



## Concerned Citizens Must Act to Avert Catastrophe<sup>1</sup>

by Philip Symons

Humanity is headed in the wrong direction, and the problem is far deeper than an economic recession, and a degrading environment. As Donella Meadows and her co-workers suggested back in 1992 when *Beyond the Limits* was published, we need to work on multiple problems at once if catastrophes are to be avoided. Predictably, we have done nothing, so a forced and probably conservative human population decline of about a billion people over 20-40 years is likely inevitable in the near future, probably before 2030.

However, an even worse catastrophe can still be avoided if we take action before 2015. A little tinkering will not be enough. We need radical action that includes at least the following steps:

- Devise a new economy that will drastically reduce poverty and disease, and provide the basis for the next steps;
- Take concerted action to ameliorate climate change; and
- Move to a new political system, because the above two necessary steps will not occur under our current one.

This may sound like a tall order, but the good news is that we know how to undertake most of what's involved in each of those three steps (some solutions have been discussed in the CCPA Monitor), and some aspects have even been tried, although never altogether and in an integrated organized fashion. Here are some of the things we might do.

### A New Economy

Neo-liberal economic policies have failed, as has been pointed out elsewhere, but what are the alternatives? We could return to a fair, more progressive taxation system for a start, but that will not be enough,

so here are a couple of other things to consider: implement a Guaranteed Liveable Income that would reduce poverty (see Monbiot's article p. 6 this Discussion Paper); re-instate progressive taxation; then add an annual spending limit for the rich. The spending limit is necessary because once taxes rise above 50% of income, people go to extreme lengths to avoid paying them, and the law of diminishing returns kicks in. Let's take these things in turn.

### Guaranteed Liveable Income (GLI)

A GLI would provide everyone with just sufficient to live when unemployed—it should perhaps be called the Guaranteed Barely Liveable Income. We don't want to remove the incentive for gainful employment, but at the same time we don't want people who have become unemployed through no fault of their own to end up on the streets. Many of those already on the streets require more than economic assistance, but that's beyond what's being considered here. A GLI would guaranty that everyone receives sufficient income to afford food and shelter of adequate, if not luxurious, quality. Everyone receives it and it is progressively taxed back as a person's income increases.

A few moments reflection on the repercussions of a GLI suggest it would have a major effect on society. Minimum wage legislation would no longer be needed because people would refuse to work for today's minimum wages in lousy jobs—true market forces would control the labour market, which should delight mainstream economists, but it won't.

At the introduction of a GLI there will probably be an explosion of art of all sorts, as would-be artists suddenly find themselves economically able to survive while following their life's passion. I suspect many of these artists, having once assuaged their need to paint, write or act—whatever it is—will return to the regular



Human civilization is at a juncture: will we take the steps necessary to avoid catastrophe?

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## Personal income tax levels appear to be unrelated to national prosperity

Statistics for both personal income levels and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita can vary wildly because of different methods of collecting and presenting the data. The personal income tax rates ranked in the table to the right from highest (59.74%) to lowest (35.60%) for OECD countries are the “Top combined Marginal Individual Income Tax rates in 2006 from OECD Table 1.4” as presented by the US Tax Foundation. A quite different order is presented by the CATO Institute for 1997.

Gross Domestic Product is often used as a measure of a country’s wealth, although it is a poor measure as it combines all domestic expenditures whether good (e.g., road building) or bad (e.g., pollution clean-up). A better measure might be the median income of people in each country. However, GDP is often used as a measure of wealth and the rank order of GDP per capita at purchasing power parity in the accompanying table is that given by the International Monetary Fund for 2008, the nearest year to that for the income tax data that I could find in a quick search. Two other rankings of GDP by different agencies were present in the same reference (Wikipedia).

Given the numbers of different rankings of both personal income tax and GDP, it is not surprising that one can “prove” almost anything. That, nevertheless, is often done, and what is presented here is probably no worse than any other analysis. Very little relation is visible from a cursory glance over the data in the accompanying table. The Spearman rank correlation coefficient,  $r_s$ , is +0.38, which means that although the relation is very weak the higher the personal income taxes, the greater the GDP per capita, the opposite of what mainstream economists proclaim. Furthermore, this relation is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). Correlations, however, do not prove cause and effect; higher taxes do not necessarily *cause* greater wealth (as measured by GDP). The correlation may simply mean that in wealthier countries people are able to, and do pay higher income taxes.

