

On the Spot: Our Cities

President Roosevelt, the members of his National Resources Committee and the members of its Urbanism Committee, deserve the gratitude of the nation for their epoch-making study, "Our Cities: Their Role in the National Economy." For the first time a government agency has faced squarely the ominous facts of poverty and plenty in the city, the ever-present juxtaposition of slum and mansion, and for the first time a government agency has the courage to show the country the root of the problem and suggest the fundamental remedy.

In an enumeration of "emerging problems," the National Resources Committee lists in all its aspects the social problem of the urban areas and shows how these arise from the central problem of poverty. But more than that, it considers the urban problem within the vast dimensions of boom and depression on a national scale and declares with scholarly candor:

"The unparalleled growth of cities has been accompanied by uncontrolled subdivision and speculative practices and by the most fantastic real estate booms which have meant dramatic profits to a few, but tragic personal losses to others and burdensome delinquent properties to the community; and this on a scale affecting the economic situation of the entire Nation.

"The history of the recent industrial depression cannot be written without an account of the role of unsound financing and of speculation in real estate which at times became mere gambling.

"We are now faced with the problem of arriving at a rational urban land policy which, while affording private owners and developers adequate opportunity for wise and profitable land uses, will curb the forms of speculation that prove calamitous to the investing and tax-paying public."

To the nation, the trenchant declarations of this report, based upon the most careful and thorough study of the facts, will come as a bombshell.

To Georgists these will be nothing new. For they are the same assertions which the followers of Henry George have been making since the noted economist discovered in embryo the dangerous social and economic trends which have now been measured and verified by the Federal committee.

Having discovered the problem, what had the committee to say of the remedy? It would have been easy for it to have dismissed this aspect of its study by pointing out that the Federal government is powerless to correct the condition. To its everlasting credit, it did nothing of the sort. Its Urbanism Committee, in a series of recommendations, included this important one:

"State and local authorities should consider the reduction of the rate of taxation on buildings and the corresponding increase of such rates on land, in order to lower the tax burden on home owners and the occupants of low-rent houses, and to stimulate rehabilitation of blighted areas and slums."

Nor did the Urbanism Committee stop there. It also recommended:

Headed Land Study

WASHINGTON, D. C.—Harold S. Buttenheim, editor of *The American City* and president of the Tax Policy League, a noted authority on municipal finance, was head of study in the preparation of a report on urban land policies for the Urbanism Committee of the National Resources Committee. L. Segoe is director of the committee.

Collaborators of Mr. Buttenheim included Wayne D. Heydecker, Ira S. Robbins, Herbert S. Swan and Dr. Mabel L. Walker, executive secretary of the Tax Policy League. George A. Blair, Oscar Fisher, William H. Ludlow and Marion E. Lewis served as assistants. Their work is contained in the Urbanism Committee's report, "Our Cities: Their Role in the National Economy."



"A thorough study should be made of the problem of special district assessments and the place of such assessments in the fiscal policy of the city. A study should also be made of the increment tax on real estate in lieu of special assessments, to see whether such a tax would make possible the financing of public improvements more nearly through tax revenue derived from the increased values which these improvements create, and whether such a tax would aid in combatting speculation in land."

Noting that these recommendations require action by authorities other than the National Government, the National Resources Committee declared: "Their consideration is commended to the various State and local authorities vested with power to deal adequately with the serious problems presented."

President Roosevelt, in making the report public, pointed out that this was the first national study of urbanism undertaken in the United States. It is significant that the first time a competent study should be made of urban problems, the findings should confirm the observations of that economist and social philosopher whose amazing insight into the operations and the consequences of complex economic and social forces enabled him to overcome the lack of information and knowledge which obscured the meaning of those problems even from some of the wisest men of his day. It is doubly significant in view of the patronizing neglect with which it was the fashion of many economists, sociologists and social philosophers to view Georgist social theory until fairly recent years.

The report analyzes the trends of urban population, mushroom growth, land policies, urban housing and slums, urban planning, the problems of public health, crime and crime prevention, education and recreation, overlapping Governmental organizations, the place of the city in the transportation and power structure and organization, and the possibili-

ties of sounder Federal-State-local governmental interrelationships. It points out ways of dealing with many emerging and critical trends of urban life. Especially noteworthy is the National Resources Committee's introduction, an excellent and colorful statement of the problem of wealth and want on farm and in the city.

Without endorsing all that is said in the report—indeed, reserving the right to take definite exception to some sections—this, however, needs

to be said: It shows intelligence and courage of a higher order in facing the facts of poverty, expropriation from economic opportunities and forces, and economic concentration, which make the future of the urban community so drab, so black.

Its signature, including the names of Secretary Ickes, five other departmental heads, and those of a long list of experts in various fields of the social sciences, suggest the extent to which the economic theories and the social philosophy of Henry George

have influenced the thinking of the more intelligent of America's intellectual leaders since the world depression began in 1929. The student of fundamental economics will find the facts with which the report is crammed of particular value. He may obtain a copy for fifty cents from the United States Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.

—W. L.

See: "Teachers Manual (P. & P.)," L. 5, Q. 20, Q. 23, Q. 24, Q. 26, L. 6, Q. 4, Q. 5.