

EIGHT TIMES MAYOR OF VANCOUVER.

"Single Tax" Taylor: Louis Denison Taylor 1857-1946.

by Mary Rawson, Vancouver BC, Canada

(Mary Rawson is a Fellow of the Canadian Institute of Planners and a member of the Vancouver Historical Society. The following are extracts from her 4-page article published in the BC Historical News, Winter 2000, and are reprinted with permission.)

"First elected as Mayor of the City of Vancouver in 1910, L.D. Taylor was tagged with the sobriquet 'Single Tax' because of his commitment to the ideas of the American Henry George. George was identified chiefly with a proposal to raise needed public revenue from urban and resource rents alone and to remove all other taxes. His principal book, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), had electrified the reform-minded public world-wide. ...

"Taylor had become acquainted with the ideas of Henry George while in Ann Arbor, Michigan, his birthplace, and even ran for election (on a Republican ticket) as a very young man. After living through two swings of the boom-and-bust cycle working at various jobs -- librarian, bank clerk, accountant, railway auditor -- he set out for Alaska and the gold fields. He paused enroute in Vancouver in 1896, struck out for the Klondike, 'struck out' very quickly, and settled down to spend the rest of his life in British Columbia. Vancouver in 1896, as a take-off point for the Klondike, was a roistering, raw young city. ...

"He appeared on Vancouver's political scene the first time as a member of the 'Decorations Committee' for celebrations in 1901. This committee was one of several set up to welcome their Royal Highnesses, the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York. ...

"Taylor's first successful try for Council occurred after his 'full lunch pail' campaign in 1910. Among the proposals he put forward were the annexation of South Vancouver, exempting improvements from taxation, mechanizing the fire department, and establishing a juvenile court. He also urged Council to adopt the eight-hour day for municipal employees. Delegates from Vancouver and South Vancouver went to Victoria to support the first proposal, but the Provincial government under Bowser refused. Taylor kept pushing year after year, in office and out, until his aim was finally achieved in what is known as the 'amalgamation' in 1929.

"Improvements were wholly exempted from taxation, as Taylor promised, in 1910. The fire department was the first to be mechanized in North America. Council voted to approve the eight-hour day for civic workers, and for civic contractors; a plebiscite approved the decision. A juvenile court was established, assisted by L.D. assigning part of his mayor's salary to help out. In sum, 1910 was a year of remarkable accomplishment.

Taylor won the mayoralty the next year, but was defeated in the two following contests. He won again in 1915. Probably due to both business and family pressures, Taylor did not enter civic politics between 1916 and 1922.

... "L.D.'s next stretch in office began in 1925. This time his success at the polls continued over four consecutive years. It was a period of prosperity which, together with Taylor's continuity in office, no doubt contributed to a variety of solid achievements. The Greater Vancouver Water Board was put through and in good shape. The CN hotel--which had long been promised--got underway. He got the airport started. ...

"L.D. Taylor was also the person who propelled city planning into Vancouver. He appointed the first City Planning Commission and strongly supported it, an effort that was important for fifty years after, and perhaps even today. ...

"He had been instrumental not only in getting the Councils of Point Grey, South Vancouver, and Vancouver to talk together about amalgamation, but to work together on community planning before the actual amalgamation date.

As it turned out, Taylor was defeated in the campaign that would have made him the first mayor of the about-to-be amalgamated city. W.H. Malkin, a leading downtown businessman but a resident of the Point Grey area, defeated him. ...

"However, L.D.'s greatest triumph at the polls was to defeat W.H. Malkin in the very next election. Taylor also won the 1933-1934 term following. That was his final term as Mayor. He had already passed his 77th birthday on his last day in office. ...

"... Taylor had always presented himself as a champion of the working man:

"My aim in administering this office is to represent all the people. I treat the corporation as an individual. I fully appreciate its usefulness, but do all in my power to curb it if it shows grabbing tendencies. ... We want opportunities for all--the poor man as well as the man in affluent circumstances. ..."

"He had lived up to his creed as a businessman, when he condemned the union-busting tactics of the telephone company in 1905 and called for its public ownership. ... He called meetings to try to find ways of dealing with hardships, and he used his good offices to prevent strikes, as in the case of the B.C. Electric Railway in 1934. In all this, he was true to his Congregationalist upbringing and to his Georgist background, typical of the social reformers of his generation.

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"It is one of the little ironies of history that the philosophy of Henry George should be frozen in the narrowing caption 'Single Tax.' Social justice was George's core concern, but that 'single' jingle has seemed to steer modern historians onto a false trail. Available references to L.D. Taylor are a case in point. They are scanty and uncoordinated. In spite of Taylor's long and positive record, he is treated slightly in Vancouver's histories. ...

"The 100 percent exemption of buildings from property tax, L.D.'s 1910 policy and his most obvious connection to the Single Tax, was gradually abandoned by Council, but not by L.D. In 1918, the exemption was diluted to 50 percent where it remained for fifty years, before a further dilution in 1968. These later Councils may have been unwise. Hans Blumenfeld, Canada's senior philosopher of cities, wrote in the year of Habitat (1976) that shifting the property tax from buildings to land (L.D.'s old policy) 'would do more for the quality of human settlements...than all the busy housing and development programmes now being operated by huge and proliferating Federal and Provincial bureaucracies.'"

(editor's note: The British Columbia Assessment Authority was established in 1974, centralizing the assessment function of the 145 B.C. municipalities into an economic and efficient assessment system capable of providing service of consistent quality throughout the province. Assessment Commissioner J. Ted Gwartney oversaw practices and procedures for bringing land values province-wide up to full market value assessment. Persons who attended the back-to-back International and Council of Georgist Organizations conference in Vancouver in 1986, hosted by a small Vancouver group of Georgists and chaired by Mary Rawson, had the opportunity to tour the B.C. Assessment Authority offices courtesy of Commissioner Gwartney.
