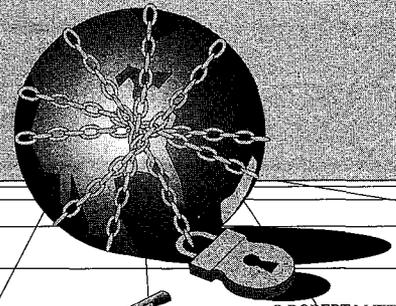


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BRIDGING THE LEFT AND RIGHT DIVIDE

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(The following speech was presented by Mike Curtis at the CGO conference banquet July 31, 2017 in O'Fallon, IL.)



It's been nearly 50 years since I became acquainted with George, and I have never been so haunted by his words. He says:

"Given a community with republican institutions in which one class rolls in wealth and the many seethe with discontent at a condition of things they know not how to remedy, and power must pass into the hands of demagogues who will seize and wield it for a time, only to be displaced by worse demagogues."

"The accidents of hereditary succession may sometimes place the wise and just in power — but in a corrupt democracy the tendency is always to give power to the worst. ... "A corrupt democratic government must finally corrupt the people, and when a people become corrupt there is no resurrection."

Well, the system wasn't and isn't totally corrupt, but it is fundamentally corrupt. The foundation of American Capitalism is private property in land. And that institution is reinforced with every shift to income and sales taxes.

True, since there is no free land, all taxes are paid out of what would otherwise go to the owners of land and other monopolies, but income and sales taxes levy no direct penalty for land speculation, which is the cause of unemployment, un-affordable housing — and the reason why wages tend to a minimum below which the value of land would fall as well.

We've intervened with the Minimum Wage, and by some estimates we are redistributing nearly a trillion dollars a year with an array of welfare programs at every level of,

because there aren't enough jobs and wages are so low. And even that isn't solving the problem.

Why wouldn't the coal miners, assembly line workers, and every other semi-skilled person vote for Trump? He actually promised something. They heard the Democrats and their concern for poor illegal immigrants and their kids who wanted to go to college, and the refugees who fled from the wars and chaos of the Middle East. And all the while they, as American citizens, were working at dead-end jobs or unemployed and our government did little or nothing to help them.

From the sound of the news, you'd think things were getting pretty good right now, but the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that eight million more people would have to be working just to get to the same percentage of adults employed as there was before the recession began. The \$7.25 Federal Minimum Wage buys less of the basics than it did in 1950. The median wage, increased by 10% while productivity increased by 100% during the last 40 years. And inflation takes more than the banks pay in interest. With every increase in productivity, wages & interest are becoming a smaller portion of what's produced, and there is never enough land sold that all the people who represent the increase in population, and those who were replaced by machines, can work and afford a decent living. The rich are getting richer and the poor are in greater need of assistance. Henry George, your time is now!

Bridging the Left and Right Divide — that's what Henry George did. That's what we do. I remember the last time we had a conference here in St. Louis. There were a good number of conservatives in attendance and someone asked: What on Earth are these right wing reactionaries doing at a Henry George Conference? And the answer is: We all agree on one thing: The rental value of land is a natural and just source of public revenue. That's it — But, it is the bridge between the Left and Right. And it's the one thing that all Liberals and Conservatives can agree on without compromise — as long as they understand the nature of land.

So, How do we advocate the same program to both these groups and still be in sync with what they believe? What can we say to the Bernie Sanders supporters that also resonates with the Ted Cruz followers, and doesn't alienate those who voted for Trump. How can we present the Single Tax and reach the 99%?

We often see other movements succeeding and wonder what we can learn from them. Can we replicate their success? How about Nelson Mandela? (Continued on page 14)

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Wasn't he one of the most successful leaders for social change? The fact that he was just slightly ahead of the people he was leading is considered a key element of his success.

Well, we are not even in the realm of the people we hope to lead. Most Americans believe that everyone should contribute a portion of their income or wealth to the support of the government. At one extreme they want the government to fund legislation, the infrastructure, police, courts, prisons and the military -- that's it. At the other extreme, they also want the government to fund education, retirement, healthcare, and a basic income guarantee. And they want the rich to pay progressively more to fund it.

