

Practical Politics

From *Protection and Free Trade*
by Henry George

Are you seeking social justice? Really? How? Are you committed or just involved? As they say, in a breakfast of bacon and eggs, the chicken is involved but the pig is committed. What is stopping you? Do you need a strategy? Read on and I promise you shall find both the motivation and the strategy to take your next step for the great cause. - Ed.

Free trade, narrowed to a mere fiscal reform, can only appeal to the lower and weaker motives — to motives that are inadequate to move men in masses. Take the current free-trade literature. Its aim is to show the impolicy of protection rather than its injustice; its appeal is to the pocket, not to the sympathies. Yet to begin and maintain great popular movements it is the moral sense rather than the intellect that must be appealed to, sympathy rather than self-interest. For however it may be with any individual, the sense of justice among the masses is keener and truer than intellectual perception, and unless a question can assume the form of right and wrong, it cannot provoke general discussion and excite the many to action. And while material gain or loss impresses us less vividly the greater the number of those we share it with, the power of sympathy increases as it spreads from man to man — becomes cumulative and contagious.

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But he who follows the principle of free trade to its logical conclusion can strike at the very root of protection; can answer every question and meet every objection, and appeal to the surest of instincts and strongest of motives. He will see in free trade not a mere fiscal reform, but a movement which has for its aim nothing less than the abolition of poverty, and of the vice and crime and degradation that flow from it, by

the restoration to the disinherited of their natural rights and the establishment of society upon the basis of justice. He will catch the inspiration of a cause great enough to live for and to die for, and be moved by an enthusiasm that he can evoke in others.

It is true that to advocate free trade in its fullness would excite the opposition of interests far stronger than those concerned in maintaining protective tariffs. But on the other hand it would bring to the standard of free trade forces without which it cannot succeed. And what those who would arouse thought have to fear is not so much opposition as indifference. Without opposition that attention cannot be excited, that energy evoked, that are necessary to overcome the inertia that is the strongest bulwark of existing abuses. A party can no more be rallied on a question that no one disputes than steam can be raised to working pressure in an open vessel.

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The working class have been awakening to the fact that there is some deep wrong in the constitution of society, although they may not see clearly what that wrong is; they have been gradually coming to feel that to emancipate labor radical measures are needed, although they may not know what those measures are.

And scattered through the great body thus beginning to stir and grope are a rapidly increasing number of men who do know what this primary wrong is — men who see that in the recognition of the equal right of all to the element necessary to life and labor is the hope, and the only hope, of curing social injustice. It is to men of this kind that I would particularly speak. They are the leaven which has in it power to leaven the whole lump.

To abolish private property in land is an undertaking so great that it may at first seem impracticable.

But this seeming impracticability consists merely in the fact that the public mind is not yet sufficiently awakened to the justice and necessity of this great change. To bring it about is simply a work of arousing thought. How men vote is something we need not much concern ourselves with. The important thing is how they think.

Now the chief agency in promoting thought is discussion. And to secure the most general and most effective discussion of a principle it must be embodied in concrete form and presented in practical politics, so that men, being

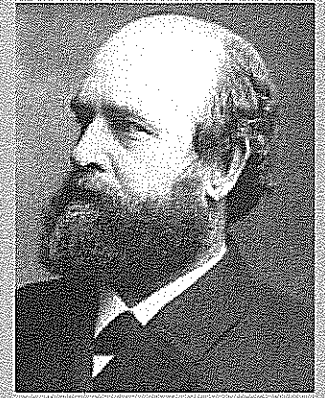
called to vote on it, shall be forced to think and talk about it. The advocates of a great principle should know no thought of compromise. They should proclaim it in its fullness, and point to its complete attainment as their goal. But the zeal of the propagandist needs to be supplemented by the skill of the politician. While the one need not fear to arouse opposition, the other should seek to minimize resistance. The political art, like the military art, consists in massing the greatest force against the point of least resistance; and to bring a principle most quickly and effectively into practical politics, the measure which presents it should be so moderate as (while involving the principle) to secure the largest support and excite the least resistance. For whether the first step be long or short is of little consequence. When a start is once made in a right direction, progress is a mere matter of keeping on.

It is in this way that great questions always enter the phase of political action. Important political battles begin with affairs of outposts, in themselves of little moment, and are generally decided upon issue joined not on the main question, but on some minor or collateral question. Thus the slavery question in the United States came into practical politics upon the issue of the extension of slavery to new territory, and was decisively settled upon the issue of secession. Regarded as an end, the abolitionist might well have looked with contempt on the proposals of the Republicans, but these proposals were the means of bringing to realization what the abolitionists would in vain have sought to accomplish directly.

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To secure equal rights to land there is in this stage of civilization but one way. Such measures as peasant proprietary, or "land limitation," or the reservation to actual settlers of what is left of the public domain, do not tend toward it; they lead away from it. They can affect only a comparatively unimportant class, and that temporarily, while their outcome is not to weaken landownership but rather to strengthen it, by interesting a larger number in its maintenance. The only way to abolish private property in land is by the way of taxation. That way is clear and straightforward. It consists simply in abolishing, one after another, all imposts that are in their nature really taxes, and resorting for public revenues to economic rent, or ground value. To the full freeing of land, and the complete emancipation of labor, it is, of course, necessary that the whole of this value should be taken for the common benefit; but that will inevitably follow the decision to collect from this source the revenues now needed, or even any

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considerable part of them, just as the entrance of a victorious army into a city follows the route of the army that defended it.

Thus it is that when men take up the principle of freedom they are led on and on, and that the hearty advocacy of freedom to trade becomes at length the advocacy of freedom to labor. Once the tariff question becomes a national issue, and in the struggle against protection, free traders will be forced to attack indirect taxation; while before the abolition of indirect taxation is reached, the incidence of taxation and the nature and effect of private property in land will have been so well discussed that the rest will be but a matter of time.

Property in land is as indefensible as property in man. It is so absurdly impolitic, so outrageously unjust, so flagrantly subversive of the true right of property, that it can only be instituted by force and maintained by confounding in the popular mind the distinction between property in land and property in things that are the result of labor. Once that distinction is made clear — and a thorough discussion of the tariff question must now make it clear — private property in land is doomed.

For it is true, as was declared by the first National Assembly of France, that "ignorance, neglect, or contempt of human rights are the sole causes of public misfortunes and corruptions of government."

Here is the conclusion of the whole matter: That we should do unto others as we would have them do to us — that we should respect the rights of others as scrupulously as we would have our own rights respected, is not a mere counsel of perfection to individuals, but it is the law to which we must conform social institutions and national policy if we would secure the blessings of abundance and peace.

This is Chapter 22 of F. C. R. Douglas's 1929 abridged version of *Protection and Free Trade*. If you liked this, I recommend the original version, chapter 29. Its funnier and full of examples and deeper insights. Search for it on the Internet.