

Faith Of A Town Planner

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THE depression hadn't dropped to its lowest depths when I started to school, in the fall of 1932, but my father, who had managed a department store, had already lost his job. We went with mother to live on her father's ranch in the dry belt of British Columbia while dad stayed in the city to look for work.

Mother kept house, milked the cows, looked after the chickens and a big vegetable garden, did the canning and baking, and cooked, washed and mended for everybody, including the hired men.

We kids had a wonderful time on the ranch. We always had plenty to eat and we didn't care if most of our clothes were work-a-day hand-me-downs. But cash was short.

I remember my grandfather gave a calf to my brother, and when it was grown, it was taken to market and sold. Mother must have been counting on that money to buy clothes for us, or something, because I remember her making the supper one night, and crying bitterly, because grandfather refused to give her the few dollars he got for the calf.

Dad finally gave up trying to find work in Vancouver and came to the ranch with us. He was a city man, but he dug in on the household and farm chores. He went "on relief", and in exchange for \$21 a month he went out to fix the roads a few days each month. The ranch was 17 miles from town, the last few miles a narrow dirt road, and I don't think anyone ever checked up on him. Off he would go with his lunch, and a pick and shovel in his wheelbarrow, and stop where the road needed attention. He rolled stones off, filled in pot-holes, cut earth bank away and filled in the far side. Nowadays you do not have to do any work for your "relief"; you pay in advance in the expectation of being unemployed. Which means, I suppose, that unemployment is now taken for granted and is built into the system.

We went along like this for awhile, getting into debt at the grocery store, and then mother got a job nursing in a T.B. sanatorium and we moved into town to be near her. Dad did not get a paying job again, except for a short time during the war, and by the time the war was over he was 65. He called himself an Independent, but good times and bad he never voted anything but Conservative. A person like that is bound to get into political arguments with his friends and growing children.

In school, I was active, studied hard, and played all games strenuously. After high school, I joined the drivers corps of the army and lived like a vegetable for a year and a half. I enjoyed seeing new places but I read little and thought less. This fallowing time, plus war gratuities, gave me both zest and money for further learning. So I went, like thousands of others, to university courtesy of the war. Learning and living with the veteran brand of student was something special. I think I really started to wake up to life around me about this time.

My major studies were in languages and economics. One of my professors put in a good word for *Progress and Poverty* and when I saw it in an old-book shop for 50c. — a red, hard-covered, somewhat yellowed and marked edition — I bought it at once. I read it bit by bit over the winter. It was full of interesting things and I remember going home at Christmas and talking to dad about this wonderful book and all the arguments in it. And he said: "Oh, yes. I remember that book. My dad used to read it to us at the dinner table. Henry George was right about the land tax." And this from an old Tory! Dad did not agree about free trade though, and I never thought it worth arguing too hard about. First things first — and the land question underlies the other.

Coming from the family and experiences that I did, I was quite sure that "all was not right with the world". What kind of world is it where we need a war to open the door to education or employment? But my "independent" father's arguments against Karl Marx and such foolish fellows made sense too. When I read *Progress and Poverty* a lot of things fell into place. I understood about the role of free land. Had not our family gone back to the land during the depression? But it had never occurred to me that land should not be private property. It was a premise I simply took for granted, as I imagine 99 per cent. of us do who grew up where land is treated this way. Henry George quoted all the law and the prophets in support of the proposition that land is common property — a new idea to me.

If you grant that this is so, as you soon must, the pressing question becomes "But how?". The full beauty and usefulness of the land tax as the best means to the end did not strike me at once, though it seemed a pretty

good idea. I began to see connections between events which seemed before to be unrelated. Economic life and the interdependence of economic phenomena formed an ever more coherent picture, a picture that expanded to encompass social problems and political manoeuvring.

