

## Conferences

IF you want to see America as the poor see it, travel by Greyhound bus; the bus terminals are invariably in the poorest and most run-down parts of America's big cities and in the drabber portions of its small towns.

Here you see true America as the lower orders, the forty million Americans who exist below the poverty line, experience it. Such travel is a liberal education in Georgism. En route from New York our Greyhound stopped in Camden, New Jersey, in the 6th Avenue slums approaching the Benjamin Franklin Bridge spanning the Delaware River to Philadelphia — the birthplace of America's greatest philosopher of political economy and the site of a sesquicentennial conference in his honour.

In this city of tension, slums, squalor and homelessness, more than two hundred delegates from fifteen nations gathered at the Annenberg School of Communications on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania in West Philadelphia from July 29-August 6: eight momentous days in which the 150th anniversary of the birth of Henry George was celebrated.

After initial registration formalities on the Saturday, the grand commemoration began on Sunday at 2.30pm at the restored birthplace of George at 413 Old South 10th Street. A two-storey brick-fronted Georgian-style colonial terraced house expertly restored by the Philadelphia architects Collins & Rosenberg, this modest home acted as backdrop for the delegation. The guest of honour was Agnes George De Mille, dancer and choreographer of Oklahoma!, State Fair and other American musicals and a linear descendant of Henry George, her father a brother of film director Cecil B De Mille, having married Henry George's daughter.



George: unorthodox American.

only example of its kind — with official drawings on file in the archives of the Library of Congress.

The 150th anniversary of George's birth and the International Georgist Conference held in Philadelphia in 1989 became the catalysts for restoring the birthplace to its 1839 appearance. Architects Jim Collins and Charles Peterson masterminded the project. All interior sheathing of walls, ceilings and floors have been torn away to reveal ghost lines of original walls, mantels, and the roof line. The period in which particular changes were made are judged by the type of materials (nails, wood, plaster etc) used in their construction. All preliminary drawings of the existing configuration and proposed restoration and final working drawings received required approval from the Historical Commission and the Department of Licenses & Inspection. This is meaningful historical restoration, not Prince of Wales nostalgia.

The facade of the building has been returned to its original appearance in every detail. Internal space will be arranged to most suitably display the valuable collection of Georgist books and memorabilia. Areas containing original materials

# An idea whose time has come?

**H I Meyer reports from Philadelphia on a conference marking the 150th anniversary of the birth of Henry George — reputedly America's greatest political economist.**

denounced the poverty, ignorance and cowardice which America has allowed to overtake its people and called eloquently for a St Paul or a John the Baptist to bring the message of her grandfather to a lost generation of Americans. Among those present was Henry George IV.

In the following seven days the delegates, in seminars, parties, debates, field trips and a modest "banquet" endeavoured to face up to the crisis of American poverty and to proclaim the solution as expressed by one of the contributors, Doctor T Nicholas Tideman, professor of economics at Virginia State University: "We are on the verge of understanding that land and natural resources are the common heritage of humanity and must be managed in a way that provides equal benefits for all persons in all generations."

To set the scene of the week's Georgist deliberations, the Annenberg School at 36th Street and Walnut Street is a modern building whose interior public spaces bear comparison with the work of Richard Meier. The lobby stretches up through four levels clad in white marble with sub shades and geometric window patterns to the south and dotted interior balconies to

Burger, a Georgist, of Minneapolis, Minnesota, who is currently running for the nomination of the Republican Party for governor of the state. A sort of sober WC Fields, he started off proceedings by asking for a political fund of \$2 million. He raised \$550 and then introduced the speakers.

The background to the debate was the successful implementation of a two-tier property tax in Pittsburgh (Philadelphia's rival city) and the abysmal state of welfare and crime in the city of brotherly love itself. As David L Lawrence, former governor of Pennsylvania, has observed: "There is no doubt in my mind that the (two-tier land) tax law has been a good thing for Pittsburgh. It has discouraged the holding of vacant land for speculation and provides an incentive for building improvements...it is particularly beneficial to home owners."

But when Philadelphia turned down a two-tier land tax similar to Pittsburgh's in 1984, its poverty worsened. For example, 50 per cent of university graduates in Philadelphia live with their parents, 50 per cent of the population of Fairmount, a slum neighbourhood, are on welfare.

The panel of speakers includ-

president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers; William J Phillips, president of the Fairmount Tax Payers Association; Albert Lesner, secretary of the Tax Assessors Board of Philadelphia (Valuers); and Theodore Herschberg, professor of public policy and director of the Centre for Greater Philadelphia at the University of Pennsylvania.

A good bureaucrat, Betsy Reveal kicked off proceedings by stating that Philadelphia was seriously considering two-tier property taxation but, in order to do so properly, research was needed and a computerised updating of the property assessment list, which would take two years and cost \$10 million, was being placed before the city council for urgent approval. Councillor Tayoun responded saying that this was a transparent bureaucratic delaying tactic to put off the issue until the city budget-making crisis in 1991 would dispose of the land tax issue entirely.

Fact: there are 750,000 homeless families in the US.

William Phillips chipped in with a graphic description of the dereliction, crime and waste of humanity which has overtaken his home in Fairmount, once the most stable, desirable and homogeneous community in

public housing funds meant to relieve the appalling conditions under which the poor in America live.

A South African delegate, Geoffrey Dunkley, turned to me and said: "America is worse than South Africa. I dread what will happen soon in Philadelphia, but the Americans and the Philadelphians will have deserved it."

