

Lunch and Lecture with Ralph Nader

Green presidential candidate Ralph Nader was in Philadelphia on Wednesday, March 8th for lunch with a number of land value taxation advocates at the famous White Dog Cafe on Sansom Street near the University of Pennsylvania. Attending the luncheon gathering, which raised \$1000 for Nader's presidential campaign chest, were Melanie Douty, Richard Biddle, Joan Sage, Bradley Keach and Herb Lubowitz, all members of the Philadelphia based Henry George School of Social Science, Jake Himmelstein, Treasurer of the Council of Georgist Organizations, Paul Johnson, former Board President of the Henry George School of Northern California, Rebecca Hicks, editor of Green Revolution, a publication of the School of Living, Anne Goeke, Green Party leader and activist from Lancaster, Ted Gwartney, Director of the New York City based Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, and Alanna Hartzok, United Nations NGO Representative, International Union for Land Value Taxation, who had worked with Green Party organizer Dan Kinney to make arrangements for the gathering.

Nader, already familiar with basic ideas of Henry George, requested and was given a brief update on the movement for land value taxation. He gratefully received an information packet containing Alan Dunning's book *Tax Shift* and other relevant material. When shown *The New Economics of Sustainable Development*, James Robertson's latest book (published by the European Commission) that makes the case for eco-tax reform, land value taxation and citizen dividends, he requested and received this as well.

Stating that there is a huge problem with media access for third party candidates, Nader realizes that a major obstacle to getting his campaign issues out to the broad public is that not enough time is given for depth consideration of issues. He was looking to us for sound bites to get our message across and was given several suggestions such as "tax waste, not work" and "tax bads, not goods." The Nader campaign will be approaching a dozen major civic groups to invite them to co-host a debate that the media would want to cover.

Very articulate about the problem of wealth maldistribution and how our democracy has been compromised and undermined by the concentration of economic power, Nader is clearly looking for powerful solutions to add to his arsenal of proposals for change. He very much likes the Tobin Tax, a proposed tax on global financial exchanges of 1% or less

which would raise billions of dollars from currency exchange and speculation. The impact that our discussion made on him was immediately apparent, as he proposed that there be public debates about the merits of land value taxation and the economics of Henry George in his talk to several hundred students and Green Party members in the Steinberg-Dietrich Hall at the Wharton School immediately following our lunch with him.

Nader is running a serious campaign for President under the Green Party ticket, intent on winning 5% of the vote, which would give several millions of dollars of funding for Green Party efforts. He is running "To escalate people's expectations of what is possible," stating that there are "huge capabilities being obstructed by the concentration of power."

When asked about taking votes away from Democrats, Nader responds with a question, "Are you satisfied with the Democrats?" He reports getting four Republican votes for every six Democratic votes in California for his previous run for President to show that there is definitely room for a third party force that can cross both major party lines of the "duopoly."

He says "they have you hostage if you do not particularly like the Democrats but accept them as the least bad choice. Most of you are taxpayers, consumers, workers and voters. Do you want more power for all those roles?"

Nader views our government as rule by the few, with the entrenchment of power and wealth defeating the advance of democracy. He states that Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt all warned of the excesses of monied interests.

"These are booming times according to GDP and executive stock, and news reports that things could not be better, but there is a huge disconnect between this and the majority of people," says Nader. "Anyone who controls the yardstick controls the agenda."

He points out that with the nine trillion dollar plus GDP there is massive consumer debt and the US has 20 percent child poverty, the highest of any Western nation. The majority of workers are making less today when adjusted for inflation than in 1979. More and more family members are trying to eek out a middle class living, spending 163 hours more a year working for less than 20 years ago. Fifty million Americans try to make ends meet on less than \$10 an hour. Bill Gates wealth equals that of 120 million Americans, while vast numbers of Americans are broke with no net wealth at all or deeply in debt. Public works, transportation, schools, drinking water quality and other infrastructure is crumbling while stadiums and arenas are being built for the enrichment of a few, like the Roman stadiums of past ages.

