

L&L interview

Named by the *Independent on Sunday* as one of the 40 international prophets of the 21st Century, writer and campaigner George Monbiot stands at the forefront of the anti-globalisation movement. In conversation with Land & Liberty's new editor **Peter Gibb** he talks about the theft of the planet's common resources



Are we witnessing a new form of takeover of our common resources, similar to the enclosures of previous

Trapped in the downward

IN HIS BOOK *Captive State* George Monbiot chronicles what he calls the corporate takeover of Britain.

Peter Gibb But who *does* Britain belong to?

George Monbiot To everyone who lives here, and to a lesser extent to all who visit here, just as I believe every country on earth does. It's the duty of those who live here and have a vote here to use their citizenship to ensure that the wealth of the nation and the wealth of the land is used for the benefit of everyone not just a select few.

What we've seen through a number of processes – many of them embedded deep in history – is the gradual alienation of the nation's key resources, and their enclosure in the hands of an increasingly rich and powerful few. That few has changed over time, moving from the monarchy and the aristocracy, to a new corporate-dominated

and institutional aristocracy, but its power of enclosure is just as great as that of the old feudal lords.

The assets this new aristocracy is taking from us are in some cases the old assets – the land and the use of the land. And it's very important to see land not just as a physical surface, but also as a set of rights which

should be widely divided amongst the people who make use of it.

These assets also include democracy, all manner of human

freedoms, the wealth generated from productive processes of different kinds – and not forgetting intellectual property, like the genome, and increasingly the internet.

Huge areas of life, which we considered until very recently to belong to everyone or to no-one, are coming to belong to just a few

very powerful individuals.

PG One powerful individual you and I were lucky enough to avoid was 'hanging judge' Lord Braxfield.

On 'ownership' of the country, Braxfield said: "A government in every country should be just like a corporation, and in this country it is made up of the landed interest, which alone has a right to be represented. As for the rabble, who have nothing but personal property, what hold has the nation of them? What security for the payment of their taxes? They may pack up all their property on their backs and leave the country in the twinkling of an eye, but landed property cannot be removed."

The possession of an interest in the land and our common resources – in the various manifestations you've just described – is surely one of the very foundations of community. How should our common interest in land be instituted?

GM There are a number of ways. It's not just the very obvious issues of physical

Those with major property should be the ones who fund society



centuries? George Monbiot (above) thinks so

spiral

access to land itself. It's also a question of, for instance, rights of access to the decision-making processes governing the land.

One of the key areas here is the planning process – the process of development control. The whole purpose of planning laws is to ensure the control of development resides not just in the hands of the developers and the landlords. It's a recognition that land is a key asset that determines the quality of life of everybody.

Unfortunately what we've seen in the last few years is a gradual erosion of such communal rights we had over land. Now we have a proposal for a complete removal from the hands of local people of any effective say in the decision-making process when it comes to large projects – such as airports or nuclear power stations – in which you'd imagine that local people would have a certain interest. That interest is now being disregarded.

These decisions, we're told, are to be made by Parliament, and we all know what that

Gene stealers: how companies monopolise the human blue-print

The race to sequence the human genome was a battle between public interest and private, profit-seeking. At stake: the control of human DNA – life's building blocks. **Ciaran Jennings reports**

The Human Genome Project (HGP) was funded by the American tax-payer and the UK's Wellcome Trust. Its aim was to provide the 'book of life' – information on the genome to identify genes, enabling new treatments for diseases like cancer and AIDS, and bringing nearer the possibility of correcting debilitating genetic defects. HGP studiously put their research into the public domain on the internet – free for all to use.

In contrast, Celera, set up as a private venture by Craig Venter in the US specifically to beat HGP to decoding the full sequence, wanted to patent gene sequences to recover their investment and make money. Venter wanted to monopolise the genome to force companies wanting to carry out research involving the use of individual genes to pay royalties.

The HGP revealed their draft on the internet in 2000, but it didn't stop the patenting of gene sequences, which, according to Genewatch, a UK-based monitor of genetic engineering, has exploded into the thousands. Before the sequence had been finished,

Celera had made over
6,500 patent
applications.
Over 1,500

patents had already been granted by the US Patent by the end of 2000. These were to various organisations, including the US Health Department and many US, European and Japanese bio-engineering companies. Genewatch reports evidence of research being throttled by those companies granted patents.

Not only has business made money from securing the right to use this common property, but it is also patenting gene sequences of people, animals or plants without permission. For example Mars UK has patented genes from a west African plant, whose synthesis could destroy the cocoa industries of poor African nations.

