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Which Route to Justice?

OVER THIRTY YEARS after I first heard of Henry George, I find myself heading a tiny charity that bears his name: a name that almost nobody in Britain today knows or cares about. But a name representing a philosophy that more people than ever care about, concerning proper economic relationships between human groups and our planet's endowment.

Research and public education into the implications for a modern age of the ideas of Henry George are our work. We can only do it by engaging with those outside our tiny "Georgist" domain who have the tools of modern research and the ears of the public.

But even they don't listen, if we start by talking about The Man or his Single Tax. So we become voices in a wilderness. And we develop what a sympathetic preacher calls "the stridency that comes from not being heard". Which does the cause no good.

MOST OF MY working life was spent as a military surveyor. Love of maps and the need to keep fit led me to orienteering, a sport that involves route planning and expert navigation. An orienteer soon learns some basic lessons for life: In a complex world, the best route to one's goal is often not the shortest – and can sometimes begin in the opposite direction to the destination. Stubborn persistence with a route that is clearly wrong merely leads to further disaster. Maps (and route plans) are a compromise, needing frequent update. There is never perfect information. Standing still gets you nowhere!

LAND & LIBERTY is a key part of our outreach. In this issue several writers of integrity present their views on the route choices open to those who wish to achieve a sustainably just society. New readers may be surprised at the passion invoked by the "split-rate" approach route characterized by Josh Vincent and Steve Cord, working in Pennsylvania and surrounding states. They are winning small victories and a few big-thinking allies for Smart Tax reform.

Ken Wenzel and Messrs. Hyde and Hudson plump for the frontal assault. They pour scorn on "accommodatist politicians" and those with "supine reverence for property". Yet in a society where most voters are home-owners, surely this is wise reverence? And have they mapped out for us an alternative route towards the Single Tax goal? The political landscape has changed since George bestrode it. The map needs updating.

The Pennsylvania pathway interests many whose

attention is needed if any progress is to be made towards our "very desirable long-term goal" (Cord) of Single Tax. Nowhere do Cord and Vincent appear to "reject single-tax philosophy": Wenzel himself admits that the road to the Single Tax is "gradual if necessary".

TACTICS SHOULD not be mistaken for strategy. The goal is all important – but only for the mind's eye. Clear perspective for the next important step must be the eyes' and the brain's constant focus. Apparently short-term and trivial – even diversionary – achievements must not replace the true goal. But they may be necessary check-points, if only because they attract attention to our wider programme. This doesn't mean the perpetrators have "promoted an alternative vision" or changed their motivation.

The split-rate at local level may leave the overall tax burden "substantially unchanged in either amount or incidence" (Hudson & Hyde) but it is not the end-game. It is at least arguable that it has taken the cause forward.

Few politicians like unproven policies that 'frighten the horses'. The next election has to be won. There are not going to be revolutions, sad as it may seem to some! While debating the remote possibility of a perfect but uncharted future, how many worth-while imperfect opportunities will be missed?

Whatever form The Smart Tax takes (and it need be neither local nor split-rate), and however gradual the progress, in many countries (like Britain) there first has to be a land valuation. It won't happen overnight and it will take national legislation and the active collaboration of technocrats and administrators with little interest in grand visions.

The evidence from my own research (*page 10*) is that such people expect major property tax reform to be piloted locally before any national decision. Our Progressive Forum is bringing together a potent mixture of those with the vision and those with the means to "progress" it. Those with vision must pass it on. But we must also find the means to achieve it, one step at a time – big steps where possible, but small will do. As Voltaire said: "The best is the enemy of the good". "Smart" may not mean "best" but the split rate tax is doing good. Can we do better, where we each are? Only by trying – through action research – will we find out.

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