Given the conflicting conclusions reached by mainstream economists and the weak but opposite conclusion supported by the admittedly simplistic analysis here, the safest conclusion appears to be that there is little or no relation between personal income tax levels and a nation’s prosperity as measured by GDP.

Country	Rank Top Marginal Income Tax 2006	Rank GDP per capita 2008
Denmark	1	11
Sweden	2	12
France	3	17
Belgium	4	14
Netherlands	5	6
Finland	6	15
Austria	7	8
Japan	8	18
Australia	9	10
Canada	10	9
Germany	11	16
Spain	12	19
Italy	13	20
Switzerland	14	4
Portugal	15	25
Ireland	16	5
Poland	17	28
Greece	18	21
U.K.	19	13
Norway	20	2
U.S.	21	3
New Zealand	22	23
Luxembourg	23	1
Korea (South)	24	22
Iceland	25	7
Hungary	26	27
Turkey	27	30
Czech Rep.	28	24
Mexico	29	29
Slovak Rep.	30	26

labour force, having tired of the life of the impecunious artist in the proverbial garret.

Single moms will have a choice: they can stay at home and look after their child or children without starving, or they can put their children in childcare while working to supplement or even replace their GLI. Childcare will be affordable because the child-minders already have a GLI, and they, too, need only supplement their income. A few moments thought may reveal some other interesting repercussions of a GLI.

The big problem with a GLI is, of course, its cost. Even with the savings arising from abolishing welfare, old-age security and employment-insurance programs, which would no longer be needed, and with reduced crime and health-care costs (poverty contributes to both) a back-of-the-envelope estimate suggests a GLI in Canada would cost about \$100-billion/year, or 20% of current national tax revenue.

That isn’t small change. Where would the money come from?

## Progressive Taxation and a Limit to Annual Spending

We need to re-introduce progressive taxation. Mainstream economists have argued that taxation reduces productivity and Gross National Product per capita, but there is very little evidence to support these claims *within the range of taxation of western countries today* (see boxes above).

There are other forms of progressive taxation, including Georgian land taxes (see Monbiot’s article p. 7, this Discussion Paper) and tax shifting—taxing what we don’t want while removing taxes on what we do want. Proponents of tax shifting, however, argue that we need to encourage income, so we should remove income taxes. This, unfortunately, does nothing to redress our currently skewed income distribution. The rich with their two or more houses,

several gas-guzzling vehicles, mega-yachts and other supernumerary toys (we're talking the obscenely rich) are the chief reason for many of our environmental and social problems. They should pay to undo the social and environmental damage they cause on the user pay principle. High taxes on the very rich are morally defensible. (See also Discussion Paper No. 22, *A Bronze Bullet: The Spirit Level—Why Equality is Better for Everyone.*)

Nevertheless, even in Nordic countries taxation has not quite reached 60% of income, so some other means of distributing wealth and paying for the GLI is needed. What about an annual spending limit on the rich? Here's the rationale.

Research on the relation between happiness and income has shown that as income rises, so does happiness up to a certain income level, beyond which happiness plateaus, regardless of increasing wealth. A few years ago, the plateau began at an income of about \$80,000 per year. Let's say that today it is probably \$100,000 net per year, just to have a nice round figure, and then let's say that we'll allow double that income—we're not trying to be stingy. Taxes would increase to say 50% as income increases, but when a person's income after taxes rises above \$200,000, the surplus is banked by the government for that person's use later in life if desired and needed. In the meantime it can be used to pay for a GLI and be loaned to business to stimulate investment—green investment, let's hope!

There is no cap on salaries, therefore, and a hockey player may have a salary of \$7-million a year if he desires, but he can only access \$200,000 of that income per year after income taxes (\$400,000 before taxes). If the hockey player retires at age 28 and has a life expectancy of 82 years, he only needs to play for just over three years to retire with an income of \$200,000 per year for the remaining 55 years of his life. If he plays for more than three years, he can guarantee himself the maximum spendable income to a greater age, or he might be allowed to give a certain amount to charity, and/or leave a reasonable inheritance for his children—there are various options with which we needn't concern ourselves here.

