

Protocol—1952 By MARSHALL CRANE

NOT LONG ago I had the good fortune to meet one of the many thousands who filed past the body of Henry George as it lay in state in New York, fifty-four years ago.

"I was only about fifteen at the time," he said, "just a youngster, and not a very thoughtful one either, but I remember feeling, as I watched people's faces and heard their hushed voices, that something very terrible had happened, that in Henry George's passing we had all suffered a really great calamity. It was a strange, solemn experience for a boy of my age, yet I must confess to you that I had no idea then what George stood for, and I've never learned since."

He looked at me inquiringly, and I spent the next few minutes trying to enlighten him. I once worked out a thumbnail sketch of the Georgan principles for just such occasions, but somehow I can never remember it when the time comes to use it. However, in this instance I had a sympathetic listener, who helped a lot by asking intelligent and pertinent questions, and the going was not too hard.

"Hm. Can't say I see anything wrong with it," he said when I had finished. "Sounds worth looking up. Sure is logical. But suppose it is? As they say nowadays, So what? What are you going to do about it?"

I suggested that my conversation with him was an example of one of the things we must do, and made some rather vague remarks about spreading the word. I do not know whether he was satisfied with my answer, but as I thought it over later it struck me that he had asked a question which every Georgist should think about very seriously. What are we, as individuals and as a group, going to do about it?

Fortunately there are at least a few to whom economics is more than just an amusing avocation. For half a century, here and there in the political life of this country, there have been men and women, alone and in groups, who have labored for reforms in our taxation system. Their work never attracted the attention it deserved, even when they were able to bring specific issues before our legislatures. But acts which have been passed in various states bear witness that it has not been fruitless. The recent bill in Pennsylvania is a notable example.

Victories of this sort always involve political strategy, but the Georgist in politics has often realized to his sorrow that even the most brilliant strategist is helpless unless he has forces to maneuver. Without a very considerable body of public opinion no really significant or permanent reform can be effected in a country with political institutions such as ours. For this reason Georgists, though they may not always see eye to eye on other questions of policy, all agree on the primary importance of informing the citizen of the nature of the principles which apply to taxation, and of the specific effects of their application. Whether it be called education, publicity, or propaganda, this must be the cornerstone of the structure of reform.

It would be a mistake not to face the fact that this kind of education must always be a terribly difficult task. We are proud of our freedom of speech and opinion in this country, and perhaps we need it more than any other in the world. Every shade of racial tradition and habit of thought has found its way to our shores.

Americans share with all other human beings

a strong aversion to changing opinions to which they have become accustomed. As Alexander Pope observed, "Men, let them say what they will, never approve any other's sense, but as it squares with their own." The psychology of opinion, both of the individual and of the group, is an all too little explored science.

Who has ever really explained the fact that every day men of equal intelligence manage to arrive at exactly opposite conclusions after weighing the same evidence?

But perhaps the outlook is not quite such a gloomy one as it seems. It is as true to the psychologist as to the economist that men do strive to satisfy their desires with the least possible effort. It is to their own interest to do so. There is probably nothing which, consciously or unconsciously, influences men's opinions more than self-interest. It would seem that if the educator can convince his listeners that he is genuinely concerned in their welfare they will at least consider what he has to say, and that if he can persuade them that his program will benefit them personally they will support it.

This is, of course, an over-simplification of the teacher's problem and of its solution, which is not to be effected by any spellbinder. But it does indicate a direction.

I have wondered sometimes as I have read books and articles by Georgists (my own included) whether they could ever do very much good. For one thing, so many of them seem to be written for those who are already disciples of Henry George. After all, our greatest problem is "not to save the righteous, but sinners." I know that I find theoretical discussion both interesting and stimulating, and there are probably others like me in this respect. And no doubt it is a worthy act to confirm the believer in his faith and to make it clearer to him. But surely no one will claim that such writing is valuable as propaganda.

In all ages the great teachers have won their converts by the extreme simplicity of what they had to say, and by showing its importance to the individual listener. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself; this is the whole law and the prophets." In a pithy sentence from one of the early Talmudists Jesus epitomized a complicated moral code. He was followed from town to town by throngs of Jews who loved their religion, but too often found it hard to understand.

The Danish Justice party has doubled its representation in a few years. Its method is to present its platform in the simplest and most direct terms, explaining just the most basic principles, to call special attention to its essential justice, and to demonstrate that it is to the personal interest of the individual voter to support it. To Danes as to Jews the simpler rule has the strong appeal. It is the same everywhere.

In a democracy the citizens, the voters, have the final word as to the nature of the laws and institutions. It is to them that we must speak. As individuals they have a good, healthy interest in their financial condition, but comparatively few of them are even amateurs of economic theory. At the beginning of 1952 it seems to me we can make no better resolve than to plan to present our message in the simplest possible form.