

A Short Easy Lesson In Language

(Dr. T. J. Kelly in *Union Labor Advocate* of
Sioux City, Iowa.)

FOR several years I have enjoyed the personal friendship of the author of the following letter. He has invited me to his town to speak, and made all arrangements at his own expense, when other towns were declaring I could not appear for an address among them. He did it as a visible demonstration of his belief in the right and wisdom of freedom of discussion. I have heard his neighbors—to whom he has ministered as a physician for many years—speak of him in confidence and affection. I have come to believe in his absolute sincerity and his intense earnestness of conviction. He has often told me frankly just what he tells to me and you in this letter. But that fact has in no way marred our friendship.—Editor *Union Labor Advocate*.

My Dear Mr. Short:

Though far from optimistic as to results, I am tempted to write to you one more letter—this time upon a subject that appears to lie near your heart, the admitted incapacity of progressives to work together. But before going into the subject, it is pertinent to remark by way of introduction, that no two men, to say nothing of thousands of them, can work in harmony upon any problem unless they speak the same language, or unless each at least understands the language employed by the other. If I, employing some combination of words, intend to convey a certain idea, while you, hearing or reading my words, invest them with a meaning other than that intended, there is an end of team work for us two until we can agree to use those words in the same sense. I am certain you will agree with me upon this point if upon no other. Keeping this truth in mind, I believe it will not be difficult, from the columns of the *Advocate* itself, to discover a sufficient reason for the want of unity of effort you deplore.

In your current issue, May 7, you recur to your editorial of April 2 in which you printed an excerpt from each of four letters you had received, and drew the inference that the progressives writing them would each go his own way, unable, or unwilling to work with the others. Now, if the first excerpt quoted was not from a letter I had written you it was from one worded exactly as was mine. The probability of such coincidence being so remote as to be negligible, I am forced to the conclusion that I am one of those "progressives" alluded to. But if I have not been able to make clear to you the fact that I am not a "progressive," that I hold the progressive movement to be wholly futile, and believe that if it should succeed in winning all the offices in the country the result would be calamitous, it is because I employ language in one sense and you invest it with a wholly different meaning. I decline to assist in your campaign against Boies, and wrote you, in

response to your letter soliciting my support that in my estimation it would make not the slightest difference which should be nominated. When you wrote me asking that I help to organize the campaign for LaFollette, I wrote you that I should not even vote for him and that, in my estimation his election would prove a national calamity, or words to that effect. It is, of course, admitted that you have a perfect right to disagree with me upon both these matters, but if we cannot agree as to my attitude toward "progressivism" after I have stated it in such language, how could we hope to work together in any movement? I cannot conceive of language that would make my attitude clearer, yet you calmly classify me as a progressive. This conception of the function of language is entirely beyond my comprehension.

These incidents are, of course, unimportant except as illustrating the point I am trying to make; that it is impossible to get progressives to work together because they seem unwilling to attach to language its ordinary significance when discussing political or economic questions. But the following is important not only from this consideration, but as in itself perverse of the laws of thought:

In two issues of the *Advocate*, that of February 26 and the one immediately following or preceding it, you make use of the following language: "*The Purpose and Policy of the paper . . . is to furnish information to all those who sincerely believe that This Country Belongs to All of Us, etc.*" Evidently, then, *you* believe that this country belongs to all of us. Now, if you were teaching a class of Germans, or French, or Chinese, the English language, and should undertake to explain to them what the expression, "This article (whatever it might be) belongs to Jones," means in our language, I suspect you could find no alternative to the explanation that it signifies that the thing is his as against the claim of any or every other person.

"This is A's hat," or "This is A's house," "This is A's property" are expressions to which attach no ambiguity in the language of every day life amongst us, and the expression, "This hat, or this house, or this property, belongs to A" has exactly the same meaning. And if ten men were discussing any article of property and, on being asked whose it was should answer, "This property belongs to all of us," any English speaking person would know at once that they were jointly entitled to that property for their own exclusive use, or to the proceeds of its hire; and any court in the land would protect them in this right. Do you really believe that this country "belongs to all of us" in any such sense? If not, in what sense does it belong to us? What does this expression mean? Have men the right to employ a word or an expression in discussing economic matters in utter disregard of its accepted meaning in all other realms of thought? Can they work in harmony when they do so?