I get no indication there is any political awareness that land is a natural opportunity; or that the increase and concentration of population increases its value. Everyone knows that the infrastructure is necessary to the increase in population; that it enables efficient cooperation; but with the exception of land-speculators and a few economists, there seems to be no general awareness that public investment in infrastructure and public service ultimately ends up in the value of land. Is it any wonder they don't want to recuperate those expenditures with a tax on the same.

Neither the Left nor the Right has consciously considered a moral basis of ownership — the dichotomy between the equal opportunity of land — and the exclusive ownership of wealth nor is there any distinction made between values produced by individuals or corporations, and those created by society as a whole. What we believe is a requisite to human progress. The right seems to think we already have an equal opportunity, and what is produced by public expenditures is pretty much enjoyed equally by everyone right now. At the same time the left fails to distinguish between an equal right to nature and freedom, and an obligation of other people to provide them with education or healthcare.

They talk as though the return to capital: buildings & machinery, is the exploitation of labor. And we say no no — land is the primary source of unwarranted income but, it isn't all that obvious. The blue collar worker isn't employed on an empty lot. He's working in a factory with millions or billions of dollars worth of capital — buildings, machinery, inventory.

People look at a car factory or a high-rise building in the middle of Manhattan. In both cases there may be a vacant lot of equal size sitting right next door. The vacant land isn't yielding any income. It's just sitting there. It's the car factory with all its machinery or the high-rise tower that's bringing in all the money. They see the capitalist — not the landowner, who's getting rich.

What we have to show is that the owner of a building alone would not tend to profit more than the lender of money or a corporate bond. We have to show that when buildings are added to land, there is a far greater income than the total of the land and the buildings separately could

have possibly produced. And that synergy results from the infrastructure and the mutual support of all the people and all the activities in the surrounding area. And, because you can't make any more land, all of the surplus is taken by its owners.

Our program creates jobs, increases the supply of housing, and provides needed revenue. When it becomes a national policy, it will raise wages and the return on savings and productive competitive investments. And there aren't any trade offs like permitting pollution and CO2 emissions or international trade restrictions.

We stand for equal opportunity and a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, just like all other Americans.

For the Right: We are not about re-distributing wealth from those who have it to those who don't. We are definitely about limiting government. We stand for private property in everything that is produced by individuals and corporations, and free enterprise. We want to abolish all confiscatory taxes and replace them with a charge that simply requires everyone to pay the free-market value of the benefits they receive from the government — no more.

We support the government's exclusive assignment of natural resources to individuals and corporations. For without it, there would be no way for people to keep securely what they produce: their crops, houses, and factories. But, with the title to land comes the obligation to pay to the government its rental value. In fact, we propose to run the government like a business. When governments function well, it increases productivity, and it increases the rental value of land. Therefore, we propose to collect that value for public purpose.

For the Left: The payment of rent satisfies all other people's equal rights to the same opportunities of nature. You can't make something out of nothing. The rent of land, which includes mineral-land, and the airwaves, is a source of revenue that measures exactly the value of the benefit that every landholder receives from the government. It represents a socially created synergy that comes from the conscious and sub-conscious cooperation of the community as a whole. It is enhanced by public investments in infrastructure, the preservation of order, and the administration of justice.

And from that portion of the socially created fund, which exceeds the cost of government, provision can be made for the sick, the aged, and the helpless. It is from this surplus that our nation can fund Social Security, national healthcare, education and medical research. It can even provide a basic income for all.

Now, whenever we have done a good job of explaining the Single Tax or even a shift from taxing buildings to the value of land in a single city, their first reaction is that little voice that says: "If it sounds too good to be true, it almost certainly is". I must have missed something because everybody knows there's no such thing (continued on p. 15)

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as a magic bullet or a really free lunch. "Do you mean to tell me that in all our universities they couldn't figure out that what you are telling me is true." "How we could raise wages by shifting our taxes sounds like a passage from Alice in Wonderland."

