

APPENDIX TO CHAPTER VI.

THE SINGLE TAX FIFTY YEARS AGO.

WHILE searching for the statistical information required in this chapter, my attention was directed to a pamphlet by Herbert Spencer, entitled "The Man *versus* The State," which, it was confidently asserted, "finally disposed of the notion of Free Railways and the Single Tax by exposing their utter impossibility." Having read the pamphlet, and found therein *not one word* about either, but a great deal of very valuable, instructive, and interesting matter entirely corroborative of my "indictment against the Law," but embracing a much wider horizon than is contemplated by my own feeble effort, and exhibiting the firmer grasp of a master mind in the brilliant electric touch which exposes a fallacy or illuminates a truth with equal elegance and power, I can heartily recommend the pamphlet to such of my readers as may desire to gain a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of a subject of so much importance.

Mr. Spencer gives many shrewd hints that should be invaluable to the "collective wisdom" of New South Wales at present engaged in the task of making laws for our governance—a task for which so many of our legislators are so eminently disqualified. They will keenly appreciate his reference to the "practical"

politician, of whom he says:—"The theory on which he daily proceeds is that the change caused by his measure will stop where he intends it to stop. He contemplates intently the things his act will achieve, but thinks little of the remoter issues of the movement his act sets up, and still less of its collateral issues." (p. 23.) The whole description exposes so many of the failings of our own legislation that every "practical" politician should study it. He cannot read it without some advantage to himself, and it may be that its perusal will have the effect of inducing him to forego some of his contemplated attempts at law-making.

In his chapter on "The Sins of Legislators," Mr. Spencer gives a number of examples of "the mischiefs wrought by uninstructed law-making," and reminds us that "uninstructed legislators have in past times continually increased human suffering in their endeavours to mitigate it; and . . . if these evils, shown to be legislatively intensified or produced, be multiplied by ten or more, a conception will be formed of the aggregate evils caused by law-making, unguided by social science." Referring to the *many thousands* of Acts of Parliament that have been repealed, he says, "unquestionably, in multitudinous cases, repeals come because the Acts had proved injurious. We talk glibly of such changes—we think of cancelled legislation with indifference. We forget that before laws are abolished they have

generally been inflicting evils, some for a few years, some for tens of years, some for centuries Seeing, then, that bad legislation means injury to men's lives, judge what must be the total amount of mental distress, physical pain, and raised mortality, which these thousands of repealed Acts of Parliament represent!" (p. 50). He speaks of "the truth that law-making, unguided by adequate knowledge, brings immense evils" (51), and after exposing some of the blundering Acts that have added greatly to the sufferings of the London poor, he asks, "Where then lies the blame for the miseries of the East-end? Against whom should be raised 'the bitter cry of outcast London?'" (55). Further on he tells of the difficulties encountered by the Registrar-General in dealing with the census returns for 1881, where he had to take into account "39,000 administrative areas of twenty-two different kinds which overlap one another"—a telling example of bad legislation made actually visible by "the vast multitude of different areas" and "the bewildering complexity of their boundaries."

These quotations, though sufficient only to indicate what a mine of instruction Mr. Spencer's pamphlet contains, will serve well enough to show how pointedly he confirms my own contention that, since we make the laws that make the evils we endure, we are responsible for them, and have the power to remove them.

But Mr. Spencer has given me other and much more powerful support and confirmation, where I had not looked for such help or thought it possible. His support is all the more powerful, and all the more valuable in that it is involuntary, because, writing in 1884, and for quite another purpose alluding to his uncle's success in improving the condition of his parish, he could scarcely have been aware that he was confirming our high anticipations of the value of the Single Tax.

In his chapter on "The Coming Slavery," Mr. Spencer relates the following anecdote:—

A late uncle of mine, The Rev. Thomas Spencer, for some twenty years incumbent of Hinton Charterhouse, near Bath, no sooner entered on his parish duties, than he proved himself anxious for the welfare of the poor by establishing a school, a library, a clothing club, and land allotments, besides building some model cottages. Moreover, up to 1833, he was a pauper's friend—always for the pauper against the overseer. There presently came, however, the debates on the Poor Law, which impressed him with the evils of the system then in force. Though an ardent philanthropist, he was not a timid sentimentalist. The result was that, immediately the new Poor Law was passed, he proceeded to carry out its provisions in his parish. Almost universal opposition was encountered by him; not the poor only being his opponents, but even the farmers on whom came the burden of heavy poor rates. For, strange to say, their interests had become apparently identified with the maintenance of this system which taxed them so largely.

