

The Single Tax is more than a Fiscal Reform

A CALL TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HENRY GEORGE'S MESSAGE OF FREEDOM

A FEW weeks ago we were permitted to listen to a powerful address by perhaps the most famous lecturer on the Single Tax. As we were instrumental in getting up this meeting we were gratified at the interest displayed and the very marked impression created by the speaker.

It was a treatment of the Single Tax from the fiscal side, and from this point of view left nothing to be desired. But an instructive commentary on this presentation of our doctrines may be gleaned from an unexpected inquiry of a man in the audience who rose at the conclusion of the address and asked, quite innocently, if the reform advocated by the speaker was not much like the proposal once advanced by a man named Henry George in a work called "Progress and Poverty," and what did the speaker think of it! The lecturer admitted that that was what he had been talking about, which retort evoked a laugh from the knowing ones.

But the humor of the incident seems to us to reach further. It carries with it a certain sting to those who realize what the movement fathered by Henry George really stands for. In the old days it was the custom to preach the Single Tax both as a great measure of social reform and an important fiscal remedy for the evils of taxation. If one will turn to "Progress and Poverty" he will find how little of that great work is devoted to taxation, and how great a part to the "sovereign remedy" for the inequalities in the distribution of wealth and the monstrous evils that result from the institution of private property in land.

NO PLACE FOR GEORGE, McGLYNN, CROASDALE,
ET AL.

We have no quarrel with the fiscal side of the Single Tax. We are willing to stress the advantages of the reform considered merely as a method of taxation. We concede, too, that with audiences of a certain character this method of approach is probably the most effective. John Z. White and James R. Brown can make converts where Louis Wallis and James A. Robinson could not. So much is admitted.

But recovering, as it were, from the hypnotism of this most impressive speaker and very lovable personality, we began to reflect at the conclusion of the address that this kind of presentation to which we had listened left absolutely no place for Henry George, Edward McGlynn, Hugh O. Pentecost (in his days of sanity) or even William T. Croasdale.

It was not alone that the moral fervor was lacking; that was made up by the obvious earnestness of the speaker. But one would never learn from the address to which we had listened that man had an equal right to the use of the earth; that the earth was the birthright of mankind; that the rent of land belonged to the people. He would never have learned that, as Henry George has told us, the system

that excludes the humblest individual from the use of land is a "bold, bare and enormous wrong."

THE LOSS OF VISION

The vision of the Single Tax, falling on land values and opening up the great natural resources to labor; wages rising and women and little children no longer at work, but happy and enfranchised; the promise of a world made free! Have we forgotten these things?

It is no marvel, perhaps, that concurrently with a change in the outlook of mankind on the world a similar loss of vision should have come to the Single Tax movement—that it should also show the influence of what the Germans call the zeit geist of the period.

For it is one of the saddest signs of the times through which we are passing that there is a distinct loss of serious-minded conviction and high moral and spiritual purpose. The economic philosophy even of those in high places, is, if we may be permitted so inelegant a phrase, "sloppy." But it is not more so than the religious, educational and social trend of the people at the minute. Their intellectual diversions, as well their amusements, are all on a low plane. Nobody is concerned any more in those great controversies, economic, political and religious, which a few years ago excited so great an interest.

The people appear not to be greatly interested in anything of any vital moment. We are drifting. We are no longer touched by any passionate convictions about things. Coincident with this is the almost total disappearance of that virile Americanism which existed down to the late eighties.

Individualism is lost for the time; we hear no protest against the paternalistic legislation, regulation of and interference with the rights of the individual that have overwhelmed the old American self-reliance, and which Henry George characterized as "milk and water socialism." Skepticism, supineness and indifference are the rule, not the exception, more than at any time in our history.

In these circumstances there was an unsurpassed opportunity for the assertion of that robust individualism for which the Single Tax stands in economic philosophy. But the protest should have been couched, not in the timid terms of taxation, but in the bold, uncompromising presentation of what that philosophy includes—a free earth for free men.

LEAVING THE FIELD TO SOCIALISM

Socialists are right, instinctively, in rejecting the terms of our philosophy as currently taught by many of our lecturers and speakers. For the doctrine of the Single Tax is one of social reconstruction. So is the socialist doctrine.

Its truth or falsity need not now engage our attention. But its concern is with the great problem of wage distribution, poverty and the economic problem. We oppose their plan with, what? With suggestions for shifting taxes from commodities to land values! We talk taxation; *they* talk of the poverty of the people, of the exploitation of labor, of men and women deprived of their natural inheritance!

