

THE NEW ZEALAND
LAND VALUE RATING

ASSOCIATION

OBJECTIVE -
ONE RATING SYSTEM ON
THE VALUE OF LAND

R. D. KEALL

45 Dominion Street

Takapuna

PH: 488-1271

P.O. BOX 6038
AUCKLAND

OBITUARY - ROLLAND O'REGAN

With the deepest regret we have to report the passing of Rolland O'Regan on Friday 20th November 1992 aged 88, after several years of failing health.

Well-documented elsewhere are his distinguished career in surgery, his prominent participation in many branches of the medical profession, his significant initiatives in sport and his wide range of social involvements, all of which enhanced his contribution to the objects of this Association.

In 1943 he succeeded his father as Chairman of the then NZ League for the Taxation of Land Values Inc, later changed to the NZ Land Value Rating Assn Inc which later included the NZ Crown Leasehold Assn.

Right after the war, to rectify the ageing membership of his father's time he arranged for the Henry George School to start in Wellington and held public meetings to examine topical issues. The post-war boom, public apathy and the apparent security of the welfare state denied these ventures the success they deserved despite the hundreds of students who passed through the School. His endeavours then evolved in five main ways.

1. Picking up where his father left off he secured Land Value Rating wherever possible - whether City, Borough, County or County Town.

To this end, at least every 3 years to coincide with the local elections, a selection of local business people would be mailed to, explaining the merits of Land Value Rating and telling them how to get it in their area by poll.

Meantime a series of Rating Bulletins were prepared discussing topical Rating issues - Differentials, Special Valuations, Ratios of improvement to land value, statistical data etc. These were distributed to the Mayor and Councillors of every Local Authority in NZ, preserving Land Value Rating where it obtained and inviting change where it didn't.

In addition, as opportunity offered periodically, he prepared submissions to Govt on Local Body Finance and Rating issues. Their clear, professional presentation commanded the attention of any impartial arbiter and the enthusiasm of supporters.

One such submission was reproduced in Missouri, USA and returned to NZ to be used in support of subsequent Ministerial representations.

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The result of these endeavours was that by 1985 90% of all municipalities had by poll adopted Land Value Rating which accounted for 80% of Local Govt revenue. His quiet expectation was that given a devolution of function from Central to Local Govt more and more land values would be absorbed with less and less taken from income taxes accordingly. At that time he calculated that without the land value charges then in place land prices would be half as dear again.

The sequel to that is not Rolland's responsibility and is explained later.

2. The Land Tax which in 1922 accounted for 10% of the Budget had steadily atrophied to about 0.4% in 1987.

Rolland steadfastly, eloquently and effectively opposed any assault on this charge and finally urged it be allocated to Regional Local Govt for major works or disaster relief. A vested interest such as that would have entrenched it irrevocably, in the right place. Instead the last Labour Govt abolished it in mindless, futile, political expediency, at a time of Rolland's incapacitation.

3. In 1966 with a view to consolidating and furthering these real-life gains he narrowly failed to gain the Wellington Central Parliamentary seat. He later topped the poll in Wellington City Council elections and was for 9 years chairman of the Town Planning Committee and the Wellington Harbour Board. His thinking here was to be able to more effectively relate Land Value Taxation theory and practice to real-life situations; to be able to defend and promote the cause with first-hand evidence and understanding.

In 1973 while still on Council and Harbour Board, he wrote "Rating in NZ." This recorded NZ's experience of virtually 100 years of Land Value Taxation in one form or another. For the benefit of Georgists around the world ardently, in vacuo, advocating Land Value Taxation he set out the practical difficulties and political hazards. To Rolland's surprise it caused hardly a ripple in Georgist circles. With Local Govt members, officials and related professionals in NZ the first edition was a sell-out. It also served as a blue print for any Minister of Local Govt who might have the will if not the wit to rationalise the interaction of Local Govt Rating and Central Govt Valuation and should be read by all who are concerned with this subject.

The second edition, revised in his blindness with the aid of friends, was not so successful, but even now should be injected into the community as soon as funds allow.

