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HENRY GEORGE
PROPHET OF THE GOOD SOCIETY
by
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Prerequisites of a public relations program
that could revive the moribund Henry George
movement and carry it to victory.

THE HENRY GEORGE MOVEMENT IS DEAD

The Wall Street Journal carried a letter by Vermont Royster, stating "Henry George has long since been forgotten." That's how he sees it. You may remember something about Henry George; I may remember something about Henry George; but who else does?

Where Were the TV Cameras?

At the 1977 National Conference of Georgists the attendance was less than 150--out of a population of more than 220 million. So what if there were 15 more at home for each one at the Convention? That's about one per hundred thousand. Imagine a football stadium that holds a hundred thousand people, and one Georgist among them.

Where were the TV cameras from NBC and ABC? Where were the reporters from the N. Y. Times, the Washington Post? Where were the writers from U. S. News? Time? Newsweek? Why weren't they there?

Because a national convention of the Henry George movement isn't worth writing up. Nobody cares what Georgists are doing or saying. Henry George has, indeed, long since been forgotten.

Viewing this as a public relations problem, one asks, how was Henry George able to turn on tens of thousands of people, and his followers have turned off tens of thousands?

You have inherited one of the greatest ideas in the world. You have the answer to the world's problems of hunger, unemployment, inflation, slums, poverty. You have the answer; the right answer. You can prove it. You can win the debate with any one who challenges it. And what good does it do?

Being Right Is Not Enough

Here lie the remains of William Jay
 Who died maintaining his right of way,
 He was right, dead right, as he sped along
 But he's just as dead as if he'd been wrong.

That's the story of the Henry George movement: just as dead as if he'd been wrong.

How Come?

When a national commentator calls Georgists "a bunch of single-tax nuts," the usual response is to criticize and condemn him, to believe he is a land speculator, an exploiter. Else how come he refuses to see such obvious truth?

But these men are telling it like they see it: a movement that has long since been forgotten; an insignificant backwater sect that is not newsworthy enough to send a reporter to cover their National Convention; a bunch of single-tax nuts. That's the picture Georgists project.

IT'S NO USE TRYING TO BLAME SOMEONE ELSE

A ship's captain picked up a couple of sailors on shore leave and let them ride with him on the captain's gig back to the ship. He had bent an elbow too many times, and the combination of the alcohol and the pitching of the gig caused him to throw up--all over his uniform. Once having heaved, he felt better, so when they got to the ship he said to the first mate, "Look how these two sailors threw up on my uniform. Get me to bed and put these men in the brig for two days."

Next morning he met the mate on deck. "What did you do with those two sailors?"

"I put them in the brig for five days."

"Five days? I said two days."

"Yes, sir, but it was worse than you thought. They not only threw up on your uniform; they also shit in your pants."

Why the Public Rejects the Henry George Program

No one else is responsible. If the ideas of Henry George are not being accepted there are no sailors we can accuse and have them thrown in the brig. It's our own lack of an intelligent public relations program. It's because we fail to follow the motto of Marshall Field's Department Store: "Give the lady what she wants."

Would You Like to Buy a Gas Guzzler?

One of my friends has a Lincoln Continental for sale, an elegant car, with air conditioning, AM/FM radio and cassette deck, steel radial tires, everything you could desire in a car. I asked, "Why are you selling it?"

"Because it's a gas guzzler."

Does he mention that in the ad? Certainly not. What he puts in the ad are the attractive features of the car.

The Henry George proposal has many attractive features. Everybody responds favorably to the idea of getting rid of income taxes, and to the proposal to get rid of sales taxes, and getting rid of taxes on business and labor. Everybody would like to get rid of taxes on telephone calls, and car tires, and theatre tickets. Every tax we talk about eliminating will produce a favorable response from our listeners.

So what do the Henry George people talk about? They pick out the one thing that turns people off, and they feature that: let's tax land.

If they were trying to sell a Lincoln Continental, the headline they would write would say: For Sale / Gas Guzzler.

Focus the Telescope on What People Want

The economic order can be pictured as a balance scale. One side is weighted down by taxes which bear on labor and the products of technology. The other side is weighted with taxes which bear on land. The scale is badly tilted by too many taxes bearing on labor.

What Georgists want to do is to take weights from the labor side of the scale, and put them in the pan on the other side where they will bear on land and thus bring the scale into balance.

But do they let people see them taking weights off one side of the scale --taking taxes off people and production? No. They have a telescope focussed on the land side of the scale, and they call people's attention to the process of adding taxes to land.

People don't want taxes added, but that's all Georgists let them see.

FIRST STEP: STOP THREATENING PEOPLE

There is a story of a funeral at which the director asked, "Would anyone like to come up and say a few words about the deceased?"

No one responded. After a couple of minutes a man in the back row started forward, saying, "If no one wants to say a few words about the deceased, I'd like to say a few words about the single tax."

This joke has been laid on the Henry George movement because this is the picture Georgists have projected of themselves --a bunch of "tax nuts" who are pushing taxes down people's throats with no consideration for the lady or what she wants.

