

The Ethics of the Single Tax.

(SINGLE TAX LEAFLET, NO. 2.)

“Equity does not permit private property in land.”—HERBERT SPENCER (*Data of Ethics.*)

“The land of Ireland, the land of every country belongs to the people of that country.”—JOHN STUART MILL (*Principles of Political Economy.*)

“No individual, or class of individuals, can hold a right of private property in the land of a country; the people of that country in their public capacity are, and must always be, the real owners of the land of their country. Usufruct is the highest form of property that individuals can hold in land.”—BISHOP NULTY (*Pastoral Letter.*)

THE Single Tax on land values is simply a political agency for realising in practice, and in the most simple, direct and practicable manner, the proposition embodied in the foregoing citations; and the ethics of the Single Tax are involved in the ethics of the specific proposition that the people of New South Wales are equally entitled in justice and morality to the use and enjoyment of the land of New South Wales.

Sooner or later every hypothesis, principle, or social and industrial movement has to be subjected to the ethical test, and it matters very little ultimately what other plausibility or fascination it may possess or exert if it fails to justify itself on the score of morality and justice. “That alone is wise which is just; that alone is enduring which is right,” is less an intellectual assent dependant upon antecedent reasoning than the natural and felicitous expression of a fundamental conception of the mind, acknowledged to be true at all times and in every stage of social development.

Man has an indefeasible right to himself, an unchallengeable right, by the sanction of the Reason and the moral law to belong to himself and not another; and from this primordial right flow all those other natural and allied rights which constitute his patrimony as a man. Locke, in his essay on *Civil Government*, lays it down as an axiom that “Every man has a property in his own person; this nobody has a right to but himself. The labour of his body and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his.” But this involves necessarily, for the right to be an effective one, an equally indefeasible right to all which is essential to his living out his own life as a man. So also the American Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” So also Mr. Justice Windeyer in his evidence before the Strike Commission: “Justice demands that the natural right of a man to himself must be recognised. That right carries with it the natural right of every man to all that he produces.”

Now if it be conceded that man possesses an aboriginal and inprescriptible right to life, then the right to land follows as a logical necessity, and cannot be denied or questioned. Those who do deny or question it can only do so by denying the existence of any such natural right to life, by disavowing the existence of any absolute code of ethics or morals, by degrading Right and Wrong into contingent expedients to be justified or condemned by their consequences (thus depriving them of any independent ethical

character), and by attributing, in the last analysis, all the phenomena of life and consciousness and reason to the purely mechanical processes of Materialism.

Life can only be sustained by labour. Labour is the manifest law of nature—imposed universally upon the race, and the common necessity of labour carries with it equal rights of access to the land, without which labour cannot be exercised or life sustained. Land is the condition precedent, the field and material of labour, and is indispensable to existence. The proposition that the earth is the heritage of the race needs no proof. The conviction is forced upon our consciousness by the imperative necessities of the case, and the corollary that the land of any country is to its own people what the earth is to the whole race, should be equally self-evident. It would never have been disputed had it not been found possible by its tacit denial in civil law for one class to be able to live, either wholly or in part, without labour, by appropriating the fruit of other men's toil, in the shape of "rent," for permission to use the earth. But such appropriation, though it may have the sanction of a thousand legal enactments, is obviously a violation of the moral law which prohibits robbery. For if the land of a country may justly be owned as property by a section of a people (and nearly half the alienated lands of New South Wales are owned, legally, by less than 600 persons), and if the rental values of such land be appropriated by that section for its own exclusive use and enjoyment, then it follows that the appropriation by some men of the results of other men's labour, without any adequate equivalent being given in return, is right and just—in other words, it justifies the institution of chattel slavery, and sanctifies robbery, and the basis of the whole moral law, involved in inextricable contradiction, crumbles under our feet.

The Roman juriconsult defined justice as the constant and perpetual will to render to every man his right—that which belongs to him. Private property in land, the primary essential to life, carrying with it, as all true rights in property must, the right of exclusion, negatives the postulate that every man has an inalienable right to life, for absolute exclusion means death to the excluded. Access which is conditional upon the payment of rent to an individual places the landless class in the relation of tributaries to the landlord class, and denies the complementary postulate that every man has a natural and imprescriptible right to the "labour of his body and the work of his hands."

By taxing away the monopoly value of land, leaving untaxed all improvements resulting from individual enterprise and exertion, and applying the proceeds of such taxation for the common good of all the community we place all the people on an equality with respect to natural opportunities, prevent one man from depriving others of the fruits which justly belong to them, and recognise, in a practical and adaptive form, suited to a highly complex civilisation, the imperative mandates of justice and morality.

Help forward the Movement by joining the Single Tax League, 112 King Street, Sydney; the minimum subscription to which is 1s. per quarter.

Issued by the Committee of the Single Tax League of N.S.W.

JOHN KING, Secretary

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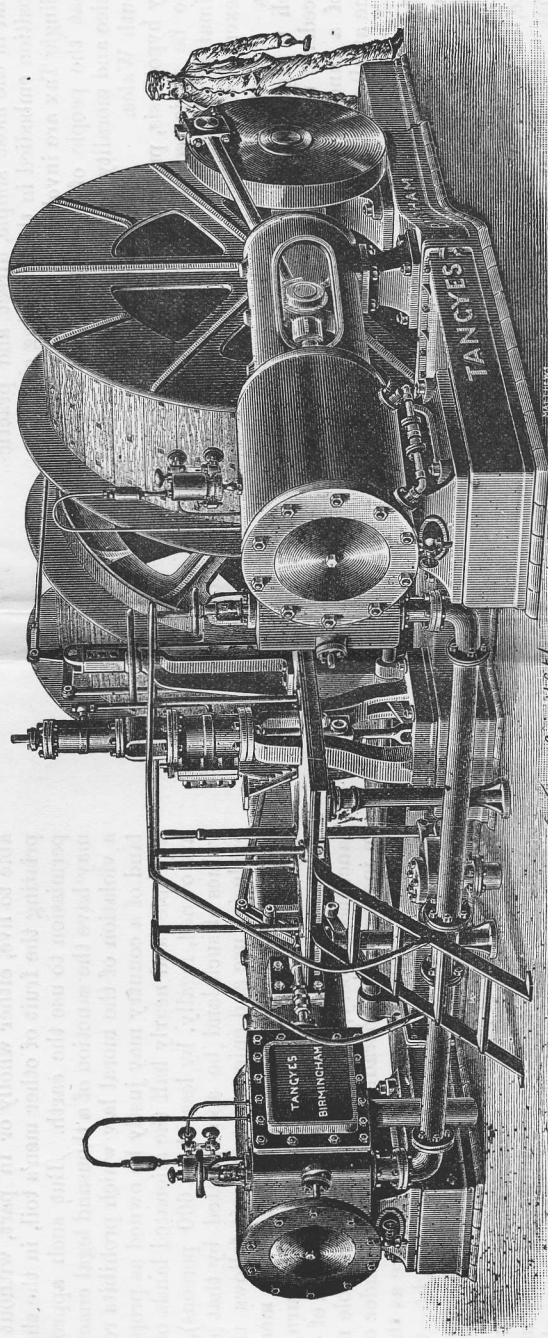
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