Bio-piracy – described by eco activist Vandana Shiva as "the use of intellectual property systems to legitimize the exclusive ownership and control over biological resources and biological products and processes that have been used over centuries in non-industrialized cultures" – has been practiced on indigenous peoples who have had their genetic samples patented for possible medical use. One individual, US citizen John Moore discovered that a company had taken out a patent on his spleen cells.

www.genewatch.org

means – they're to be made by Number 10. And we also know what happens when Number 10 gets the whip hand on decision-making. It disregards the people, just as Lord Braxfield was describing – the people who don't have major property, and don't have that economic power. It listens only to those who can't "carry their property away on their backs".

PG In a book just published called *Liberating the Land*, Mark Pennington argues that only the private sector can carry out development control efficiently. He reckons the public planning system should be dismantled and power returned to private developers. How do you feel about that?

GM My instant reaction would be that it's a horrifying proposal, but it's consonant with

many of the proposals we've seen in other areas over the past few decades – whereby the private sector has gradually acquired control over a whole series of decision-making processes and assets, which ensures the process of enclosure extends into virtually every aspect of our lives. What we would see with the privatisation of development control would be an extension of that. The developers would simply do what was in their interests. They would build whatever they wanted, where they wanted, and hang the interests of the community.

If you privatise development control you end up with no control at all. That would be a profoundly anti-democratic process, because it removes development from democracy. ▶

◀ **PG** Pennington argues that within a privatised system, through the aggregated actions of individual developers, the common interest of the community would be arrived at.

GM Back to Braxfield's wonderful quote, where those individuals able to extract that interest are the individuals with landed property. Those without landed property would have no engagement in that process – they would have no say.

There's no question the system as it stands is deeply flawed, but it's not because there's too much public involvement, it's because there's too little public involvement. The voices of the developers have been heeded by government, but not the voices of ordinary people.

PG Landowners like to style themselves the 'stewards' of the land. Perhaps similarly, politicians see themselves as stewards of our rights, priests of our morals, and corporations of our work. What does the concept of stewardship reveal to us? And what does its use by partisan interests tell us?

GM It's quite interesting how the stewards are always self appointed. Nobody goes to the landowners and asks: "Will you steward this land for us?" That's not the case with the priesthood – people do go to the priests and say: "Will you steward our souls for us?"

With the corporations nobody goes and says: "Will you steward our future for us?" They appoint themselves as stewards, and the irony here is that in the case of the landowners and the corporations it's often the most irresponsible people who appoint themselves as stewards. Why are they the most irresponsible people? Simply because they are the most powerful people, and there is an inverse relationship here between power and responsibility. Responsibility comes about through democratic, social

Monbiot on fair taxation

It's not just a question of what could be argued is a case of natural justice. It's also a pragmatic question of saying "how do we maintain the tax base in the face of globalisation – for example, when people are trading in internet currencies, which have no fixed abode and are effectively untraceable and untaxable?" I think the way forward is the one that many people have discussed, which is a gradual shift from the taxation of employment to the taxation of resources.



The development control system is deeply flawed, not because there's too much public involvement, but because there's too little public involvement

constraint.

What we've seen in the case of the biggest landowners in Britain is an appalling 60 years of devastation of national heritage – including our democratic rights in the land – by shutting us out, physically and politically. They are far from being the stewards of the land, they are the people against whom the land needs to be stewarded.

PG You recognise stewardship as a concept, but you also recognise it has limits?

GM Yes, and to some extent, I accept some of the dangers of a purely anthropocentric approach to the land. There are certain very obvious and biological limits to stewardship.

PG There is an interesting point about assent and appointment in the way that Scots first appointed their sovereign. In England the tradition is of kings and queens of England. Scotland has only kings and queens of Scots. No jurisdiction over land and resources is implied in the title, only leadership of people.

GM Yes, I think in some ways we still see the concept of divine right, and of absolute inherited rights, being a dominant theme in discourse. It is a very strong theme in English politics – that there remain certain people, whose god-given duty is unamenable to democratic persuasion or control. And with that duty, which is always very fuzzily defined, go rights, that are

always very clearly defined, to control the nation's fundamental economic and political assets.

We as a nation – and I'm talking about England in particular – have been far too slow to recognise the implications of democracy. The very first implication is that all such hereditary and divine rights to power and wealth be discontinued.

PG Is it that, more than being in a 'captive state', we're in an 'enraptured state', enthralled to the landowners?