In the next day's events Professor James L Busey, late of the University of Colorado, highlighted agrarian reforms and their failure in Latin America, and Dr Karolly Havazs of Budapest presented a view of Hungarian reforms as a result of perestroika. But perhaps the best evidence that America is in terminal crisis was given by the tour laid on for Philadelphia Day on Wednesday August 2.

The multi-storey post-modern office complexes rising at 1919 Market Street, 1515 Market Street and at the Penn Centre contrast starkly with the directly adjacent vacant lots temporarily used as car parks as speculators await rising land values before cashing in their chips.

But Americans refuse to make the obvious connections between the slums of Fairmount and the high-rise rental palaces of Market Street just as the English refuse to connect the speculative developments at Albangate and Canary Wharf with the powder kegs of Brixton, Leytonstone and Southall. As one of the delegates, Arthur Dowe, explained in his paper on the history of poverty in Britain and Australia: "There is a causal connection between wealth and poverty. Though the great majority of both rich and poor are unaware that the poverty springs from misgovernment and injustice, there is nevertheless an instinctive suspicion on the part of the rich and privileged that a genuine investigation would reveal unwelcome facts and threaten all privileged and

Director Cecil B De Mille, married Henry George's daughter.

The small red-brick row house at 413 Old South 10th Street — where George was born on September 2, 1839 — was built in 1820-1821 by George F Smith, a printer who was to become the George family's landlord. It was a poor man's house, and as such, lacked the adornments and refinements of its day. Today, however, the house has the distinction of being possibly the

valuable collection of Georgist books and memorabilia. Areas containing original materials have been retained wherever possible. In addition to serving as a museum, the birthplace will continue as the headquarters of the Philadelphia Henry George School.

That evening De Mille delivered the keynote speech of the opening dinner in the Penn Tower Hotel, welcoming the delegates to the conference. With the blood of Henry George rising strong in her veins, she

four levels clad in white marble with sub shades and geometric window patterns to the south and slotted internal balconies to the north. The nexus of the conference was in the well of this lobby, a D-shape plan enclosing a smaller D-shape sunken sitting area.

Monday's coup de théâtre was a panel discussion held at 7pm on "Land value taxation: Philadelphia's choice". The moderator, chairperson or, as the current American cant goes, the "facilitator", was John

slum neighbourhood, are on welfare.

The panel of speakers included Betsy Reveal, director of finance for Philadelphia; councillor James C Tayoun, a city councillor from the First District which includes Henry George's birthplace and who is a committed Georgist and the author of bill to allow two-tier property taxation in Philadelphia; Dr Shirley Featherman, professor of political science at Temple University, Philadelphia; Marvin E Schuman,

humanity which has overtaken his home in Fairmount, once the most stable, desirable and homogeneous community in working-class Philadelphia. He pointed out that retail taxes and local income taxes were destroying native Philadelphians.

Lerner attempted to justify the need for computerisation but Dan Sullivan, a Georgist activist of Pittsburgh, interrupted from the floor and pointed out that for \$75 Lerner could buy the state's guide to tax assessments and revalue all of Philadelphia land and building rates without a computer and in under two weeks, let alone two years.

Fact: there are 18,000 vacant public housing units in Baltimore, Delaware, and a waiting list containing 35,000 people.

Marvin Schuman for the Philadelphia teaching profession came out in favour of land value taxation and indicated that if the city reneged on its pay deal to teachers there would be chaos in the schools and in the streets.

Fact: there are 50,000 vacant houses in Philadelphia.

Professor Herschberg made an apology for the failings of Georgist tax policies to achieve political credibility and generally dismissed any attempts to try to implement it in Philadelphia. He derided the gains of prosperity in Pittsburgh following the implementation of the two-tier tax and put this down to "other factors". This incensed tax accountant Jacob Himmelstein that, from the floor, he promptly attacked Herschberg as a time-serving ignoramus. The venom was worthy of an Oxford senior common room.

Fact: the cabinet secretary of state of the federal government's Housing & Urban Development Department, Sam Pierce, and his entire staff, are under Senate investigation for having wasted, stolen or fraudulently converted up to \$8 billion of

the part in the new and privileged that a genuine investigation would reveal unwelcome facts and threaten all privileged and unearned incomes."

The historic and touristic symbol of Philadelphia and the symbol chosen for the sesquicentennial conference was, and is, the Liberty Bell, cast on the fiftieth anniversary in 1751 of the granting by William Penn of the lands of the Northern Liberties to the inhabitants of Philadelphia. Perhaps as an ironic reminder to those who were granted those lands that they in fact still belonged to the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the bell was inscribed with the motto: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

It is that symbol of liberty which Henry George, the foremost American exponent of individual liberty, had in mind when he denied that the single tax was a panacea for all economic ills by saying: "No, the single tax is not a panacea. But liberty is. And the single tax is but the taproot of liberty."

Even when it is engraved on their most cherished political symbol, Americans still don't get the message. There is something tragic in this irony, especially when we reflect that God is just.

Just as the Georgist conference was ending in Philadelphia, in the Penn Tower Hotel, on the university campus, the fifteenth annual conference of Star Trek fan clubs, with 750 delegates all in "sci-fi" costumes was gathering. From Philadelphia the politicalist message of America is clear: it is not "Land and Liberty!" but "Beam me up, Scottie!"

H I Meyer is a practising architect. He would like to thank George Collins, director of the Philadelphia Henry George School, for information on Henry George's home and birthplace.

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