Threatening to impose some new tax turns people off. They say, "We've got too many taxes already. What we want is to get rid of some of these damn taxes."

That's exactly what Henry George proposed: to get rid of taxes. He offered people what they want. And they rallied to support his program.

It's too bad Henry George's followers are not as good at public relations as he was. If they were, they would never use the phrase, "Land Value Taxation." George never used that phrase.

He used the term "single tax" and people knew he was saying, "Let's have no other tax." That's giving the lady what she wants. Get rid of taxes. Eliminate taxes, on everything--except land.

Land Value Taxation Does Not Lower Taxes

Georgists seem to forget that "land value taxation" is nothing but taxing land according to its (assessed) value, which is how land is taxed now. Putting more taxes on the land does not reduce taxes.

What does reduce taxes? Removing taxes from improvements, and from the products of industry and labor.

If Georgists want public support for their program of taxation, they must stop talking about "putting taxes on" and begin talking about "taking taxes off." They should talk about

"Taking taxes off" improvements,

"Taking taxes off" labor,

"Taking taxes off" people,

"Taking taxes off" income,

"Taking taxes off" wages,

"Taking taxes off" business and industry.

People would listen to them. They would support such a program.

Operation UnTax

When there was discussion of changing the name of LEAF, its president, William Filante suggested: Operation Un-Tax, which would make the acronym OUT. This was a great idea because it put the emphasis where people would respond: taking taxes off.

THE SECOND STEP: CHANGE THE PUBLIC IMAGE

Steven Cord, editor of Incentive Taxation, sends out a form letter asking people to renew their subscriptions. The salutation is, "Dear Fellow Land Taxer."

Nobody ~~likes~~ a taxer. The tax gatherer has been a hated character in every society.

And where do Georgists get the silly notion that if they put the word "land" in front of the word "taxer" people will love them? How can any intelligent person imagine that people are going to respond favorably to anyone who represents himself as a taxer--of whatever ilk--"land" taxer, "land value" taxer, "income" taxer, "sales" taxer, "IRS" taxer, or just plain holdup man?

People Want Taxes Reduced

How do Georgists present themselves? What do people see? In the Henry George News, March, 1979, they see a headline boasting: THE GEORGISTS DID IT. The story opens: "Pittsburgh, Queen City of the Incentive Tax, will almost double its tax rate on land for 1979..."

The average reader will come to the conclusion--the right conclusion, unfortunately--that Georgists are happy that Pittsburgh has increased its taxes.

Georgists Are Working to Increase Taxes

If he reads further in the story he will find the Georgists boasting that they are responsible for the increase in taxes. "The fact is that the only letter writers supporting the land tax were from us Georgists!" Later in the story, "Without us...there would have been no land tax increase..."

The message is clear to the average reader: Georgists want taxes increased.

That story could have read, "Georgists succeeded in stopping a proposed wage tax that would have cost the average wage-earner of Pittsburgh \$240 a year." Such an opening would have created goodwill by letting the reader know at once that the Georgists are on his side, fighting for tax reduction.

But before they can write a story like that, Georgists have to get on the side of the people, and be sincere about wanting tax reduction.

Abolishing Taxes Must Be More Than an Afterthought

In the same (March) issue of Henry George News, Christopher Mill writes about "...the necessity of...taxing without delay the full value of all unimproved land and natural resource ownership, while simultaneously abolishing all taxation on the productivity of labour and capital."

This is typical of the suicidal approach Georgists use. First, hit them in the face with an increase in taxes. Then--if you can get it said before they turn their back and leave--come through, almost as an afterthought, with a grudging proposal to abolish other taxes.

Any salesman would know enough to present first the attractive features of the proposal: "abolish taxation on the productivity of labour and capital." Then--after you have them agreeing with you--present the proposal to raise taxes on land and natural resources. ✓

How To Make Anti-Georgists

This past year a charming and loyal believer in Henry George, in a mistaken effort to apply his philosophy, refused to accept the tax reduction that was hers under Proposition 13. She sent the Tax Collector \$592 more than her tax bill.

This got a lot of publicity which gave people the idea that followers of Henry George are not interested in tax reduction; they even refuse it when it comes along.

If you should meet someone who read about her action, and you ask him to support the Henry George program, he will probably say, "I want my taxes reduced. Georgists want to pay more taxes. I'm an anti-Georgist."

Her action cost her \$592, and the publicity it produced was worth ten times that--to the opponents of the Georgist program.

But don't get the idea that this woman is alone in producing this effect. Every person who uses the phrase "land value taxation" is doing the same thing; making anti-Georgists out of nearly everyone who wants taxes reduced. ✓

THIRD STEP: JOIN THE TAX REVOLT

Puzzling about the failure of Georgists, Perry Prentice said, "The easiest thing in the world to sell should be tax reduction." When Georgists get their heads on straight and stop talking about "land value taxation," they will find Perry Prentice is right.

But as long as people see Georgists as crackpots who are trying to increase taxes, they will reject the program and fight against it. To get the program accepted, Georgists must stop acting and talking as though they are "enemies of the people."