Their phrases ring loud; their assaults upon conventional hypocrisy, upon institutional abuses, upon monopoly, form part of the call to arms in the battle for socialism. Men and women having hearts and sympathies are thrilled by them. They do not examine very critically into the recommendations for the cure of such abuses, but they are instinctively right, we repeat, in preferring these appeals to such teachings of the Single Tax as present it as a mere change in taxation.

Our appeals couched in these terms fall upon deaf ears. Socialists have a plan of social reconstruction; it is false, unworkable, based upon incorrect diagnosis and subversive of the true rights of property. We answer them by discourses on taxation and arguments for the advantages of the Single Tax over all other methods of collecting revenue. Do we wonder that they smile at us in a very superior way? As they have utterly failed to catch our implications, owing to our own fault and to none of theirs, they are entirely justified. For this presentation of the Single Tax is no answer at all to socialism, and in his heart every Single Taxer knows it.

SHALL WE DISCARD HENRY GEORGE

We desire now to refer to California. We reserved comment in our last issue on the situation in that State. We do not pretend to know the exact conditions. We are not on the ground. If the Single Taxers there are confronted by the inability to raise the money needed to carry on an effective campaign—that is a point that may well be considered in coming to a decision. We regret this because if education be the aim—and the Los Angeles group in retiring from the political field state that it is—experience has amply proven that you can educate the people more effectively and indeed more cheaply through political campaigns for amendments or avowed Single Tax candidates than you can by any other conceivable method. Doubtful as we may have been of this at one time there is no longer any doubt at all about it.

For men and women ask what it is that they are to vote for or against; what it is that the candidate stands for. In this way you reach all the people; lecture work, such as we can now command, reaches only a very small percentage of the people. And political methods secure an immeasurably larger amount of newspaper publicity for the cause.

But without trenching too much in detail on the reasons impelling the Los Angeles group to withdraw from the political fight—reasons which we have stated will cause astonishment by their inadequacy—we are chiefly interested at the minute in the curious example of the "counsel of caution" with which so many of our Single Taxers seek

to couple their advocacy of the cause. We quote from the article by Mr. Stoughton Cooley in our last issue:

"Such phrases as 'land owners are robbers,' 'freeing the land,' 'restoring the land to the people,' 'private property in land is robbery,' and similar words used by over-zealous persons, have been seized up by our opponents to prejudice our public. These phrases have always been questionable, but since the communistic regime in Russia they have been used to stamp the Single Tax movement as a system to take the farms and homes away from the people. The Anti-Single Tax League, and nine-tenths of the press, have fostered this idea until they have closed the minds of the vast majority of the voters."

If we except the phrase "landowners are robbers," all of these and other "questionable" phrases were used by the "over-zealous" leader of the movement whose words seem to some of us as almost inspired. We wonder what is Mr. Cooley's opinion of Isaiah and others of the "over-zealous" prophets of an earlier time. It is no wonder that Luke North, despite his imperfections, speaking once more in that great tongue, for he was gifted in his way, aroused the men and women of the movement as no one had done since the days of Henry George to renew the fight for the abolition of undeserved poverty.

We care not a straw whether he was an orthodox Single Taxer or not, or whether he was always sound in his economics. The economics of many of us are "sound" and nothing else, we fear, and very hollow it rings at times.

FIND OURSELVES IN POSSESSION OF A REVOLUTIONARY PROPOSITION

We find ourselves in possession of what we suddenly discover, much to our trepidation, is a very revolutionary proposal. Our fear at the discovery is almost ludicrous. The situation would be amusing if it were not sad. It reminds us of a child of intelligent years who suddenly discovers that the revolver he has found in his father's room is loaded. He lays it down and runs away.

The Single Tax is indeed a revolutionary proposition. It goes deep. It is the turning point in civilization. It means freeing the earth, giving back the land to the people, however startling these phrases may seem. Of course they are going to frighten the timid. But better frighten them than fool them. If you really shift all taxation to land values and take all land values, you have abolished the present system of land tenure and substituted another. You have taken away from every landlord the right to levy tribute on the earnings of capital and labor. You have not taken any prior confiscations, but you have made it impossible to confiscate ground rent in the future. Why not say so?

If the Single Tax is just, why fear to tell it? Our philosophy must rise or fall by what it includes. If the rent of land belongs to the people then it does not belong to the landlords, and landlordism is robbery. Landlords are involuntary robbers, but while accomplices to an institutional robbery, they are also the victims.

