



Priorities for Tax Reformers

Tommas Graves

THE NEW ECONOMICS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A briefing for policy makers

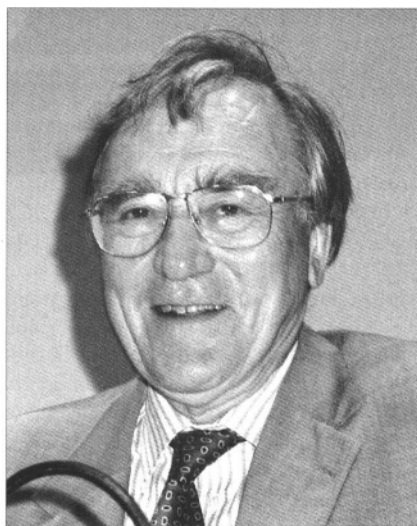
Kogan Page, £13.99

James Robertson

IT IS CLEAR that we need a four letter word which means "sustainable development", for if Mr Robertson has his way this will be the centrepiece of the new economics. He brings together his previous works in this book and homes in on nine areas of policy:

- Restructuring the tax system in favour of environmentally benign development
- Introduction of a Citizen's Income
- Termination of subsidies and public expenditure which encourage unsustainable development
- Public purchasing policies which encourage contractors to adopt sustainable practices
- Development of self reliant local economies
- Development of indicators to measure environmental progress
- Development of reporting procedures to establish sustainability
- Demand reduction policies (eg for transport and energy)
- Changes in the international trading regime to encourage sustainable forms of trade

He then explores these areas and as he does so, the enormity of his task is revealed. He requires nothing less than a complete rethink of the whole economic fabric of this nation and the world, the ideas we hold and the action which stem from the ideas. He makes a powerful case, and few would disagree who want the world to be a better place. It is obviously the work of a lifetime which is condensed in this book.



■ James Robertson

Such ideas run counter to the present thinking, and maybe it will take 50 years for the nations of the world to come round to his ideas, but he has provided a powerful impetus. As the book is sponsored by the European Commission many will find it required reading. And so we wish him well.

One difficulty is – are there any policy makers out there? There may be some who ask – what shall we do to win the next election? But fundamental policy makers are few. Just look at our tax system. It is now so complicated it is beyond reform. No-one asks what should a tax policy achieve? How should it be structured to achieve its objectives? Is it just? The cost of employment is at least double the amount that the employee enjoys? No-one examines the effects of this. So James Robertson's task is magnified.

There are many mentions of site-value land taxation, and the author is obviously in favour of this tax, especially from an environmental point of view. On page 71 is a well formulated definition of the tax. But I suspect that he has not appreciated the full implications. He mentions the growing gap between rich and poor, but does not attribute this to the private appropriation of rent and the taxes on production which necessarily follow. He is aware of poverty created by the tax system we have, but does not see that the only way out is to tackle the land question.

Georgists would perhaps urge him to deal with this fundamental injustice first, then see what remaining problems are left. For example, if wages rose to the maximum available on the best site still open to use, what would be the point of a Citizen's Wage?

I DID NOT expect to enjoy *Sketching Utopia*. Usually, political theatre is among the most boring of theatre genres, up there with "Brechtian," so named for being like that of the playwright, Bertolt Brecht, whose characters had a tendency to monologue on moralistic topics (like a sermon disguised as a play).

Sketching Utopia is a musical, but far more surprising was the fact that the music composed by Arthur Abrams is extremely good. I write as a life-long composer and performer. With only two instruments and a few good voices, the musical portion of the show was yet somehow quite effective, from the fast and furious to the deep and emotional. Of all the less plot-based parts of the show, I was most impressed by the songs (including the lyrics written by Laurel Hessing). The costumes, which, though ranging widely, from the modern to the period to the surreal, and though numerous (there were over 100), were also perfect (designed by Terry Leong). In addition, there was a lot of well choreographed and expertly performed dancing and it was never even slightly superfluous to the story (no choreographer was listed in the playbill, but Crystal Field, the director, hails from the Julliard School of Dance).



■ Emma Goldman

The set design and other technical components of the performance added wonderfully to the experience. And it's always surprising when actors start singing and don't make the audience cringe, which was the case, thankfully, with Theater for the New City's all-around terrific production of *Sketching Utopia*.

It's almost always difficult to know, when a show really works, whether to credit the actors or the director more, but whoever deserves it should get it because the play is emblazoned on my mind. I feel connected with the characters, even many of the minor ones, as if they were old friends or current acquaintances. I even hear their voices. (A classic theatre doctrine is "there are no small parts, only small actors.")