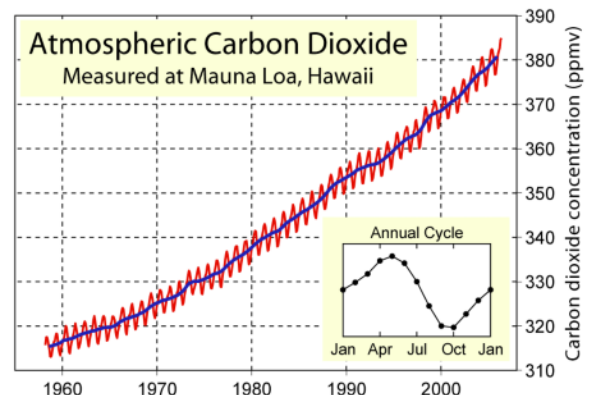
Nor need we concern ourselves with the details of how this plan would be implemented, other than to note that every individual's bank account would have an associated social insurance number, and a red flag would be raised when net annual deposits surpassed



\$400,000 to bank accounts with the same SIN. There are numerous ways in which this plan could be circumvented, so it may be unworkable, but a radical plan of this sort is needed. If an annual spending limit were implemented, it would help heal the environment and have as beneficial effect on Canadian society as the GLI.

### Climate Change and CO<sub>2</sub> Reduction

There is no question that the greatest crisis now facing mankind is climate change (see also Discussion Paper No. 25, *A Plan for 100% Renewable*



*Energy by 2050*). And there is also no question that as climate change inexorably progresses, the social disruption that will follow and the measures that will be required to ameliorate climate change and its effects will cost a great deal of money. The economy, the environment, society and its political means of management are interconnected, which is why they are all considered here.

George Monbiot, in his book "Heat" (Doubleday Canada 2006) recommends a carbon rationing system. He dismisses carbon taxes. "If we attempted to suppress climate change entirely by means of energy taxes, two things would happen," writes Monbiot. "The poor would be hit much harder than the rich, as the costs took up a higher proportion of their income. And the rich would be able to carry on burning as much fuel as they could afford...."

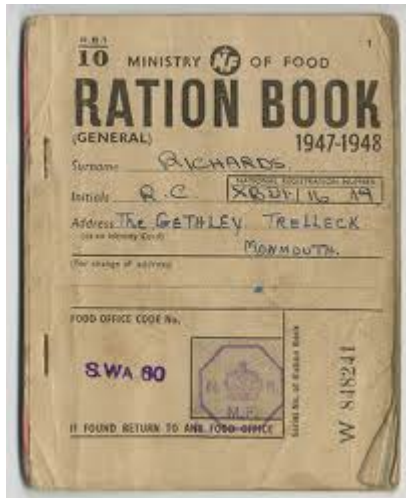
When Monbiot speaks of "cutting our energy use" he is not speaking of a timid Kyoto-protocol target of a 5.2% reduction in carbon emissions by signatories by 2012, but a 90% average reduction in rich countries by 2030 (94% in Canada, Australia and the USA).

Ninety-percent cuts by 2030 are needed if atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> levels are not to exceed 440 parts per million (ppm) of air, the point at which scientists believe critical positive feedback mechanisms will kick in (that number has recently been revised to 380 ppm), meaning there would be little we could then do "to stop the planet from burning." Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentrations currently stand at 380 ppm, up from

338 ppm in 1980. Monbiot suggests “there is perhaps a 30 percent chance that we have already blown it... But I am writing this book in a spirit of optimism, so I refuse to believe it.”

Monbiot then sets about explaining how we can meet that 90% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 through a number of ingenious, sometimes surprising, but technically and economically feasible innovations. Though it will certainly cost us financially, he believes it can be done without drastically changing our life-style or quality of life in every field except air travel.

Implementation of rationing is simple. Suppose, for example, that our 7 billion tonnes of current worldwide carbon emissions must be reduced to 2.7 by 2030, then we should probably be producing no more than 5.5 billion tonnes by say 2012, so we divide that figure by the expected world population in 2012 to calculate how much carbon everyone would be entitled to emit. It would be around 0.8 tonnes per year, says Monbiot. “Every nation would then multiply that figure by the number of people it contained, and this would be its national allocation...”



Monbiot takes into account the carbon requirements of business. “Both companies and people,” he writes, “would need to use their carbon accounts when buying just two commodities: fuel and electricity. If, for example, the fuel and electricity that people consumed directly added up to 40 per cent of a country’s carbon emissions, then the citizens of that country would be given 40 per cent of its carbon budget. Everyone would get the same amount and [w]e would need to use our carbon allowance [ration card] only when paying our electricity or gas bills or filling up our cars...”

“The remaining 60 per cent of the country’s carbon budget would belong to the government. It keeps some for itself and auctions the rest either directly to companies wanting to buy fuel or electricity, or to carbon brokers who would then sell their entitlements to other corporations or to people who cannot stay within their budgets. The price, like that of any other commodity, would depend on the competition for the resource, which in turn would depend on its scarcity.

