

NO DILUTION, NO "UP-DATING"

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From time to time we hear from speakers and writers who call for Henry George's message to be made relevant for today. Here I must urge caution. The essence of George's philosophy and his political economy cannot be up-dated, it doesn't have to be. It was valid in 1879, it is just as valid today and it will remain so 100 years hence. It does not need "packaging", simplification nor to be transformed into a form by which we may hope to gain adherents who will be attracted to it for what it can do for them in the short term. George's message is simple in that it is elegant, but it is not so simple that it can be readily understood by a child. To attempt to make it so is to cheapen and distort it.

Let me illustrate: Here in Australia we raise the greater part of our municipal income by site value rating. That is, we have implemented one aspect of George's political economy in a weak form. Surveys indicate that municipalities probably benefit from SVR, but when state and federal taxes, subsidies, tariffs, import quotas and other impediments to trade exist around and within the municipalities, how can the potential of Georgist reform be any more than hinted at?

Here is another instance: In the years immediately prior to World War I, British Georgists led a vigorous mass movement and succeeded in getting a small measure of land value taxation incorporated into the 1909 budget. They were given the promise of a 0.2% LVT to yield just 0.3% of the government's income and so had to promote and justify this as LVT to political opponents of left and right. Of course a 0.2% LVT could not create a Georgist society and the Georgists' failure to dissociate themselves from this dilemmatical position contributed to the subsequent decline of their movement in Britain.

Against my "hard line", it is argued that small reforms may yield but small improvements, yet they are "steps in the right direction," they will indicate what further similar reforms may yield. As a tactical measure this is of doubtful utility; without precise statistical measures the marginal benefits derived can probably be attributed to other variables. And political opponents with their superior resources could easily present a convincing case against Georgist reforms.

Most readers of this Journal are what might be termed "convinced Georgists." That is, they support land value taxation (or site rent for revenue) to the hilt. We gained our understanding through careful reading, reflection, discussion and argument - ways open to all those to whom we might present our ideas. It is my belief that Georgism would be better served by a small number of people thoroughly conversant with the essence of George's thought and able to see its application to their times, than by a large body of lukewarm followers unfamiliar with George's own writings, unable to argue the Georgist case cogently and unable themselves to convince intelligent others of the worth of Georgist proposals.

Georgism is simply not amenable to ready transmission through pamphlets, slick television advertisements or a few posters. Georgism is a perspective, a matrix of ideas; the communication of Georgist philosophy requires time, depth, subtlety, even intuition. It cannot be packaged and foisted upon people like a commodity, it cannot be understood without some intellectual effort.

I am arguing, therefore, against the dilution of George's ideas and also against the need for a mass movement. We need instead a dedicated, competent and continuing critical commentary on current affairs and the earning of respect from others by our present achievements rather than solely from the Utopia we promise.