Russia indeed, and Russian bolshevism and communism! The failure of the Russian system is because they do not see clearly the "sovereign remedy," but prefer the experiment of an unworkable communism. Doesn't every Single Taxer believe that? Shall we be afraid of epithets? Could we not take a child aside, and teach him that the Russian regime of Lenine and Trotsky does not recognize the distinction between land and property, and because of this that their system is doomed to failure? Are we to be deterred from pointing out the true remedy by confusions of thought among the people as to Russian conditions, or conditions anywhere? If so we shall be deterred to the end of the chapter. The world is full of reasons for not doing things.

THE GROWTH OF A HABIT

There began not so long ago in the movement the prevalence of an idea that perhaps is the strangest ever conceived by the protagonists of a great reform. It was that you could better advance an idea by not mentioning it. You were to bring it in by the back door after you had seated your invited guests in the parlor. That they had been induced to attend by an invitation which failed to disclose the real purpose, didn't seem to matter much as a question of ethics.

In the field of Single Tax journalism the *Public* was conducted for many years on this policy of getting your audience without stating your real purpose. At the start, under the ablest editor the movement has known, this tendency was not so pronounced, but it grew with the years, and soon became an incurable habit. At last its Single Taxism was not discoverable by a magnifying glass. By and by it ceased to exist, and so died this journalistic experiment of a paper that sought to teach a doctrine by carefully refraining from mentioning the thing it believed in.

Not to mention the Single Tax at last became a fixed habit of Single Taxers. It seized all candidates for office, and its popularity passed all bounds. Challenged to avow his former convictions on the subject a one-time president of the Manhattan Single Tax Club, then a candidate for governor on the democratic ticket, made a somewhat abashed reply to the effect that the Single Tax was not an issue in the campaign. The challenger, his Republican opponent for the same office, had not said it was, but wanted to know if in the event of his election his rival for the office of governor would sign a bill making the Single Tax the law of the great State of New York. The challenged party declined to state.

Another candidate for office in another State, an avowed Single Taxer, also said when challenged that he would "as soon think of advocating polygamy as the Single Tax at that time." We knew, or thought we knew, that gentleman's views on the Single Tax, but were in absolute ignorance of what his views were on polygamy. But as it had become so fixed a habit not to advocate what you believed in, we might, in view of his mention of polygamy, begin

to suspect a certain friendly hospitality to that system, "not at this time," perhaps, but in some future and happier period.

A VERY GRAVE DANGER

What constitutes the enduring character of any law on the statute books? Its moral validity? Not at all. The fact that its operations are beneficent? Not even that. What makes for the longevity of a law is that it has grown as a necessary part of the life of a people. To endure it must be deeply rooted in their convictions.

Therefore—and our friends should bear this in mind—any change in taxation in the direction of our philosophy that does not find its origin in the knowledge of what is basic in the doctrine, is subject to every wind of chance. Where more revenue is needed, the resort to the taxation of improvements where these have been exempted, will occur without any effective protest. If communities lack the essential conviction that the rent of land belongs to the people, is a communal product of the community, and should therefore be taken for communal needs, exemptions are of little value as marking progress.

Do we need to cite proof of this contention? Then there is the history of Vancouver and other Canadian communities, injudiciously heralded as "Single Tax experiments." We uttered this warning in the Special Vancouver Number of the SINGLE TAX REVIEW published in 1911. Later Henry George, Jr., on his visit to Vancouver, gave utterance to the same significant caution. As there was never at any time any real Single Tax sentiment in Vancouver; as the tax rate was a very low one with inadequate land valuations, the resort to the old system of taxation of improvements could have been, and was foreseen by many of us. At the present time we now take occasion to indicate the lesson that this should carry to these who teach the Single Tax as a purely fiscal proposal.

WE CANNOT RE-WRITE THE SINGLE TAX

The Single Taxer's creed is that the earth is the birthright of mankind. That the Rent of Land belongs to the people. That one man has as much right to land as another. That this right must be restored to all the people. That this can be effected by a simple change through the taxing machinery that will enable us to abolish all taxation and take the rent of land by the present established methods of revenue collection. This is our creed, and that of every Single Taxer who knows his "Progress and Poverty."

Shall we re-write this in other and more acceptable formula for those who thrive on privilege, or desire to maintain friendly relations with privilege? Shall we mince terms when women and little children are starving because of our laws? Shall we be less bold than Herbert Spencer, who said that every land title was written in blood or fraud? If these words offend, the offence is not in the words, but in the thing proposed to those who would continue the system that robs mankind of its birthright.