“The market created by carbon rationing will automatically stimulate demand for low-carbon technologies, such as public transport and renewable energy...”

Monbiot has brilliantly proposed a just, equitable and perhaps also radical scheme for countries to reduce their carbon emissions by 90% by 2030. The rationing scheme can drive the whole system at any set speed. And there is no need to wait for all countries to come on side—those countries who procrastinate will only have a more difficult time later when moral, political and perhaps even economic pressures bring them in line. Canada could become the leader it once was instead of the hypocritical laggard it has become under successive Liberal and Conservative governments.

### A new Political System

What must be abundantly clear is that radical solutions such as those suggested above will not be implemented under our current political system. Wealthy people will have to pay, and our politicians for the most part belong to the upper economic classes, as do our corporate leaders, who have far too much influence on our politicians. A radically new political system is needed whereby the average citizen has more influence and control over political decisions than at present.

Fortunately, again, some different ideas have been tried. Various provincial Citizens’ Assemblies have studied, debated and recommended electoral reform. Unfortunately none of the referenda that followed the dissolution of these Assemblies succeeded, chiefly because many of the provincial politicians and corporate leaders did not want change, and they successfully misled and sowed fear among the voters. You can begin to see what we’re up against.

The World Federalist Movement—Canada (WFMC) is a part of an international non-governmental organization that has been trying to reform the United Nations almost since the UN’s inception. WFMC has been unsuccessful for much the same reason that Citizens’ Assemblies have so far been unsuccessful: politicians do not want change. WFMC has learned some things over its many years of existence, and one lesson is that if you can’t win by attempting reform head on, try an end-run around the politicians. That is, don’t wait for the politicians to accept the people’s ideas, simply put something in place, and through moral suasion accompanied by *fait accompli*, get the people’s wish accepted.

So why don’t we, the Canadian people, set up a nationwide “Citizens’ Assembly,” or maybe several



of them, each to study one of the problems raised above and make recommendations about how to go about solving them? More than likely these assemblies will recommend completely different solutions to the ones proposed here, perhaps even more radical, certainly more practical and widely acceptable solutions—and that's the objective.

What are Citizens' Assemblies and how do they work? A Citizens' Assembly consists of a pre-determined number of people who are selected at random from the voters' list and invited to come together in a series of meetings for a specified period (the B.C. Citizens' Assembly periodically convened and debated electoral reform over the period of nearly a year) and then makes its recommendations.

In an ideal democracy the Assemblies' recommendations would be binding on government, but that won't happen now. What is more likely is a raising of awareness in the general populace of practical but radical and effective solutions; the people would then increase pressure on our current politicians to accept those solutions. Some solutions would be for new forms of governance, i.e., a new political system. If current governments won't make the appropriate changes, a shadow government of the recommended form could be set up, and while it would have no legislative powers initially, it could come to have them in time. This is the kind of "end run" that the WFM-International is planning to make to get a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly established.

### A Way Forward

Selecting people at random from the national voter's list would be a huge job for private citizens even if it could be done, but the voter's list is no longer available to the public. In any case, the Victoria B.C. Branch of WFCM discovered in the course of organizing "Wisdom Councils," which are like very short-term mini citizens' assemblies, that the only people likely to accept an invitation to join a citizens' assembly are social activists—in other words, people who are members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Obtaining membership lists from NGOs whose members wished to participate in National Citizens' Assemblies debating such important issues as the economy, the environment and a new political system for Canada should be comparatively easy.

There are many NGOs whose members might want to participate in such Assemblies, including the

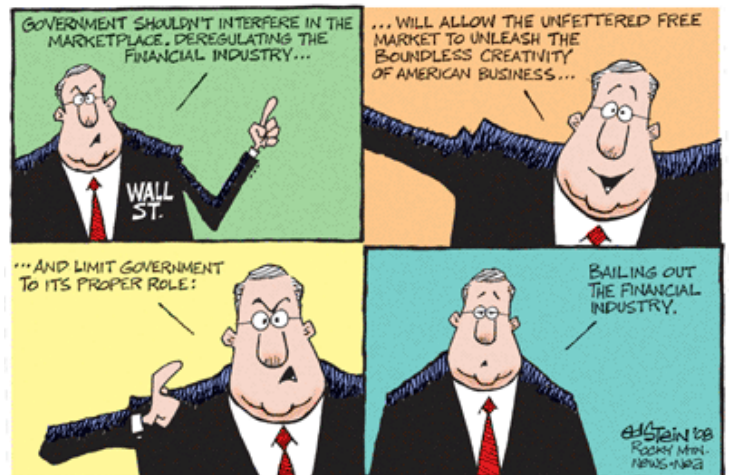
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, the Council of Canadians, the World Federalist Movement—Canada, and others, but to organize and set up the Assemblies a small coalition of NGOs is needed—perhaps only the three just named. WFCM also has had experience organizing coalitions of NGOs (e.g., to apply pressure for creation of the International Criminal Court), so it might be willing to take a lead role if asked and supported financially by other NGOs.

