

THE IDEA OF PROGRESS

RICHARD NOYES

TWO THINGS are on my mind both of which converge into one conclusion.

First: we who see merit in the so-called Georgist concept have a critical need to get ourselves "into the public dialogue". Second: there is open to us right now a logical new door through which to enter.

A relatively new "non-profit public-policy organisation" is at work these days in San Francisco (where *Progress and Poverty* was written) on a new economic measure to replace the American GDP.

They call it the GPI — for Genuine Progress Indicator.

Three of its key people have written a piece called 'If the GDP Is Up, Why Is America Down?' which appears in the October 1995 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Its 11,000 words are comprehensive, covering the history of the GDP/GNP, the practical application of it to today's perplexing economy, and the growing confrontation between economists who insist that it shows that things are just great these days and the public which knows better.

After an exhaustive (but far from exhausting) presentation of the idea, the authors get round to the tax implications of their proposal. Here is the effect they believe it would have in that key area: "To put it simply, the nation would cut - or if possible eliminate — taxes on work and enterprise and replace them with increased taxes on the use of natural resources."

Where have we heard that before?

As a political activist these days (or, if you insist an active politician), I am convinced the Georgist concept is rising to the surface right now. We are winning. The ideas are steadily emerging, not so much out of our efforts as out of the bubbling historical cauldron, spontaneously.

Free Trade, Free Enterprise Zones, planning and zoning laws based on the fact the earth is ours. And, of course, liberty and freedom which are the root of it all.

OUR TROUBLE is simply that people still refuse to see the value of putting a tax on land values or settling for a single tax, or recognising quite yet that land and the products of labour and industry are different.

But all that will come, because it has to come, and we need only to be: first, patient; and second, social (which

is to say, in the public dialogue).

The related concepts of a 'flat tax' and an 'end to the Internal Revenue Service' are both legitimate, viable ideas in the rapidly developing political mix these days. They aren't exactly what we want: they are only part-way measures. But they are both logical for a society that is heading in the right direction.

I said in my paper to the International Union for Land Value Taxation at Roskilde in July that the log-jam we face as social reformers is the fact that all too few people see that there are two kinds of "property" and therefore two bundles of "property rights."

Redefining Progress is already seeing the dichotomy in, for instance, "the so-called 'takings' bills, which would require taxpayers to compensate property owners for restrictions on the use of their property." I touched on that key distinction in my paper at Roskilde, which faced up directly to the well-chosen theme of that conference.

It is a distinction which, as the authors of the *Atlantic Monthly* piece realize, came into sharper focus when the Walt Disney company proposed a new theme park near the Civil War battlefield in Manassas, Virginia.

"[Pat] Buchanan and numerous other tradition-minded conservationists joined environmentalists in blasting the proposal," they remind us.

It is not far from there to a realization that the word "property" is too complicated to be used without a qualifier: property in land, or property in wealth?

The challenge for Georgist politicians these days is not to win back for Henry George the honour he deserves, but to recognize how steadily his realizations are coming to the forefront of public awareness, albeit bit by bit and piece by piece. But there is both consistency and continuity to the process.

It is happening right now, all along.

"The GPI has been several years in the making," the authors say, "and we will continue to refine it. But already it appears to have touched a nerve in the economics profession and beyond."

The twinned motivations for this piece come together right here. We need to be in the public dialogue, not the fusty dialogue of single tax quibbling, and, if so, the nerve that appears to have been touched will send us signals.