conclusions of political economy, the professors of which are to-day busily readjusting their theories to meet the new skepticism.

These are the smaller, the unaccomplished and transition features; but what of the larger incidents? In other words, not in the changed attitude of mind toward the old political economy, for which the influence of the new is mainly responsible; not in the growth of unbelief in the rigor of old methods of taxation (evidence enough of the breaking down of long established fiscal customs) must we be satisfied to look for evidences of the progress of the movement begun by the publication of "Progress and Poverty" in 1879, but to things actually accomplished or in process of accomplishment.

For answer, therefore, to the inquiry propounded in the title of this article, and plunging at once into our subject, let us turn to Colorado, now a " storm center" in the world-wide movement for tax reform. In that State in the coming autumn the voters will be called upon to accept or reject a constitutional amendment permitting the adoption of what is known as the Australasian Tax System. This system is an approximation to the single tax now in operation in New Zealand and many parts of Australia. It will permit the adoption by any county of the exemption from taxation of improvements and of capital invested in productive industry. The vote submitting it to the people was passed by the Legislature one year ago and was recommended by the retiring Governor, Thomas, and by the present Governor, Orman. It received a practically unanimous vote in both houses, and it seems likely that it will be carried by the vote of the people in the autumn with flying colors. While not in itself a single tax law it will bring the adoption of the single tax measurably nearer. Opposition to the bill has been based chiefly on the ground that it means single tax and that its father, Senator Bucklin, is a single taxer. It should be said that Senator Bucklin's bill was framed only after a lengthy stay in New Zealand, where he had been sent by the Colorado Legislature to investigate the

operation of the new system of taxation in that colony. Senator Bucklin included the results of his inquiry in an admirable report which, widely circulated in pamphlet form, has contributed materially to the success of what is known as the Australasian Tax Movement.

Turning now to other States, there are additional evidences of the progress of those ideas set in motion by Henry George twenty-two years ago, which at that time could hardly have been foreseen even by the most sanguine. In Ohio Tom L. Johnson's agitation against the evasion by the railroad corporations of their just share of taxes and the fact that the popular Mayor of Cleveland is a single taxer has aroused a widespread general interest throughout the State in the work of the Ohio Single Tax League. In Chicago the agitation led by two young public school teachers, Miss Margaret Haley and Miss Catherine Goggin, single taxers, has resulted in placing upon the tax lists over \$262,000,000 of corporate property and increasing the revenues of Chicago by over \$2,000,000. In other States the principle of local option in taxation, in which single taxers have a peculiar interest, has made wonderful progress. In Massachusetts especially, where single taxers have demanded local option that counties may have the power to adopt the new system if they vote to do so, the agitation has grown steadily in favor, with the result that a bill is now before the Legislature of that State embodying these demands, which have been so insistently yet tactfully pressed. The friendliness of the Boston press, the unexpected accession of the powerful advocacy of Charles Francis Adams, the general interest in the work of the Massachusetts Single Tax League, all give promise of the probability that that State may be the first to inaugurate the new system of taxation. It may be objected that progress toward local option in taxation is not single tax progress. But when it is remembered that this movement has been led by single taxers, that it is everywhere advocated by those who wish to see industry relieved of its burden, it will be seen that the influence of the new school of political economy is mainly responsible.

It was through local option in taxation that New Zealand, the country that leads the world in this reform, secured land value taxation in sixty odd towns and taxing districts. In many of these districts

improvements are exempt and there is no tax on personalty. New South Wales in 1892 adopted a Government land tax and reduced its customs duties. In 1901 Queensland practically exempted improvements from taxation. A few years ago Germany applied without reservation the principle of single tax to its colony of Kiao Chou in China— no taxes are there imposed save a tax on land value. In Manitoba all improvements in or on land used for farming purposes are exempt and taxes are levied upon "prairie values" alone. In British Columbia localities have the power by statutes framed from 1886 to 1892 to exempt improvements, and many taxing districts have taken advantage of the law and have exempted, wholly or in part, buildings and other improvements. In the Province of Ontario many expressly named products of industry are exempt; municipal option to exempt machinery, plants and tools engaged in manufacture is also permitted.

Turning now to Great Britain, the growth of the single tax principle among our Scotch, English and Irish cousins is notable. It has fought its way up to Parliament, where on more than one occasion it has been debated at that high intellectual level which makes the Commons unique among legislative bodies. In Great Britain the name "single tax" is rarely used, nor does the agitation take the same form it does here, for the movement has Protean shapes. In Great Britain three hundred local rating authorities have petitioned Parliament for power to levy rates on unimproved values only, and the Liberal party has included this in its program. Many of the municipalities in the old country have had striking examples of the growth of land values and are recognizing that it is a just principle that these values should be taken for the use of the whole people who create them. It is but two months since a bill for urban site value rating was introduced in the Commons, and on the motion for a second reading the friends of land value taxation scored a substantial victory by largely reducing the normal Conservative majority. Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, the Liberal leader, in a speech delivered on the 19th of February, declared that "the taxation of land values is a reform both necessary and urgent, and the first Tory you meet on the street will say as much." An overwhelming majority of the Scottish representatives in Parliament, Conservatives as well as Liberals, are pledged to the issue of land

value taxation; indeed, it is doubtful if there are more than two or three of the seventyodd Parliamentary districts of Scotland where a representative could be returned who would dare to antagonize the growing feeling that the landlord class must be divested of their privileges and that this must be done through the operation of the taxing power.

Such is a brief resume of the essential facts in the progress of the single tax in the last few years. I make no argument as to the benefits that are cited as certain to result from its adoption; with that I am not concerned. But single taxers can at least reasonably insist that they are at last a force to reckon with and that a very substantial progress has been made. That some of the steps that have been taken have borne other names, that single taxers themselves are less uncompromising than formerly, is nothing; the character of the agitation has changed, but not its essential aim, and the general movement of tax reform all along the line seems, it must be admitted by those who will indulge their candor, to have been in the direction and along the path which single taxers have pointed out, not always with perfect tact, but with high sincerity and splendid zeal.