

Georgism and Popular Government

By GEORGE A. BRIGGS

I HAVE a deep admiration for the Henry George School and the work it is doing. When I first encountered *Progress and Poverty*, back in Chicago, fifty years ago, there were no such schools. I was thrilled by the book and read it again and again. Every week, however, I would discover what I thought to be a flaw in doctrine. Then on Friday night I would attend the weekly meeting of the Henry George Club, where I would describe the fatal flaw to some of the "big shots." Within a few moments they would convince me that I was wrong and Henry George was right.

In those days doubtless there were tens of thousands of people who were interested in *Progress and Poverty*, who discovered what they thought to be flaws and who did not have access to Henry George Clubs. The majority of them perhaps went through life believing that the book presented a beautiful dream which would not stand up under the test of practical experience.

Even now, I wonder how many recent graduates of the school have a thoroughgoing understanding of the philosophy and its ramifications. All that our school can do for them is to give them a solid foundation upon which they may erect a superstructure of beauty, insight and understanding. The day they receive their diplomas is in a very real sense Commencement Day. The superstructure will not be built unless Georgism continues to be one of their chief interests throughout their lives. Such a course will be full of intellectual and emotional rewards, but it will also be beset by pitfalls.

They should beware of an overwhelming desire, factlessly and inopportunistly to try to share these rewards with others, lest they cause their friends and associates to think of them as intolerable bores. What could be worse than a

one-track mind trying to bludgeon others with a logic whose primary assumptions are neither accepted nor acceptable?

Georgists, if they are to keep their faith, must be prepared to lose many illusions. One of these has been already suggested. It is a naive belief that if their program is presented clearly, opportunistly and tactfully, it will be accepted as a basis for political action. This belief is based upon a misconception as to the nature of popular government. Such a government theoretically depends upon a disinterested and public-spirited electorate. The difficulty here is that our electorate is neither disinterested nor public-spirited. Most people from cradle to grave are rather narrowly self-centered, seeking ways and means to promote their own material prosperity without much regard for the opportunities of others.

Thus the history of our government has been characterized by constant efforts by individuals and groups to keep money out of the pockets of others so that their own eager pockets might be filled. Alexander Hamilton made this the cornerstone of his economic and governmental policies.

It will be recalled from history that the soldiers of the American Revolutionary Army were paid in part by scrip issued by the Continental Congress. This scrip became worthless because it had no backing except printing presses. At one of the earlier sessions of Congress, after the constitution was adopted, a bill was passed to redeem this scrip at face value in gold. Hamilton promoted this legislation and should receive great credit. But he also should be held responsible for his subsequent action.

The scrip was held largely by ex-soldiers and their families scattered throughout the country. Due to the slow communication facilities of

those days many months would pass before the scrip-holders could learn of the new law. Speculators had couriers and fast boats ready for action the moment the bill was signed by the President. Their design was to hurry into the hinterland and buy up the scrip before the holders knew about the redemptive legislation.

An effort was made to postpone action on the bill for six months so that the most remote holder would know of the proposed legislation. Hamilton successfully defeated this action. He wanted the speculators to succeed. He held that if some men were made rich by government at the expense of others, then the rich would come to the aid of government in time of need. So, the scrip-holders were robbed for the benefit of speculators.

These laws of special privilege were of course enacted by our legislatures, and our legislators were elected by popular vote. What a prudent lot they are. Albert Jay Nock goes further and says they are prize cowards. At any rate their main desire is to be elected and re-elected. The public interest is of subordinate importance. Thus we have never had a government of the people, by the people and for the people. What we have had is a government of the people, by politicians for pressure groups.

There are two groups, however, who are trying to find a way out of our economic plight. One of these, the socialists, believe in social planning and economic control of industry, as a means to public welfare. This would involve a high degree of economic regimentation. Even though we had a disinterested and public-spirited electorate, and therefore elected wise and public-spirited representatives, I believe this plan would fail. It is inconceivable to me that government could successfully manage all the infinite number of details involved in a developing industry and technology.

The other group, composed of Georgists, believe in special privileges for none, and equal opportunity for all. They believe that government should act as an umpire to keep open the way for free economic competition, and to kill monopoly wherever it may show its ugly head. If we had a disinterested and public-spirited electorate I am confident this plan would be successful. I favor it for the further reason that any welfare worthy of the name will come as a by-product of freedom, whereas to seek welfare directly is to close the door to freedom.

But why seek this goal if it is unlikely to be reached within the foreseeable future? My answer is, that it will enrich your lives. It will give you a yardstick with which to measure current economic trends. It will revive and sustain faith in freedom. It will convince you that our sorry economic plight is not inexorably decreed by fate, but is due to maladjustment to the source of all wealth, namely, land. Doubtless we as a people will go up many blind alleys of error, but a Georgist will recognize a blind alley when he sees one.

On the other hand, it would not be a public-spirited procedure for you to refuse your support and devotion to Georgism simply because you do not see how it can be adopted during your lifetime. This is a test to which every Georgist must submit. Your attitude will be the measure of your character.

How I First Became Interested in Henry George

I was born into a Georgist atmosphere. I don't know, but probably the first words to fall upon my infant ear, when my father came into the room to see what the stock had brought, were, "Oh! so it's a girl! Then we can't call it Henry George."

I knew the parlance of the philosophy long before I knew what it meant, or that it had a meaning. I recall, when a little girl of nine or ten, A. E. Freeland, who died within the past few years in Seattle, took me on his knee and asked, with a wink to my father, "Bessie, did Henry George want to tax land?" "No, sir," I replied promptly, "land values," thereby attaining (in Georgist circles) the reputation of a child prodigy. If they had only known I was merely parroting what I had heard my father say.

When in my early teens I began to explore the charm of popular novels and verse, my dad said to me, "Kid, if you want to read something really fascinating, read *Progress and Poverty*. Having keen respect for his judgment, I got the book down and essayed to read it. That was my first great disillusionment; my father did not have a discriminating taste in literature after all, to prefer George to Gene Stratton Porter or Ella Wheeler Wilcox! Later, of course, I knelt in remorse for my youthful dearth of discernment.

I gave the book to my son when he was about the same age that I was when dad gave it to me. Bill devoured it avidly, promptly became and has remained from that day, an ardent Georgist—which is one argument, I contend, that the intelligence of the new generation has not deteriorated but has increased over that of the elder one.

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