

During the campaign the town seethed with excitement. The whole question of Human Rights versus Privilege was fought out in this local contest and the people won. We are wondering if some such local storm center may not on some occasion when circumstances are propitious propagate itself through the whole body politic, and the land question become a burning issue. In the meantime, congratulations to the people of Oyster Bay township and Glen Cove.

## Frank Stephens on Democracy

THE *Forum* having started a symposium on the question "Is Democracy Breaking Down in America," addressed the inquiry to a number of men prominent as thinkers and publicists in the United States, among whom was Frank Stephens. Mr. Stephens' communication arrived too late for inclusion in the *Forum's* symposium and we are glad to give it space in these columns. Brother Stephens answered the inquiry as follows:

Democracy is not breaking down in the United States. I do not believe it will break down within any time we can foretell. Personally I am more and more impressed as social conditions become worse and worse with the marvellous accuracy with which our democracy functions in giving us an exactly representative government in spite of bitter social injustice among the governed and crass economic ignorance among those who presume to govern.

One can look with philosophic patience even at our National Congress and our State and Municipal law makers when he realizes how their privilege grabbing, their prohibition laws, their hundreds of millions for warships and war preparation, their faith in state police cossacks and sneaking detectives, exactly represent the venality, the hypocrisy, the boastfulness and the cowardice of our people as a whole, from the pow-wow doctors of Old York to the crazy financiers of New York.

That things go as disgracefully wrong with us as a nation is the best possible proof that democracy is working successfully, it is giving us as a nation exactly what we want. But the hope of democracy is the fact that there are more people concerned today in wanting something better than at any other stage of the world's history, and they are more and more coming to realize that the way out is through better understanding of the underlying principles of economics.

I do not believe that the common people have lost faith in democracy in the sense of believing there is some better working theory or practice, that Mussolini is after all a better leader than Mazzini or Thomas Fortune Ryan a better exemplar than Thomas Jefferson.

The people in this country who believe that democracy is breaking down are the class, few in numbers and weak in influence whose opinion my dear friend Dr. Will Durant voices, those in Tennysonian phrase for whom "knowledge comes but wisdom lingers," who having laboriously accumulated huge quantities of undigested and unrelated facts without knowledge of the simple economic truths by which these can be set in order and understood are afflicted with pangs, fears, nightmares and wailing beside which the indigestion of Mr. Polly in Mr. Wells' little tale was as the smiling slumber of infancy.

Let these literati but acquire so much knowledge of the relation of social well-being to social justice and social stability as may be gained by a week's honest study of the economics of Henry George, the realization that simple truths remain true and remain simple even in the most complex civilization, and they will realize that they need have no fear of the breakdown of democracy.

## How To Improve the Property Tax

WRITING in the National Tax Association Bulletin, Prof. F. H. Swift of the University of California, says:

"The general property tax is recognized by all students of public taxation as the most unscientific and most unjust type of tax employed in the world today. It was shown, however, that despite its universal condemnation it is the tax most widely used in the United States as a means of providing state school revenues."

Commenting on this, Mr. John Harrington, formerly of the Wisconsin Tax Commission, writes as follows:

"The assertion that the general property tax is unscientific and unjust is either true or it is not true. The question is fundamental. The general property tax now produces two-thirds or more of all state and local taxes. To shift this amount of taxes to other forms of taxation will be a real revolution, and probably a huge mistake.

If assertions are of any value, I am willing to set up the counter-assertion that the general property tax is the most scientific and just tax now in general use in any state.

This is not to say that it is a perfect tax; far from it. But it can be made as nearly a perfect tax as human enactments can be made. The first step toward perfection is to exempt from the tax all ordinary personal property. The next step is to follow the so-called "Pittsburgh Plan," of gradual exemption of buildings and improvements.

This procedure would, of course, result in the greater part of all taxes being imposed on the value of land. And here the so-called "tax experts" will throw up their hands.

They do not seem able to grasp the rather simple proposition that the collector of ground rent makes no return to society for what he receives; that is to say, he is a pensioner on society, giving nothing back, and performing no service in return. This may be illustrated in a striking way by a case in this state where a certain two acre tract of land is worth \$4,000,000, and pays the owner \$200,000 a year net ground rent. Very clearly the \$200,000 is a drain on the income of the community, for which those who receive it give nothing back. The method we have outlined would absorb for taxes a considerable part of this \$200,000 annually. A like result would obtain as to all the lesser ground rent cases.

Actually the whole problem is a sort of underground contest as to whether taxes shall be chiefly borne by labor and productive enterprise and industry, or by the "something for nothing" incomes of monopoly. And I fear