It may appear strange at the end of an article to recommend the creation of a body or bodies that would set aside all the radical solutions suggested earlier in that same article in favour of something entirely different—and better—but

that's the nature of true democracy. All we need now is for some NGO to grasp the nettle and pull together these national citizens' assemblies. Radical action is needed, and fast!

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*Philip Symons is the current editor of JUSTnews, the newsletter of Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice. He expects feedback from this article so has dressed appropriately.*



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# Basic Income Guarantee—the Spark of Hope

By George Monbiot

Most of the world's people are decent, honest and kind. Most of those who dominate us are inveterate bastards. This is the conclusion I've reached after many years of journalism. Writing on Black Monday, as the British government's full-spectrum attack on the lives of the poor commences, the thought keeps returning to me, "With a most inhuman cruelty, they who have put

out the people's eyes reproach them of their blindness" (John Milton, 1642).

This [UK] government, whose mismanagement of the economy has forced so many into the arms of the state, blames the sick, the unemployed, the underpaid for a crisis caused by the feral elite, and punishes them accordingly. Many thousands will be driven from their



George Monbiot

homes, many more pushed towards destitution. Relief for the poor from council tax will be clipped; legal aid for civil cases cut off. Yet, at the end of this week [in April 2013], those making more than £150,000 a year will have their income tax reduced.

Two days later, benefit payments for the poorest will be cut in real terms. A week after that, thousands of families who live in towns and boroughs where property prices are high will be forced out of their homes by the total benefits cap. What we are witnessing is raw economic warfare by the rich against the poor.

## "The poor are scum" myth

So the age-old question comes knocking: why does the decent majority allow itself to be governed by a brutal, antisocial minority? Part of the reason is that the minority controls the story. As John Harris explains in the Guardian, large numbers (including many who depend on it) have been persuaded that most recipients of social security are feckless, profligate fraudsters. Despite everything that has happened over the past two years, Rupert Murdoch, Lord Rothermere and the other media barons still seem to be running the country. Their relentless propaganda, using exceptional and shocking cases to characterise an entire social class, remains highly effective. Divide and rule is as potent as it has ever been.

Any movement which seeks to challenge the power of the elite needs to ask itself what it takes to shake people out of this state. And the answer seems inescapable: hope. Those who govern on behalf of billionaires are threatened only when confronted by the power of a transformative idea.

A century and more ago that idea was communism. Even in the form in which Marx and Engels presented it, its problems are evident: the simplistic binary system into which they tried to force society; their brutal dismissal of anyone who did not fit this dialectic ("social scum", "bribed tool[s] of reactionary intrigue"); their reinvention of Plato's guardian-philosophers, who would "represent and take care of the future" of the proletariat; the unprecedented power over human life they granted to the state; the millenarian myth of a final resolution to the struggle for power. But their promise of another world electrified people who had, until then, believed that there was no alternative.

## Transformative ideas

Seventy years ago, in the United Kingdom, the transformative idea was freedom from want and fear through the creation of a social security system and a National Health Service. It swept a Labour government to power which was able, despite far tougher economic circumstances than today's, to create a fair society from a smashed, divided nation. This is the achievement which—through a series of sudden, spectacular and unmandated strikes—Cameron's government is now demolishing.

So where do we look for the idea that can make hope more powerful than fear?

Last week I ran a small online poll, asking people to nominate inspiring, transfiguring ideas. The two mentioned most often were land value taxation and a basic income. As it happens, both are championed by the Green Party (<http://www.carolinelucas.com/media/fair,-efficient,-sustainable-new-report-shows-strong-case-for-land-value-tax.html>). On this and other measures, its policies are by a long way more progressive than Labour's.