The explanation is that there had grown up the practice of paying out of the rates, a part of the wages of each farm servant—"make wages," as the sum was called. And though the farmers contributed most of the fund from which "make wages" were paid, yet, since all other ratepayers contributed, the farmers seemed to gain by the arrangement. My uncle, however, not easily deterred, faced all this opposition, and enforced the Law. The result was that in two years the rates were reduced from £700 a year to £200 a year; while the condition of the parish was greatly improved. "Those who had hitherto loitered at the corners of the streets, or at the doors of the beer shops, had something else to do, and one after another, they obtained employment;" so that out of a population of 800, only 15 had to be sent as incapable paupers to the Bath Union (when that was formed), in place of the 100 who received out-door relief a short time before.

Mr. Spencer gives no particulars about the "New Poor Law" he mentions, nor does he give the slightest intimation that he was acquainted with its purport; though, knowing the evils of the previous system, and the beneficial results which followed the enforcement of this "New Poor Law"—results which could not possibly have been produced by a *bad law*, an observer so keen can scarcely have failed to take note of a matter of so great importance.

After reading the above anecdote, I had the curiosity to look through the volumes of English Statutes for 1833-6 in the Free Public Library in Sydney, to find out what special provisions the "New

Poor Law" contained that would account for its good results. Among the measures passed in the years "6 and 7 William IV.," page 1139, Chapter 96, I found "an Act to regulate Parochial Assessments in England and Wales," by which it was enacted that poor rates should be levied only upon *the net annual value* of the property assessed.

Judge, then, of my surprise and my gratitude to Mr. Spencer when I found that he had thus furnished me with—what I had not imagined to be at all possible—an example of "The Single Tax" in actual operation! To have known the existence of the Act itself would have been of great value; but to have the working of the Act described and its beneficial results dilated upon, and by an authority perfectly disinterested and unimpeachable, was a piece of good fortune as inestimable as it was unexpected.

Mr. Spencer probably did not know, or did not remember the exact conditions of this long-defunct statute, and Mr. Henry George is probably not aware that his theory has ever been even partially reduced to practice. But here it is, and mark how grandly superior its work! It failed not of what it was designed to accomplish, and developed no unexpected evils after the manner of other statutes, and it may be cited as the one solitary Act of Parliament to which such commendation can be given. It not only did the work expected of it—to provide a fund for the relief of the poor—but it had other and more beneficial effects.

It greatly improved the condition of the parish and literally banished poverty, leaving only 15 *incapable* paupers, where before there had been 100 "on the parish;" and it reduced the amount levied on the parish from £700 to £200 a year. In two years, what a marvellous change! By simply abolishing a bad system and enforcing a good one, the entire aspect of the parish is "greatly improved," and the burden of taxation upon the ratepayers made lighter by no less than five-sevenths! and still more gratifying. 85 per cent. of the paupers, comprising all but the incapables, were enabled to earn their own living.

How great, then, would be the national benefit, if, instead of applying such a law in a single parish, or to a single phase of national life, it could be made to include the whole taxation assessment of the country, as it is proposed to make the Single Tax include it! Should it ever be enforced here and the same percentage of improvement should follow, as in the case of the parish of Hinton Charterhouse, our taxation would fall from nine millions to two and a half millions, all the unemployed and all the pot-house loafers would be set to work, only the "incapable paupers" would be idle, and the condition of the whole country would be greatly improved.

Is not this exactly what has been prophesied of the working of the Single Tax? Yet we are not now compelled to rely solely on our anticipations, for we have an authority to appeal to, an example to quote,

to strengthen our forecast with actual invincible facts that can neither be denied nor explained away. So many objections have been raised on the ground of its supposed impracticability, that it is scarcely possible to over-rate the value of this example of the practical working and beneficial results of the Single Tax. It silences at once the objection that it is a mere theory, and proves that it has a sound and solid basis, and that it is supported by something more substantial and practical than "the visionary notions of a mere enthusiast."