Here are other themes that Nader touched on:

- We now have a plutocracy - rule by the rich and powerful, where decisions are made by the few not the many.
- Industries use government funds - corporate socialism produces a corporate state.
- Government policy entrenches fossil fuel and nuclear, not clean technology.
- Corporations need to internalize their costs instead of turning our air and water into sewers.
- The military budget is twisted into a grotesque excess.
- The National Security state vendors take \$80 billion to defend prosperous countries. Funds for F20 fighters and B2 bombers are more than combined federal budgets allocated for social needs.

Nader asks of the American people, "Do you really want this?" He told the story of Granny D, an 85 year old from New Hampshire who walked 3100 miles across the country and asked at her news media gathering at the Arlington National Cemetery, "Did those brave men give up their lives for this?" referring to the sorry state of democracy in America.

"American people have lost their taste for self government," says Nader. He says we have been living in a state of increasing demoralization and that it is time for another populist progressive movement. We have to move beyond even participatory democracy to "initiatory democracy" where people are not simply following a movement, but they themselves become leaders who are putting forth and implementing ideas to create a better political and economic system.

Quoting the Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero who said that "Freedom is participation in power," Nader is calling for strengthening the roots of a democratic society. He says:

We can have democracy or concentration of wealth in the hands of the few - not both. The two major parties are like fossils, they have no grassroots. They raise huge amounts of money for electronic combat and no longer have storefronts or any real loyal supporters. It is one corporate party with two heads wearing different makeup.

Speaking to concerns of the students against sweatshops movement who helped organize his talk at the Wharton School, Nader spoke about the "corporatization of universities." He suggests that the University of Pennsylvania website list all corporate contributions so that graduate students working on projects will know if their professor is a corporate consultant.

Nader further urged that research universities should have annual meetings with their Boards of Trustees - a "meet your rulers day" with all the corporate

sponsors and trustees on an auditorium stage to answer questions from students for at least three hours every year.

He urged students to become part of statewide PIRGs (Public Interest Research Groups) noting that New York State has 100 staff and 14 offices. He told us that in 1976 when 26,000 Penn State students signed a petition for PIRG funding, the students lost two to one on the panel, which was two-thirds industrial and agribusiness representatives. "They knew that if they allowed PIRG the students would go after those companies," he said.

Nader is optimistic about the ripple affect of the student anti-sweatshop movement:

They have learned more about corporate abuse than they ever would in the classroom and realized their power as students to join together and use the libraries, newspapers, and campus media, all to create a movement without having to go begging a TV station for 30 seconds in the evening news.

Nader says that the big injustices in the world are not being dealt with in the college curricula or in the media, which is 90% entertainment and ads. "We are losing control of our children to hucksters and videos." He would like to see an end to the trivialization of the media and urges citizens to "take control of what we own as a people" meaning the airwaves and broadcast bands.

He called taxation a "nightmare of inequity and inefficiency" stating that:

We need a big debate on different kinds of taxation; to talk about how corporations are freeloading on public services and getting tax breaks while taxes are falling on workers and smaller businesses. We need to open a debate about land taxation and Henry George, to tax bad things not good things, and not tax people who go to work everyday.

Addressing growing concerns about the World Trade Organization (WTO) and IMF and World Bank policies, he advocates trade agreements which do not impinge on consumer, labor and environmental issues or make them vulnerable to trade restrictions, stating that we need to pull up not pull down standards for trade agreements. He explains the problem with the WTO by bringing the issues close to home, asking

What if the state of Georgia had no minimum wage, no environmental or workers safety laws, and so could produce cheaper goods and thus control the market, which is what the WTO wants worldwide. Global markets without global democracy is a big problem.

Ralph Nader intends to ignite a small progressive movement and turn it into a major political force. He is drawing the line in the sand for us. Dare we step across?