The genre of *Sketching Utopia* is difficult to classify. It is indeed political but unlike plays of that ilk it is anything but



A moving sketch of utopia

stagnant or proselytizing. Primarily, it is a story in which politics are both the driving motivation of the characters and the play's theme. It spans several generations of an artistic and activist family, starting with college kids at the recent international trade protest scene in Seattle. It also touches, to some degree, on the 1960s' civil rights fight, drugs, free love and the culture of rebellion and political activism for which that generation is famous, but which is not at all unique in American history, as this play demonstrates, to the 1960s. The bulk of the tale actually takes place in the early 20th century when Georgism was a dominating force among activists.

The script and story employ a broad variety of techniques to engage the audience and do so on many intellectual and emotional levels. This is extremely effective educationally, by filling up the hearts and minds of audience members with their own thoughts, feelings, ideas and questions, as opposed to attempting to cram something particular down their throats. Some of the contextual tools range from modernistic relationship conflicts to classic philosophical debates, but which are neither specifically topical nor historical. One of the plot's most impressive dramatic aspects is the artistic flow of emotional and intellectual dynamics. Even through the very end, the depth of literary meaning and the cohesion between the storyline (young idealists searching for utopia) and the theme (that idealism is not ignorance nor are utopian quests futile) is complete. Due to the positive message of the play, this makes its experience as gripping, moving and artistic as a Greek tragedy, but with the opposite flavour. It is exquisitely uplifting.

The production never appeared sappy, stale or weird for weirdness' sake. The intermixed story lines were never jumpy,

gratuitous nor contrived. Every word and action was a necessity. Though full of drama and variety, it never became boring nor absurd nor uncomfortably tense. Rather like a piece of good music, it all flowed together very smoothly, building in depth and intensity on different levels, with releases of humour and ecstasy at the proper moments. Then, the ending was excellently satisfying in every way. Attending this show was a beautiful experience I'll never forget.

Review by Adam Jon Monroe

My favourite part of *Sketching Utopia* is the way the primary theme marries the passion of the reformer with that of the political activist. The masterful use of humour in the script as well as in the production is what I think really made the show work so well for those unacquainted or uninterested in its political overtones. There are many forms, levels and degrees of comedy and nearly all found their way into the show, but none of it seemed derisive or out of place. It was a very classy piece of theatre and though clearly quite educational, was thoroughly entertaining.

Most importantly, it was inspiring and that, in my opinion, is what makes any form of art "great."

THERE ARE MANY aspects of the show which would thrill Georgists, but most are not overt.

Those are few but include a discussion wherein the Malthusian theory is debunked and a song about land and how people should not be slaves to the landed. The less obvious geo-components are such as the fact that most of the main characters are historical figures who strongly favoured Georgism (since not all did so within the context play). These were such as Upton Sinclair, Emma Goldman and Bolton Hall. Hall's founding of Free Acres, one of the three Georgist communities still up and running in America, is very integral to the story. At one point Hall asks, "Can you speculate in air?" (Of course, nowadays, his question would not be automatically considered rhetorical.)

Other pro-Georgist undercurrents are such that, seeing it for the first time, perhaps only Georgists would fully appreciate or understand their relativity to the cause. One is that the ultimate adventure of the main characters ends with their quest for



Free Acres, the Georgist commune, having tried others which, for one reason or another, were unsuccessful. Another recurring theme is that Georgists (and other types of reformers) often have a tendency to be unfairly vilified by more "mainstreamers."

Outside the history lessons therein, I think there is something many Georgists will appreciate very much about *Sketching Utopia* and another kind of lesson to be learned. It is often regretfully noted that Georgists, unlike other political groups, have little to offer the public in the way of culture or community. This play makes the case that it is the passion of the artist which makes for the most effective reformer. Was George's writing not beautiful, was it not art? Was it not his passion more than the complexity of his understanding which changed the world? For that matter, what would the 1960s have been without the likes of Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix?

I was very happy to find out that, despite the size of the house (there were at least 80 seats), nearly every performance was sold out or close to it. So, apparently, I'm not the only one who enjoyed it! As it turns out, the show's director, Crystal Field (who is also Artistic Director and Co-Founder of Theater for the New City), was one of the terrific actors in the show. She probably deserves a lot of credit for the excellence of TNC's performance of *Sketching Utopia*. I would also suggest that the author, Laurel Hessing (a resident of Free Acres), should be congratulated for this fabulous piece (and for her sorely needed contribution to the store of Georgist culture). And, last but definitely not least, I would thank Arthur Abrams for the delightfully engaging and effective score he composed. Without good music, few films or musicals (or political movements) are likely to move the public. To everyone involved, "Bravo!"

① *Sketching Utopia* showed Jan. 25 through Feb. 18 at Theater for the New City, 155 1st Ave. on Manhattan's lower east side. Laurel Hessing, who has chaired the Free Acres Historical and Archives Committee for the past 10 years, wrote *The Annotated Anthology of Free Acres*. Free Acres is a Georgist community founded in 1910 in New Jersey.

