

Are Conventions Worth While?

THE value of conventions in the life of any association or movement, whether organized or unorganized is, it seems to me, so self-evident as to leave little, if any, ground for debate. But such conventions must be regarded as means to an end, not as an end in themselves. It would be very unfortunate if we were so to lose our sense of proportion as to look upon the annual Henry George Congress as representing any great achievement in and of itself. Such a Congress can be of value only in so far as it serves to educate its participants, to develop a greater degree of agreement and cooperation, inspire renewed zeal, bring about an improvement in methods or technique and expand activities which will advance the movement which it seeks to represent and express.

When the first Henry George Congress was held in Philadelphia in September, 1926, there was no definite intention on the part of its sponsors to make it an annual function, nor would we now insist that there should be any rigid adherence to any fixed procedure, either with regard to time, place or type of programme. But this initial Congress was welcomed so heartily by all participating that in response to the demand, it was deemed wise by the directors of the Henry George Foundation sponsoring the Congress to continue such gatherings as long as results achieved seemed to justify the effort or until a better plan might be devised for enlisting a greater degree of effective team work on the part of Single Taxers. In view of the sustained interest and of pressing invitations from Single Tax groups in various cities and towns, these national conventions or conferences have been maintained without a break for a period of nine years. Our hopes as to witnessing a great revival in the Single Tax movement have, I may frankly say, been realized only in a very small measure but we have nevertheless felt it our duty to persist in the effort, so that whatever has been gained might be conserved.

Personally, I welcome the freest discussion of this question on the part of all interested but I feel that the criticism recently expressed by my very good friend, the editor of LAND AND FREEDOM, is wrongly directed and rests, in part at least, on unsound premises. It is clear, of course, that no individual or organization has, or can have, any monopoly of the Single Tax movement. The doors are always wide open. Would it not therefore be well to direct our attention to the things that are left undone rather than to disparage what has been done? For we must all grant that much has been left undone and perplexing problems as to "how to put it over" remain unsolved after more than fifty years of experimentation and earnest striving.

The recent Henry George Congress held in Chicago was not only, in the opinion of many who attended, one of the best Single Tax conventions yet held but it was

probably the least expensive Single Tax convention of national scope ever held. All of the work incident to the planning and execution of the convention (which is considerable) was done by volunteer workers receiving no financial remuneration (and this includes a rather voluminous correspondence, not to mention much other work), the expense being limited to the cost of printing, postage and a few incidental expenses which were largely defrayed by five dollar contributions, voluntarily offered by those friends who felt that the modest investment was worth while.

As for the traveling expenses incurred by those attending, including hotel accommodations, meals, etc., which someone has estimated might aggregate as much as ten thousand dollars (but as to which no one can speak except the individuals who may have kept personal expense accounts), we may grant, of course, that there might have been a few persons in the assembly who, had they not attended, would have contributed the expenses of their trip directly to some form of Single Tax propaganda. But of how many is this likely true? Is it not more likely that by reason of attending the annual rally, many of these persons will actually increase the contribution that they would otherwise have made to their favorite type of Single Tax work for the current year. For it must be remembered that attendance at these annual gatherings is purely optional and that it has necessarily been largely limited to those who have time, money and inclination to travel, many of whom travel occasionally in any event for their own pleasure or self-improvement. As a matter of fact, many of those attending the conventions during the past two years were persons who had planned to visit the World's Fair and arranged their trip so that they could also get the benefits to be derived from fellowship with their fellow Georgists and from the exchange of ideas and information, if nothing more. Furthermore, with the exception of a small group of leaders, there are few who undertake to attend each year and for this reason the conventions are held in different sections from time to time and each convention represents in large part a new group, many of whom do not need to travel any great distance.

As one deeply interested in the cause of economic righteousness, I should like to see not merely an examination and appraisal of our annual convention, but a very earnest examination and appraisal of the Single Tax movement as a whole. If our movement is to thrive and grow and meet the challenge of the times in which we live, it should receive the best thought of our ablest minds, not merely for two or three days out of a year, but continuously, until a way is discovered by which the movement, founded by the great philosopher, may actually obtain some degree of momentum here in the United States.