GM I think that's a very good point. It actually ties in with much of what Alastair McIntosh wrote about in *Soil & Soul* (see review p19) – the way in which we grant this licence to the powerful because we are somehow transfixed by their power, and we therefore participate in their power. There's no doubt about the extent people willingly take the yoke upon their shoulders, and bear the oppressive weight of historical injustice.

As Alastair very compellingly points out in his book, to liberate ourselves from external tyranny we first have to liberate ourselves from our internal tyrannies. We must see the extent we have come to reinforce inordinate power by means of our own attitudes.

PG Is the way to throw off this yoke – in so far as we're speaking about land and land ownership – to be found in transforming the concept we have of landownership?

GM I don't have a huge problem with the concept of ownership of land – it's a question of how that ownership is exercised and how it's distributed that is key.

For example, I'm very keen on the idea of common property rights, which is a much more effective means of distributing benefit and protecting environmental assets than either nationalisation or privatisation of land.

We can see – for instance amongst the Turkana people in northwestern Kenya – the way in which there are two aspects to common property: it's common, and it's property. It belongs to the community. It's not a free-for-all, as Garrett Hardin supposed in his essay, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, which is an appalling misreading of the way common property is managed.

PG Presumably these community rights needn't be tied to specific, exclusive territorial areas? They're overlapping rights, rather than defined parcels of ground.

GM That's absolutely correct, and what you see is that – again to use the east African example – on certain areas successions of groups and people will use land at different times and for different purposes, or at the same times for different purposes, or collectively for the same purpose at the same time. But those rights are very carefully discussed, mediated and regulated by the

members of those communities.

Hardin confused open access systems, such as the atmosphere or the ocean, where there is no clearly defined community interest over any one part. So everyone has a greater self interest in dumping their waste in the atmosphere, or in the oceans, than they have an individual self interest in making sure waste is controlled (see *Sky Trust* p13).

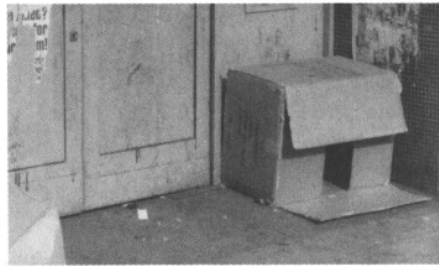
In a common system, that property is defended extremely fiercely by the people who possess it. One of the great challenges we have is to start to look at common property systems that are clearly identified with a particular community, but which do not exclude and trample on the interests of outsiders. To tie in the idea of group rights, with the idea of universal rights. That's challenging, but by no means an impossible ideal.

PG Thinking of this enjoyment of rights within a larger, generational timescale, a recent study by the Centre for Economics and Business Research estimated that in the next 18 years house prices in London are going to rise in value three-fold. We know wages will not rise by anything like that in the same period, so our children will find it increasingly difficult to afford houses, and most homes will be passed to the new generation through inheritance.

It seems we are establishing a new landowner class in our big cities, with a corresponding and increasing class of dispossessed, with no hope of acquiring a secure interest in 'Braxfield's Britain'. Is this not the making of a new class takeover of Britain?

GM Yes, and I think it's very interesting the way you tie that in with issues of inter-generational justice. I hadn't thought of it in that way before, but I think that you're absolutely right.

This is a very, very major problem. It could easily lead to huge numbers of people being



Dispossession and homelessness are bleak prospects. The issue of rising house prices is a matter of intergenerational justice

effectively dispossessed, not just of property itself, but of any enjoyment of property – in other words, of any means of keeping a roof over their heads. We will see vast numbers of people becoming homeless.

So what do we do about this? I think the first thing to do is instantly transform the current pattern of building, which concentrates almost entirely on what are called 'exclusive developments', into one that concentrates on inclusive developments. In other words, prioritise affordable housing above expensive housing. This can only be done by very strict new development controls on the part of government.

It's clear from this issue alone just how absolutely useless the idea of privatisation of development control would be.

We will have to see an increased land take of one sort or another for housing. Those of us who are environmentalists, as well as being concerned with social justice, will have to yield some ground – literally and figuratively – and accept there are some places that will have to be built on to accommodate these demands.

However, just because land is grade-one or grade-two agricultural doesn't mean it should be defended most fiercely. Let's not blindly preserve the chemical deserts, while destroying the rare and beautiful places.

PG The idea of resource rents – the

reinvention of land value taxation – is attracting interest among groups around the world who care about economic and social justice. The requirement of the payment of a rent to the public purse would institute a public land right. How do you think land value taxation might help sort out the problems of housing provision in Britain?