4. In 1968 he recognised that Land Value Taxation in any form was vulnerable to the whim of every Minister of Finance or Local Govt every year. In 1896 the gestation period of Land Value Rating had been three years in NZ's Upper House about the time when Rolland's father and Sir George Grey were in Parliament. Finally the dispensation was granted allowing a petition to demand a poll on the issue of Land Value Rating. Despite the rapid success thereafter at the hands of Ratepayers there remained a crafty opposition that constantly tinkered with it, confusing even the most assiduous student.

On this basis Rolland reconsidered his inherited ascription to Land Value Taxation and submitted a paper to the 12th International Union Conference at Caswell Bay, Wales, September 1968. In this he proposed "State Leaseholds as the basis for Land Reform." That was 24 years ago. In support he noted the established precedents in Australia and NZ and the advocacy of a leading jurist in Australia.

In advancing his case he was mindful of the political hazards of Land Value Taxation and the practical problem of the ever-diminishing tax base as the tax increased. He was also aware of those other natural resources like minerals, water-rights, airwaves, some forestry, fishing, electricity generation and distribution etc for which Land Value Taxation was impractical.

Accordingly he sought to institutionalise the principle of Resource Rental by whatever means was most appropriate. One member at the conference regarded the proposal as the most sense he had ever heard at a conference and proposed to fund Rolland for full time work on it. On the strength of that initial gesture Rolland published his books.

In 1980 he published "Te Ara Tika" (The Right Track/Road/Way - for NZ) elaborating his views on leasehold tenure as the basis for a stronger economy to be derived from greater integration with Australia, essential to support an adequate common defence policy. Two years later the CER (Closer Economic Relations) Agreement with Australia was signed by the National Govt.

5. In 1985/6 he crystalised his representations on Local Govt Finance and addressed them to the Labour Party Policy Council and Caucus Committee on Local Govt. With his credentials within the Party and in Local Govt plus the Labour Party's formal adoption of Land Value Rating in 1948 (of which he reminded them) he reasonably expected some progress from the new Labour Govt. For those who see the ultimate objective as the collection of the full economic land rent at the local level this would have just about sewn it up. A quiet revolution democratically achieved. Having had no response after a year he widened his approach, with scant response once again - ominously in hindsight.

In 1987/8 the new Labour Minister for Local Govt began the restructuring of Local Govt. First by removing the traditional right to a poll on Rating (whilst at the same time propounding the merits of local decisions locally made), and then promoting a reversion to Capital Value Rating wherever he could, finally proposing that wherever Capital Value Rating had been or was ever adopted, (by Council resolution now) it would be irreversible. That was dropped. Meanwhile the grapevine had early delivered its message. So that Dunedin, Christchurch and finally Wellington reverted to Capital Value by means various, definitely devious and contrary to popular reaction. Rolland was quietly mortified. Ninety years of progress, every step democratically achieved, vandalised and undone by erstwhile colleagues prepared to do in stealth what not even the known enemy had dared do.

The change to Capital Value in his beloved Wellington especially, devastated him. His shining example of urban renewal to Auckland and the world, of a city united, cleanly and honestly run without faction, division or strife; rescued from partial to complete Land Value in 1927 by his own father reversing the Council's endeavours; now sold out, clumsily, illegally, arbitrarily, contrary to popular input and with a Knighthood for the perpetrator.

Subsequent Council attempts elsewhere to revert to Capital Value have generally failed due to vigorous popular opposition galvanised by this Association. So that due to Rolland's continued efforts Land Value Rating has become entrenched as the norm and any attempt to remove it excites the demand for Citizens Initiated Referenda on any issue including Rates.

Comprehensive moves across his many and varied involvements throughout society to have him Knighted fell foul of some temporary occupants at the top table known to be antagonistic despite being of the same Party. Characteristically, from his own high ground he judged their insulting offer, effectively closing that door.

His contributions to the movement leave indelible marks; a wealth of data, records, references and proposals; and an undeniable inspiration and example to those who follow, anywhere in the world.

R.D. Keall
Hon. Secretary
30/11/92