Let us discuss and let us act in the light of the best

ideas we can obtain. Let us analyze our situation to discover what, if any, weaknesses stand in the way of progress. Among other things, the disciples of Henry George must learn how to organize. The national conference, or convention, was intended to be a step toward effective organization but the problem of organization in the Single Tax movement presents special difficulties not to be found in like nature in most other movements, if indeed in any other comparable movement, for Single Taxers are notoriously individualistic in promotional activities as well as in their social and economic philosophy.

In my judgment, really effective organization depends upon the formulation of something more appealing than mere academic education, important as that is in its own sphere. If the Single Tax movement is to attain great strength and achieve more rapid progress, it must, in my opinion, heed the advice of Henry George on the subject of "practical politics." The political and economic situation today is, of course, different in certain respects from that prevailing in the days when Henry George engaged in his political activities but the central idea, which he advanced as to ways and means is, if anything, more sound to day than it was then. The fact remains that until his followers can correlate their movement with some outstanding popular issue, the work of education as well as the work for legislation will probably continue to be confined to the restricted circles of the elect and thus fail to reach the masses. Until a solution is found, would it be wise to neglect the opportunity for suggestions and discussion and reports, which such an annual conference does afford, if nothing more?

Criticism of any particular type of convention programme is certainly in order and there is much room for improvement in this regard. This matter is entitled to earnest consideration, if we are to continue to have such annual or occasional gatherings, and I believe it was decided at Chicago to experiment the next time with a different type of convention procedure with a view to better results. But as to the specific criticism advanced in reporting the last Congress, it seems to me that there is something that might be said in reply. It is alleged that Single Taxers have at times been exposed to the painful experience of listening to certain speakers who are inclined to present a critical attitude. Now, if a convention is held for the sole purpose of obtaining newspaper publicity or impressing visitors with the thought that we are all like-minded in every respect, then perhaps addresses of a controversial or critical nature should be tabooed and we might well abandon any thought of introducing a variety of discussion. I believe that the convention programmes might be greatly improved by more careful planning and selection, but it is also my opinion that Single Taxers attending such meetings are benefitted, rather than harmed, by occasionally exposing themselves to a discussion of related questions from a slightly different viewpoint, rather than insisting upon

a rigid adherence to a restricted field of discussion. For example, whatever we may think of public ownership of public utilities as an immediate and separate issue, it is certainly a part of the programme advocated by Henry George and being a Henry George Congress, or such discussion in several years would hardly seem to be in the nature of undue emphasis. And touching upon proportional representation as another example, if we have any interest at all in methods of securing results in practical application, a discussion of effective political machinery for the attainment of our ends is certainly in order. Even the money question, which surely has had a very small place in any of the conferences, is not entirely foreign to the Georgist philosophy and programme and Single Taxers cannot afford to be ignorant of the subject when proposing to present the solution of our economic problem. And in working out concrete tax plans in a *transitional* stage, no matter how orthodox we may be, we shall probably have to tolerate some forms of taxation other than that on land values; hence it may even be profitable to give some consideration to the question of what kind of existing taxes might well be discarded first and in fact to anything having a bearing upon the development of a practical step-by-step programme, which could hope to win popular support in our day or in the present crisis. But in any event is it not true that fully ninety-five per cent of all convention time has been devoted strictly to discussion relating to the Single Tax in its various aspects?

Finding Single Taxers differing sharply in their opinions as to just what should be done and how those ends could be best attained, the Henry George Congress was conceived as a means of providing, if nothing more, an open forum of free speech where all of those interested in the philosophy and teachings of Henry George might meet as opportunity affords itself for earnest discussion and exchange of ideas in the faith that such free discussion would certainly tend to bring about better understanding and a greater degree of united action. I believe that the Henry George Congress has been fruitful in this respect, but I am eager to see much more accomplished in the years that lie immediately ahead. Certainly the time is now at hand when we might well subordinate discussion to action. Regardless of whether or not general agreement can be obtained in support of any particular concrete programme, it is earnestly to be hoped that those who have such programmes developed, will proceed to submit them to the test of practical experience and let the results speak for themselves.

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THE St. Lawrence Seaway is popular with officeseekers. Its building will encourage foreign trade, thus creating need of additional custom house officials to discourage this trade again.