

"THE SHRIEK OF WOUNDED PRIVILEGE"

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Many cities and counties in California have undergone the same kind of assessment equalization that is reported of the town of Clay, N.Y. in the "I-You Chat" of IUN No.13. We too have assembled some lessons from the experience.

Increased land assessments (by which we mean increases in the values subject to taxation) do not increase the taxes of residents as a class nor even of property owners as a class. The assessor doesn't tax anybody. He just apportions the total tax load among property owners. When the new assessments go into effect, some property owners pay more, others pay less. So 800 per cent assessment hikes on land values are good news for the many property owners whose valuations have been more nearly in line with market values all along. Their taxes will come down at last as the hitherto undertaxed land begins to bear its fair share of the city's taxes.

The farmers' complaint that their land is not being used for industry is familiar but irrelevant. The ad valorem principle calls for taxing the land according to its worth - that is, on the expectation of what it would sell for. The growing departures from that principle constitute a regrettable trend toward the British system under which land users pay the rates and idle holdings are exempt. They deserve no sympathy.

The complaint that the change is too sudden, after "20 years of neglect," is simply an admission that they have been getting favored treatment for a long time. Would they have less to complain of if their assessments had been raised little by little over the past 20 years? If their illegal under-assessment had gone on for 100 years, would they demand an even more gradual resumption of fiscal responsibility? The more gradually as assessment roll is restored to the equality required by law, the longer the majority of property owners will continue to be overburdened.

The furious reactions of a few landholders who after 20 years of favored treatment are at last called upon to pay taxes on the same basis as other property owners is not a "public reaction" but the shriek of wounded privilege. City fathers who hope to get re-elected should carefully note the difference.

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("I had rather be right than President," said Henry Clay - but the town of Clay had rather have low than right assessments. According to information sent by Jerry Enright since IUN No.13, the assessor who upped the Clay assessments has resigned under pressure and the town has backed down to a 15 per cent increase. A nearby town, Skeanatles, has meanwhile achieved assessment at full value. How did they manage it? The economics of 100 per cent assessments is sound; the problem is a political one - how to get it through. We have been right for a long time. It is time for us to be both right and President and we have to catch up on lessons in that direction. - Ed.)