They have no idea that idle land is motivated by its increase in value, or that it causes a shortage of housing and jobs. They can't imagine a free-land opportunity like the homestead acts of the 19th century.

Keep in mind: This ain't no ordinary proposal. We are not only advocating the overthrow of our aristocracy, which includes the people who own the news papers, the air waves, and our politicians, but we are also saying to the majority of Americans, they must give up the one thing that has gotten them off the treadmill of life. We are promising that their wages and the return on their savings will increase, that there will be no taxes on income, sales, or their house itself; that they will be far better off with the Single Tax than they are right now.

And some people think we just might just be right, but few people have any confidence that we are. What they do know for sure is that because they own a house, no one can ever raise their rent. And the more time that has passed since they got a 30 year fixed rate mortgage, the more they can afford to go out for dinner, take a vacation, send their kids to college, and actually retire when they get to 65 or 70. And, if they can get their real-estate taxes reduced, they see that as a very big plus. While renters are paying 10 and 20% on bank loans and credit cards, the homeowner knows that he can borrow pretty much whatever money he wants for about 3 or 4%. Is it any wonder the masses don't come right out and join our chorus. Even among those who are sure we are right, how many think that the 1% will ever let The Single Tax become a reality?

Neither the logic of our arguments, nor the power of our personalities is enough. Look at the advocates that have preceded us. Were Churchill or Brandeis any less credible than the best among us now? Were Tolstoy or Darrow any less persuasive?

I used to think that a few Socratic questions would get people on board, but I found that they didn't want to admit that they couldn't defend even the most basic principles of their own Left or Right ideology. It isn't until you offer people a course in political economy that you realize the majority of people don't want to study social problems, they want to elect a Savior who will fix them.

Now, I'm sure that some ways of promoting our program are more effective than others, but I don't believe there are any real short cuts. Even when we get a city like Harrisburg to adopt a good measure of Land Value Taxation with a commensurate success in creating urban rejuvenation — jobs, housing, slum rehabilitation, and needed revenue,

there are always other policies in play and most people don't see that only the cities with LVT are the ones that turned around.

None-the-less, our proposal does bridge the left and the right divide. It makes clear just what is required to provide an "Equal Opportunity", which The Left and the Right both adamantly proclaim. It incorporates the principle of the Right: That those values produced by individuals and corporations belong to their producers. It incorporates that principle of the Left: That socially created values belong to the community and society as a whole. So, with the proper emphasis we offer a moral justification for each of these positions and we create the possibility of adding people from the Left and the Right to our movement.

I often think a political party could get our thesis into the public dialogue. The people who didn't vote in the last election could have elected anyone they wanted. But I keep hearing Henry George, as he says:

"Social reform is not to be secured by noise and shouting, by complaints and denunciations, by the forming of parties or the making of revolutions, but by the awaking of thought and the progress of ideas. . . ." "The great work of the present for every man and every organization of men who would improve social conditions, is the work of education. . . ."

Of course it is true: if we don't stop polluting the air and water, we will be a 3rd world country. If we don't stop global warming, the planet will become uninhabitable. If we don't prevent nuclear war, there won't be any other problems. But, what are the chances that the hungry will worry about pollution; the unemployed, about global warming, the homeless, about nuclear war? And yet, can anyone imagine a person who is assured an opportunity to work, own a house, and enjoy a decent life for themselves and their posterity, who wouldn't be concerned with pollution, global warming, and nuclear war? The Single Tax really is the only thing that can prevent them.

The feeling that we are not alone in our yearnings to get this program accepted may well be the most important aspect of our Annual Conference. We learn things, yes, and most importantly, we get re-energized with the feeling that we are a part of something that is far bigger than ourselves.

In the words of Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world — it's the only thing that ever has"

"The truth that I have tried to make clear," said George, "will not find easy acceptance. If that could be, it would have been accepted long ago. If that could be, it would never have been obscured. But it will find friends—those who will toil for it; suffer for it; if need be, die for it. This is the power of Truth." Will it at length prevail? Ultimately, yes. But in our own times, or in times of which any memory of us remains, who shall say?

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