They must create a new public image of themselves as friends of the overburdened taxpayer. People must begin to see them as crusaders against taxes. No one today (1979) sees Georgists as leaders of the Tax Revolt. Who do they see? Howard Jarvis.

Georgists like to kid themselves that Jarvis's success is a step in their direction. They are like the mouse who sat on the elephant's head and when the elephant turned left, he shouted "left," when the elephant turned right he shouted "right"--playing that he was steering the elephant.

Proposition 13 has nothing whatever to do with shifting taxes from earned incomes to unearned incomes. ✓

"Get the Tax Off Our Backs"

To change their public image, Georgists must change their attitude and change their behavior. If they want people to see them as working to reduce taxes, they must begin to work to reduce taxes.

To gain public acceptance, Georgists must join the Tax Revolt.

FOURTH STEP: TALK THEIR LANGUAGE

Part of the difficulty is that Georgists are not clear about education vs. public relations. To make Georgists, education is required. This is the function of the schools and the classes.

Public relations has an entirely different function. It is not to make Georgists out of people. It is to build goodwill toward Georgists and their program of reducing and eliminating taxes--on everything except natural resources.

The word "esoteric" means "understood by only a small group." "Land value taxation" is an esoteric phrase. Georgists know what they mean by it; others recognize the word "land" and think we are talking about the soil. That is what turned the farmers against George's program.

To build goodwill among non-Georgists (as a first step toward getting some of them to become Georgists), we must speak their language. We must offer them what they want in language they can understand.

TNR not L V T

If Georgists will talk about "Taxation of Natural Resources," their listeners will think of taxing silver and copper mines, oil lands, stands of timber, ports and harbors and waterways. The phrase does not immediately suggest taxing the soil. Furthermore, it is more accurate in that it includes valuable resources such as radio and TV channels, whereas these would never come to the mind of one who is thinking narrowly of land value taxation.

FIFTH STEP: OFFER PEOPLE THE GOOD SOCIETY

The specialist is not a narrow man; he is a broad man sharpened to a fine point. Henry George was a broad man sharpened to a fine point. As an economist, his point was taxation of land and natural resources. But this was not his end. This was his means. ✓

Because his followers got mixed up as to ends and means, they have been trying to sell people the means. They begin talking about taxation, and lose their audience before they even get started.

Single-Taxers vs. Georgists

Harry Pollard distinguishes between "single taxers" and "Georgists." The Georgists understand that The Good Society is a comprehensive philosophy of justice and freedom which restrains government from interfering with the productivity and cooperation that is natural to human beings.

An effective public relations program for the Henry George movement would offer people The Good Society. It would emphasize the goals of justice and freedom and peace, as Henry George did. People will respond as they responded to him.

It would go on to point out that the way to achieve The Good Society is by reducing and removing taxes -- and repealing the laws that make these taxes necessary. It would discuss getting rid of taxes on sales and purchases, on houses and buildings and other improvements, on business activity, inventories, exports and imports. It would advocate removing taxes on labor, on wages and salaries and other earned incomes, on construction, on cars and vans and trucks and recreational vehicles and boats -- all taxes except one, which it would not mention.

SIXTH STEP: LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE

As Dr. James Busey said about Proposition 13 in his brilliant article in Equal Rights (September, 1978) "...the abolition of some tax such as that on improvements would have tremendous appeal at the present time. Never mind about 'where the money is to come from.' Did California voters fuss about that?"

If the people we are trying to win over don't raise that question, common sense should let Georgists know that they should not raise it.

Taxation of Natural Resources

But if people do raise the question, Georgists have the perfect answer: Natural resources are the natural source of public revenue. We will charge people for the natural resources they use.

Earl Hanson stated it precisely in the resolution to the Utah Republican State Convention: "Economic rent is the rightful source of public revenue."

The federal government owns and controls all the radio and TV channels in the United States. For the licenses to use these channels the operators pay only a nominal fee. Suppose the government were to lease these out in open, competitive bidding. The rights to mine the seabed in those areas of the oceans controlled by the United States could also be leased out in open bidding.

The government could also collect as taxes the ground rent of mines and oil wells and forest land and all other land and natural resources.

Thus taxes will be charges levied for the use of the common domain.

THESE SIX STEPS CAN LEAD TO VICTORY

1. Stop threatening people by trying to impose on them a new tax which they fear because they don't understand it.
2. Change the public image of Georgists from people working to increase taxes, to people working to reduce and get rid of taxes.
3. Join the Tax Revolt.
4. Talk their language.
5. Offer people The Good Society. Focus attention on the goal.
6. Let sleeping dogs lie. Be clear in your own mind about the source of public revenue, but don't stir up unnecessary opposition.

As Georgists begin working for tax reduction instead of working for tax increases, they will find growing public support.

As they work to reduce and get rid of one tax after another, they will find themselves working together with people in the Tax Revolt. These people will begin to look on Georgists as allies, and will begin to ask questions. Many of them will appreciate the common sense of Henry George's analysis and will become Georgists themselves.

In time Georgists can become leaders of the Tax Revolt, and their program can become the blue print for the new world: The Good Society.