

The Politics of Social Reform

Confronting the Land Question. By Jackson H. Ralston. Bayside, N. Y.:

The American Association for Scientific Taxation, xxi + 104 pp., \$1.

For fifty-odd years Jackson H. Ralston has battled for land reform. Often he has been beaten but never has he been really discouraged.

Judge Ralston's last appearance in politics was in California, in 1938, when he sought to defeat the sales tax by the adoption of an amendment to the State Constitution. The intention of the amendment was admittedly good. It provided that within nine years, all taxes (except gasoline taxes) should be removed from improvements and tangible property and that the levy on land values should be proportionately increased. It certainly would have stimulated business and encouraged the most economical use of land. Yet, those who might have derived the greatest benefit from the change struggled most bitterly against it. Once more Mr. Ralston witnessed defeat. This time, however, he decided to do something about it and the present book is the result of that determination. It inquires into the California failure and others that Mr. Ralston has suffered and suggests a number of changes in the over-all land reform program to the end that it may secure a better reception from future electorates. The observations made, based as they are on long experience, will be of interest to all who look inquiringly towards the political future of this movement.

Addressing himself particularly to "Single Taxers" (he admits to being one of them), Mr. Ralston outlines twelve steps which he believes the followers of Henry George should take at once.

First, he says, statistical data must be amassed to show the benefits of land reform to city dweller and to farmer. Then, he counsels, each worker must acquaint himself with the legal machinery necessary to install his reform as law. Thirdly, an attitude of open-mindedness must be cultivated towards changes necessary to overcome existing prejudices.

One of these needed changes, he says, is to adopt a system of compensation for present land owners. This compensation he limits to no more than the amount of the original investment, but to deny even that, he warns, is to handicap seriously any chances of success.

In a chapter entitled "Special Situations," Judge Ralston advocates gov-

ernment ownership of waterpower, forests, pipelines and other transportation, including air, all of which involve the monopolistic use of natural opportunities. Forestalling his critics, the Judge says, "Withal we must hark back to the fact that all we are asking is that the government shall use and exploit its own property which cannot be used privately unless endowed by the government with special faculties, such as the power of eminent domain, properly only enjoyed by the community and necessarily monopolistic in character. The broad field of private endeavor is left untouched. This is accepting socialism only so far as social requirements demand."

The book is interesting and provocative of thought. It may encourage other investigations along similar lines and lead, finally, to the solution of the pressing problem of how to get land reform measures on the statute books.

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