The next thing I asked myself was — if this idea is so good, why don't people take it up? What is wrong with Henry George? None of my fellow students knew anything about him or his ideas so they were no help. To settle the question I asked two people with wide experience, trained in economics, and of high character and intelligence, "What is wrong with Henry George's ideas?" One said: I read the book when I was just learning English and I do not remember it very well. The other said: I have not read the book but I believe it has something to do with it being out-of-date. Things have changed so much since then. Land is not so important now.

What such answers from such men meant to me was that very few people could be found who would know what they were talking about when they talked of Henry George, the Single Tax, the land tax, or the land question in general. I have met many people since that time who know even less about George than did those two fine folk but who are willing to dismiss him and all his works without a blush.

A book like *Progress and Poverty* opens up the mind. To have one conception of the world disturbed and changed makes you wonder how many other undisturbed misconceptions, or pre-judgments, are still lying in your mind precasting your opinions. *Progress and Poverty* is a book that fires the imagination, that awakens and frees the mind. I suppose this is what makes it a great book.

We bump into the Land Question in our history books, of course, but always in terms of far away times and far away places. We read about the Roman *latifundia* and the Gracchi brothers. We read about the Enclosure Acts. We read about the Russian peasants' cry for "Zemlya i Volya" (Land and Liberty). We may read even of the Highland Clearances, although these are too recent and too close to home to make comfortable reading. If we think about it at all, we think of the Land Question as an ancient or an agrarian problem.

But it is in urban areas that the land problem reaches its peak of complexity and gravity. Today, I do not think you can get much closer to the land question than in town planning, and if you have eyes to see them, lessons abound. Town planners have their noses rubbed in the "ancient" land question every day — whether they see it for what it is or not. It plagues them in a hundred different guises: "shortage" of land for homes, high costs of land acquisition for school and park sites, for freeways and slum clearance, arrested redevelopment, premature subdivision, sprawl, the long and longer journey-to-work. Land is not so important now? In a pig's eye it isn't!

Nor does the justification for a tax on land values become less strong as a country moves from an agrarian to an urban economy. Values on the farm are measured by the acre, in the city by the square foot. It is in urban areas that tremendous values in land accrue — values created by the presence of population, values created by public works, values created by invention and progress. The case for a tax on land value becomes, if anything, more apparent, more pressing, in an urban context. Yet scarcely does a trickle of this commonly created value go into the public treasury.

But if you do not tax this, you must tax that. And "that" becomes goods of all kinds including food, clothing, machines and houses, as well as income of all kinds including wages, pensions and interest on stocks and bonds. An ironic footnote to this catalogue of taxes is that (in Canada) income derived from land sale and speculation is often classified as a "windfall" which is altogether free of tax.

The distortions that are wrought in the economy by a multiplicity of taxes and by taxes of various rates are impossible to trace. To these must be added the effects of subsidies to favoured groups paid direct from the public funds, not to mention the well-known practices of feather-bedding and feather-your-nesting. To defend all this in the name of free enterprise is to mock both freedom and enterprise.

Forms of economic organisation can be seen as a kind of spectrum ranging from the unattainable ideal of Adam Smith's free and perfect market to the Communists' unattainable ideal of a completely controlled economy. Like Adam Smith, Henry George saw the free market as harmony and desired to work toward it; Marxists see it as chaos and want to work away from it. On that account, Marxists not only sneer at the land value tax as "mere reform", they often prove to be its bitterest opponents.

Given the ideal the Communists work toward, we cannot condemn them as hypocrites. But what are we to think of those who, whilst taking the posture of public-spirited men, of champions of free enterprise, seek every form of subsidy and privilege and gather themselves into combines further to mulct the public? Who is it that is destroying free enterprise? Not just the Communists, who despise reform, but the "Capitalists" who resist it. They make a great team.

There are still a good many people who desire reform, however. It is not surprising that many who are strongly motivated by this desire choose town planning for a profession, for economic and social problems take on most acute forms in the city. In so far as the urban problem is a land problem (as it largely is) I would say that no single tool is so little appreciated yet so full of import as the taxation of land values. I do not feel I can do more valuable work than to speak for this reform, mere or not.