

A Strong Movement Depends on All of Us

— An Interview with Mark A. Sullivan

Mark A. Sullivan has served the Council of Georgist Organizations for many years, as Administrator, Conference Co-ordinator, Secretary/Treasurer and Vice President. Now, with the resignation of Dr. Drew Harris — for personal reasons, during his second distinguished term — Mark takes office as President as the Georgist movement stands at a crossroads: where some see a time of crisis, others see unprecedented opportunities.

Lindy: What's your reaction to the notion that the Georgist movement's morale is dangerously low?

Mark: Well, morale is low. And sometimes I share it. There are many frustrations. One camp is utterly fearful of anything that might seem 'political'. Another group refuses to support anything outside of the two-rate tax reform effort. Some demand education only, and scorn any talk of applications. There is a persistent tendency for a few dominant personalities to influence the major Georgist organizations in unhealthy ways. It seems that a large endowment can attract such professionals to the Boards, and the advisory circles, of our organizations — sometimes diluting their Georgist mission, or even redirecting it entirely.



Lindy: But aren't such problems endemic to public-service organizations in general? Are we worse off than all the rest?

Mark: Probably not. I can tell you from experience that the level of paperwork and procedure grows exponentially, the more assets an organization has and the more grants it gives out! The maintenance of the organization can become its main preoccupation. Boards get tied up debating structure and procedure. Members vie for power, and as you know, power corrupts.

In contrast, I see the role of the Council as diffusing power, empowering **all** Georgist activists and organizations — especially the small groups and volunteers with no other means of support. There are many effective "little-g georgists", working without major funding, who get quite a lot done. The big organizations tend to deny them. "True believers" are an embarrassment to some of our

professionals, who come aboard thinking to fix this movement. This can lead to a kind of self-esteem problem.

Lindy: Do you see a self-fulfilling prophecy at work here?

Mark: Yes. There have been too many “self-hating” Georgists! One part of that comes out of a rivalry that dates back to Henry George’s day. George was self-educated, and rather hostile toward academia — who, as we know, had very little good to say about him. Now, the top end of our movement, seeking academic respectability, has often tended to turn against the strong tradition of Georgist popular education.

In the political arena too, I think that we have repeated and amplified some of George’s mistakes. He showed a willingness to compromise, to float his ideas on rising political tides, such as the free trade issue in the 1880s. His support of Grover Cleveland and the Democratic Party alienated many of his earlier supporters — including Dr. Edward McGlynn. Another example: George initially supported the Haymarket Anarchists on trial in Chicago. He was one of very few who changed his mind the other way — thereby losing his strong labor support.

Likewise, in their focus on achievable beginning steps, some Georgists have drastically watered down our message.

Lindy: So, we need to re-focus our message?

Mark: Yes, and expand its reach. We need to make our work more relevant to current issues. Our message is about social justice! But as a movement, I don’t think we listen to today’s protests against very real injustices that we can and should speak to. Our century-old free trade stand, for example, has to be able to address the issue of globalization. We desperately need more discussion of financial monopolies. We need to be able to demonstrate how the law of rent works in today’s world. And there is another source of frustration: many important questions need research, but academic turf wars tend to get in the way.

Lindy: Can the CGO address these issues? What specifically do you have in mind for the Council?

Mark: I hope the Council can address these issues — but I don’t pretend that it can provide all the answers. I don’t presume that the CGO is synonymous with the movement, for one thing. The Council of Georgist Organizations is the facilitator; the organizations and individual activists are the movement. As President, *(continued on page 13)*

momentum and a populist base?

Political Action: Bob Willis has compiled a list of over 200 social activist organizations that will be invited to co-sponsor our conference. A legislative bill for land value taxation in Iowa is being prepared. There will also be sessions on globalization, environmental justice, trade and debt issues.

Publishing: The CGO Staff plan to publish an *Iowa Book* composed of conference papers and proceedings. [*Another tradition revived at the '99 Arden Conference! — L.D.*]

CGO Development: In a freewheeling "town meeting" format, we will discuss ways to strengthen and synergize our movement on Saturday afternoon and make official decisions on Sunday morning.

Conference planners Sue and Scott Walton are happy to report that this year's event will be pleasantly affordable. The conference fee will be well under \$300. Our hotel, the Merle Hay Four Points Sheraton, charges a base rate of \$68 per night. Optional sightseeing activities, including a planned visit to Des Moines's historic opera houses, will be both affordable and separable from the main body of conference time, so attenders may pick and choose as time and funds permit. And there are a surprising number of direct flights to Des Moines! (G)

Mark A. Sullivan...

(continued from page 11) I don't want to go in with a lot of preconceived answers; I want to listen, and attempt to do what the members want. That's why we plan to have a long, relaxed "town meeting" before this year's CGO business meeting. I hope we can end any rivalries that impede cooperation.

One thing we are doing to foster unity is to reissue the CGO directory, the "Introduction to the Georgist Philosophy and Movement". We will have a new issue of that in print at the Iowa conference, and up on our website. It will include Georgist activists and experts as well as organizations. This vital service is part of the CGO's stated mission, and I'm happy that we're updating — and upgrading — it now after so many years.

Beyond that, I want to encourage the members to set the agenda. I hope we can increase both the number of members and the level of participation. We need to reach out to all Georgist organizations around the world. The 1988 edition of the CGO directory listed more than 50 members; currently we are down to less than 20. Ultimately, the only way to have a strong CGO is to have a strong Georgist movement, and that depends on all of us. (G)