My understanding is that "this country," at any rate every foot of it that is worth having, is the recognized,

private property of some man or corporation—that it is the property of those who own it, many of them being not even residents of this country. Do you contend that the 60,000 acres of Illinois land to which the Scullys of England hold title, “belongs to all of us?”

That part of Woodbury county known as its courtyard belongs to the people of that county, to all of them. Certain parks in Sioux City belong to the people of that city, to all of them. But how did these parcels of land become their property? Why, as every school boy knows, they were bought by those people, or received by them as gifts from philanthropic individuals. Just why should “the people of this country” buy the land of this country if it now belongs to them? What does the phrase, “this Country,” signify? (I mean outside of “progressive” literature). Does it not designate the United States? And would not any school boy in the world define the United States as that portion of the earth bounded by the two oceans, the gulf, Canada and Mexico? Certain improvements have been added to parts of it, but if they should all be destroyed, this country would still be here, all of it. And I can scarcely believe that even a progressive would contend that the house Smith builds, or the hat he buys is, or should be the property of all of us. These statements being facts that no one can dispute, just what do you mean when you propose to devote your paper to the championship of those who “believe this country belongs to all of us?”

If you had said that your publication would champion the claim of those who believe this country should belong to all of us, the expression would have had some meaning; men might agree with this contention or they might oppose it, but they could unite in an effort that had some explicable purpose. But it would be interesting to learn just what activities the individual readers of the *Advocate* would expect you to undertake, and how carry them out in the accomplishment of your declared purpose. Does not such obviously inaccurate language necessarily lead to the very want of unity you deplore? Men have no right to juggle with language; they must either employ it in its accepted sense or explain how and why they depart from the common usage.

One has a right to infer that you account the ownership of “this country” as of fundamental importance; for men do not dedicate their lives to what they account unimportant. Evidently, then, you believe that this country *should* belong to all of us, but had not noticed the somewhat minor detail *that it does not*. If you do not believe that this country ought to be the actual property of all of us, I can see no possible object you could have had in writing that statement of purpose, for I do not believe you deliberately attempted to confuse your readers. Now, I am far from being a rich man, but I am going to make you an offer in good faith, and if you will meet the conditions, shall carry it out. If you can demonstrate any

possible method of realizing in actuality what the above demonstrates to exist in your mind as a nebulous fancy, of bringing about such condition that this country will, in fact, belong to all of us, except by the collection of the rent of all land by the community and using it in defraying the expenses of our common activity, which is summed up in the term government; that is, except by what is ordinarily known as *Single Tax*, I shall hold myself bound to contribute, through you, \$100.00 to the progressive cause, to be used by the officers of that organization as they see fit to use it.

Land Not Rightfully Property

WHAT more preposterous than the treatment of land as individual property? In every essential land differs from those things which being the product of human labor are rightfully property. It is the creation of God; they are produced by man. It is fixed in quantity; they may be increased illimitably. It exists, though generations come and go; they in a little while decay and pass again into the elements. What more preposterous than that one tenant for a day of this rolling sphere should collect rent for it from his co-tenants, or sell to them for a price what was here ages before him and will be here ages after him? What more preposterous than that we, living in New York City in this year, 1883, should be working for a lot of landlords who get the authority to live on our labor from some English king, dead and gone these centuries? What more preposterous than that we, the present population of the United States, should presume to grant to our own people or to foreign capitalists the right to strip of their earnings American citizens of the next generation? What more utterly preposterous than these titles to land? Although the whole people of the earth in one generation were to unite, they could no more sell title to land against the next generation than they could sell that generation. It is a self-evident truth, as Thomas Jefferson said, that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living.

Nor can any defense of private property in land be made on the ground of expediency. On the contrary, look where you will, and it is evident that the private ownership of land keeps land out of use; that the speculation it engenders crowds population where it ought to be more diffused, diffuses it where it ought to be closer together; compels those who wish to improve to pay away a large part of their capital, or mortgage their labor for years before they are permitted to improve; prevents men from going to work for themselves who would gladly do so, crowding them into deadly competition with each other for the wages of employers; and enormously restricts the production of wealth while causing the grossest inequality in its distribution.—HENRY GEORGE.

WHEREVER land has a value and it is not used it has potential rent.—HENRY GEORGE.