## Basic Income Guarantee

I discussed land value taxation in a recent column [see following article, p. 7]. A basic income (also known as a citizen's income) gives everyone, rich and poor, without means testing or conditions, a guaranteed sum every week. It replaces some but not all benefits (there would, for example, be extra payments for pensioners and people with disabilities). It banishes the fear and insecurity now stalking the poorer half of the population. *Economic survival becomes a right, not a privilege* (see <http://www.basicincome.org/bien/aboutbasicincome.html#what>).

A basic income removes the stigma of benefits while also breaking open what politicians call the wel-

fare trap: because taking work would not reduce your entitlement to social security, there would be no disincentive to find a job: all the money you earn is extra income. The poor are not forced by desperation into the arms of unscrupulous employers: people will work if conditions are good and pay fair, but will refuse to be treated like mules. It redresses the wild imbalance in bargaining power that the current system exacerbates. It could do more than any other measure to dislodge the emotional legacy of serfdom. It would be financed by progressive taxation: in fact it meshes well with land value tax.

These ideas require courage: the courage to confront the government, the opposition, the plutocrats, the media, the suspicions of a wary electorate. But without proposals on this scale, progressive politics is dead. They strike that precious spark, so seldom kindled in this age of triangulation and timidity: the spark of hope.

*Published in the Guardian 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2013, here slightly edited with list of references removed.*

## Why we need land value taxation— a Telling Silence

by George Monbiot

You can learn as much about a country from its silences as you can from its obsessions. The issues politicians do not discuss are as telling and decisive as those they do. It's time to talk about the turns not taken, the opportunities foregone: the taxes which could have spared us every turn of the screw.

### The Need

The extent of the forgetting is extraordinary, but the loudest silence surrounds the issue of property taxes. The most expensive flat in that favourite haunt of the international super-rich, 1 Hyde Park, cost £135m. The owner pays £1,369 in council tax, or 0.001% of its value. Last year the Independent revealed that the Sultan of Brunei pays only £32 a month more for his pleasure dome in Kensington Palace Gardens than some of the poorest people in the same borough. A mansion tax—slapped down by David Cameron in October—is only the beginning of what the owners of such places should pay. For the simplest, fairest and least avoidable levy is one which the major parties simply will not contemplate. It's called land value tax.

The term is a misnomer. It's not really a tax. It's a return to the public of the benefits we have donated to the landlords. When land rises in value, the government and the people deliver a great unearned gift to those who happen to own it.

In 1909 a dangerous subversive explained the issue thus. "Roads are made, streets are made, services are improved, electric light turns night into day, water is

brought from reservoirs a hundred miles off in the mountains—and all the while the landlord sits still. Every one of those improvements is effected by the labor and cost of other people and the taxpayers. To not one of those improvements does the land monopolist, as a land monopolist, contribute, and yet by every one of them the value of his land is enhanced. He renders no service to the community, he contributes nothing to the general welfare, he contributes nothing to the process from which his own enrichment is derived. ... the unearned increment on the land is reaped by the land monopolist in exact proportion, not to the service, but to the disservice done."

Who was this firebrand? Winston Churchill. As Churchill, Adam Smith and many others [e.g., Henry George] have pointed out, those who own the land skim wealth from everyone else, without exertion or enterprise. They "levy a toll upon all other forms of wealth and every form of industry." Land value tax recoups this toll.

### The Benefits

It has a number of other benefits. It stops the speculative land hoarding that prevents homes from being built. It ensures that the most valuable real estate—in city centres—is developed first, discouraging urban sprawl. It prevents speculative property bubbles, of the kind that have recently trashed the economies of Ireland, Spain and other nations, and made rents and first homes so hard to afford. Because it does not affect the supply of land (they stopped making it some time ago), it cannot cause the rents that people must pay to the landlords to be raised. It is easy to calculate and hard to avoid: you can't hide your land in London in a secret account in the Cayman Islands. And it could probably discharge the entire deficit.

It is altogether remarkable, in these straitened and inequitable times, that land value tax is not at the heart of the current political debate. Perhaps it is a sign of how powerful the rent-seeking class in Britain has become. While the silence surrounding this obvious solution exposes Labour's limitations, it also exposes the contradiction at the heart of the Conservative Party. The Conservatives claim, in David Cameron's words, to be "the party of enterprise." But those who benefit most from its policies are those who are rich already. It is, in reality, the party of rent.

This is where the debate about workers and shirkers, strivers and skivers should have led. The skivers and shirkers sucking the money out of your pockets are not the recipients of social security demonised by the Daily Mail and the Conservative Party; the overwhelming majority of whom are honest claimants. We are being parasitised from above, not below, and the tax system should reflect this.



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