How should we be campaigning?
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Veteran campaigner Fred Harrison offers useful food for thought in this piece which was originally circulated as private correspondence but is here published with his permission. In his view, a completely revised approach is required, if we seriously want to place fiscal reform on the political agenda (rather than just continuing to talk among ourselves).

The conventional language employed to promote the re-socialisation of rent (and the re-privatisation of wages) will continue to obstruct fiscal reform. The entrenched interests will not allow a "tax on land values". After all, it's "their land", anyway, isn't it?

The language itself - which Georgists condone, by their use - is an obstacle, for these reasons.

A public charge on the rent of land is not a TAX. To call it a tax is to implicitly concede

(a) the legitimacy of ownership rights to land and nature's resources; and
(b) the willingness to collect no more than a percentage (and an arbitrary percentage, at that) of land's income stream (meaning: the "owner" may legitimately retain the untaxed rent).

A completely revised approach is required, if we seriously want to place fiscal reform on the political agenda (rather than just continuing to talk among ourselves). Thus

* I do NOT want to "tax" land. I want people to pay personally, directly, for the benefits they receive. Part of those payments must be by way of a general charge on the imputed rent of land. But that charge is payment for the actual services accessed at each and every location. So the payment is determined NOT by government, but by the person who chooses to locate him/herself on that site. This means the payment is (i) voluntary, and (ii) proportionate to the benefits received. Those are not the characteristics of a "tax".

* I do not want to collect a percentage of the rents - I want people to agree to pay the full price for the services they personally receive, in the way that they do in the consumer, labour and capital markets.

By this linguistic shift, the moral basis of Georgist fiscal advocacy is transformed (and goes back to Progress and Poverty). And so is the political discourse: "No, we don't want to tax your garden - all we want is for you to honour your obligation to pay for the services you receive, rather than sponge off tenant families who pay the full rent of their location PLUS taxes on their wages which are used, in part, to subsidise the land owner."

Yes, there would be nothing left over to capitalise into a selling price in the land market (which is why I cannot advocate this fiscal reform on the basis of a percentage tax on the selling price of land).

Yes, the transition arrangements entail practical compromises, over the short term. But these need to be worked out, AFTER the principles and outcomes have been democratically agreed.

Yes, I know this is the "Single Tax" (meaning: with a few exceptions, we fund public services out of the value that is created by those services). So be it. But it's NOT a tax. It's inviting
middle-class home-owners (today's aristocracy, in political power terms) to honour their value system - pay for what you get, and get rid of taxes on the incomes you earn. This is the language of a political/moral prospectus that the voting majority - middle-class home-owners - would not be able to oppose, publicly. That's why the vested interests would have to try to shift the debate back onto the territory of the landowners' choosing: "this is a tax, really". That ploy would need to be resisted.

How can the Georgist paradigm be re-launched in this way, on a scale that has the chance of altering the terms of public debate? Dunno. I can only express my view - in the knowledge that "taxing the value of land" hasn't worked in the past, and I have no reason to believe that it will work in the future.

People need to be reminded: stop whinging about what's wrong with this world, stop talking about your entitlements, accept personal responsibility and claim what is yours by right. Translate those strictures into the principles of fiscal policy, and you arrive at the Georgist paradigm.

In Britain, power shifted back to the people one day last month (can't be certain which day, but within a few days of the first article in The Daily Telegraph exposing the expenses scam of our parliamentarians - a scam based, of course, on manipulating the capital gains to be made from real estate).

This shift - of power to the people - happened twice in the 20th century: circa 1906-10; and 1945.

* The aristocracy in the House of Lords (and the intervention of WWI) scuppered the will of the people, circa 1910-20.
* The socialists screwed the window of opportunity, circa 1945-1972, by mismanaging the terms of their bid to reform the land market and fiscal policy.

Now, thanks to the parliamentary expenses scandal, politicians know they have lost their grip on power - which is why all the political parties have suddenly started offering "constitutional reform". That's their ploy for recovering lost ground. Invoking the need for a new "tax" (as in The Observer article) plays straight into their hands. That's THEIR territory - taking the discourse back to their comfort zone! But might "we, the people" succeed in retaining the initiative, if we alter the terms of engagement? That's now a problem for the Brits....