A revolutionary doctrine! Of course it is. What did you suppose it was? Just a doctrine of the shifting of taxation? And did you imagine when you told it in these terms that the man who profits by landlordism would find it more palatable than the same thing undisguised? Then you deceived yourself.

The Single Tax is the Great Evangel. It is the doctrine of land restoration. It is a message of glad tidings to the poor and needy. It is the herald of emancipation for the landless, and for the landlord, too, just as the law that struck the bonds from the slave struck them also from the Southern slaveholder. For as Henry George has told us, it is the nature of injustice that it profits no one. And at the same time he warned us against all compromise that involved any sacrifice of principle. JOSEPH DANA MILLER.

A Land Value Tax Held Sound by Students

The trouble is not that the farmer who owns a farm is suffering. The trouble is, first, that he can sell his farm, invest the money in mortgages and make more without working, in many instances, than he can make by farming his land. Second, he can often rent his land to someone else more profitably than he can work it himself. Third, if he has several sons, the ones that do not inherit the farm cannot afford to buy one in this country. They either go into other lines of work or else go to some other country.

The result is a country in which more and more of the land passes into the hands of men who hold it idle for speculative purposes, or rent it, and in which a man who wants to invest his money in land and to farm it, cannot do so profitably. Inevitably it is also a land which in food prices rise steadily.

What is the remedy? Two have been proposed. First, for the nation or the States to buy and reclaim land and sell it to farmers at a price based on what it will produce and on long time credit. This was the essence of Secretary Lane's scheme of land for soldiers, which so mysteriously disappeared. It is the basis of the California land and colonization plan, which has worked well, and it has been put into practice in some form by several other States.

The second method is a form of taxation on unimproved land which would make it unprofitable to hold such land for speculative purposes. Such a tax has always been held sound by students. A bill providing for such tax was introduced in the last congress by Representative Nolan and reintroduced in this congress by Representative Keller.

It has attracted as much attention as a pin falling into the Atlantic ocean. FREDERICK J. HASKIN, in *San Diego Union*.

PRESIDENT HARDING says there is no "legislative palliative" for housing shortage. True; but there are legislative obstacles to building.—H. M. H., in *Cleveland Citizen*.

NEWS—DOMESTIC California

PETITIONS are now being circulated in this State for the Slocumb Amendment to the Constitution. It will be necessary to secure about 60,000 signers to the petition to insure this measure a place on the ballot, and petitions must be filed on or before August 1st. Workers are now active in securing the necessary number of signers, and the campaign for the Amendment will at once begin.

Despite the falling away of a few of the old time leaders, the feeling is one of great hopefulness for a vigorous and successful campaign.

The text of the proposed amendment follows:

The people of the State of California do enact as follows:

The following shall be known as Article XIII, and shall be substituted for all of Article XII of the Constitution of the State of California and shall take effect January 1st, 1924.

ARTICLE XIII.

Section 1. It is hereby proclaimed that private property rights attach only to products of labor and not to land; that the holding of land in private monopoly by virtue of a franchise or title deed is a special privilege; that the full rent of such privileges belongs to the people collectively; that paying such rent to the whole people is, in principle, not a tax, but a moral obligation for value received on the part of the holders of such privileges; and that to secure to all fully and equally their rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness it is the duty of the State to collect such rent in full and not violate the rights of private property by any tax on improvements, business, labor, or capital.

Sec. 2. Franchises are hereby defined to be special privileges granted by government permitting the use or monopoly of land. Titles to land and all special privileges to use land for any certain defined purposes are franchises.

Sec. 3. All franchises shall be assessed annually with their full rental value.

Sec. 4. This rental assessment as made each year shall be paid in full each year by all franchise holders; in one payment or in installments as shall be provided by law; provided that where franchise rights to land are leased at a rental that is less than the assessment the difference shall be paid by the lessee, or forfeit lease; and, that that part of all contracts and leases requiring lessees to pay all taxes in addition to a certain fixed rental, is hereby declared null and void and against public policy; and no other tax or taxes whatsoever shall be levied, collected or paid, nor shall any fee or charge be made, collected or paid for any license or permit.

Sec. 5. This rental assessment shall exactly measure the advantage of the inequality of franchise rights and privileges, and is hereby defined to be an amount of money just sufficient to make the purchase price or selling price of the franchise, independent of improvements on the land held thereby, approximate zero, or only enough to wholly prevent the capitalization of the franchise.

Sec. 6. This assessment, if not paid by the time and in the manner required by law shall work absolute forfeiture of the franchise, and if there are improvements upon land held by the franchise so forfeited, shall constitute a lien