GM I've been slightly confused about LVT. To begin with I was a great enthusiast, but then I began to get slightly worried about the possibility of creating perverse incentives. If you said "we are going to charge higher rates for land on which superstores, or executive housing gets built" then the bodies that benefit from the extra money – be it central or local government – might say "well, perhaps we should allow more superstores and executive homes to be built in order to reap those higher rates".

But I think I might have swung back to the idea. It ensures that there are wider public benefits from corporate and private land use.

One of the other great advantages of land value taxation, and indeed of fixed resource taxation of all kinds, is that it is a potential solution to this constant trend of tax flight, whereby corporations and rich individuals can effectively extract themselves from the tax system, by one ruse or another, claiming their assets were earned abroad – or indeed by moving those assets abroad or whatever.

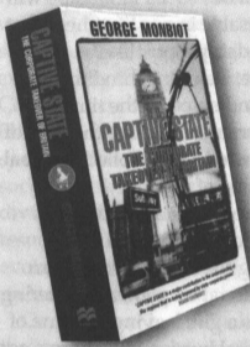
PG And again that's Braxfield's point.

GM Yes that's right. The point he makes about representation I would make about taxation. While Braxfield's saying that only those with major property should have a voice in society, I was saying those with major property should be the main ones who *fund* society – because that property is property which would otherwise be in wider public ownership.

But it's not just a question of what could be argued is a case of natural justice. It's also a pragmatic question of saying "how do we

Illustration: Lucy Glover Photography: Peter Gibb/Lucy Glover

Synopsis: Captive State



CAPTIVE STATE AND Naomi Kline's *No Logo* have been described as the two zeitgeist books of the beginning of the 21st Century.

Where *No Logo* has ironically become essential reading for marketeers looking to create global corporate brands, *Captive State* offers a campaigner's guide to resisting globalisation.

Monbiot charts the corporate takeover of Britain using 11 stories to reveal the extent of the problem.

Big developers come under fire for railroading local planning authorities into accepting development the local community doesn't want, often by off-site sweeteners paid out of planning gain. Monbiot reserves

special criticism for central government's role in planning, and he condemns its cosy relationship with big business. "When planning is in the hands of the developers, development will always work against us," he writes.

His investigations take him into the ethical grey-area of biotechnology. "Big biotechnology corporations are attempting to take over the food chain and turn the genes of plants, animals and humans into private property," he asserts.

Bewailing government's complicity in this, he asks: Who is to defend our rights?

www.captivestate.co.uk

Breaking ground

◀ maintain the tax base in the face of globalisation – for example, when people are trading in internet currencies, which have no fixed abode and are effectively untraceable and untaxable?"

I think the way forward is the one that many people have discussed in great detail, which is a gradual shift from the taxation of employment to the taxation of resources.

PG We've seen a number of books published recently that ask who own things – the sun, Scotland, the sky, Britain – but it seems to me that the underlying philosophical and moral issues are more clearly exposed when we ask the big question: who does own the world?

GM The short answer is no-one, and the second short answer is everyone!

And this, in a way, takes us back to the issue of stewardship and ecological justice. One thing we have to recognise is that, as far as the world is concerned,

We have to ensure this becomes a world for all its people, not just a few

we are the froth on the surface. We are of extremely little consequence in the wider scheme of things. So our starting point has to be one of humility – that we're just a collection of extremely complex chemicals subject to the same entropic forces as every other collection of chemicals on earth – and that from dust we came and to dust we shall return.

Having said that, our collection of chemicals has achieved such complexity we are able to feel a huge range of emotions, which include pain as well as pleasure, to inflict appalling suffering on others, to deprive people of an ability to keep themselves alive, and to ensure that their lives are enjoyable. So while our duty to the world is perhaps up for debate – simply because we are such puny fragments of cosmic matter – our duty to each other is very clear indeed: to ensure that all the six billion or so people on earth can live decent and comfortable lives.

And that means we have to restrain those who have seized a disproportionate share of the world's resources. We have to remove some of the resources from their hands, and redistribute them to other people. And we have to ensure that this becomes a world for all of its people, not just a fortunate few. **L&L**
www.monbiot.co.uk

Pay to pollute

The Earth has just 50 years before it is overwhelmed by catastrophic ecological disaster, warns environmental charity WWF UK. Here Peter Gibb argues for new social institutions to save the planet, and investigates an inspired proposal to make industrial polluters pay for the damage they cause.

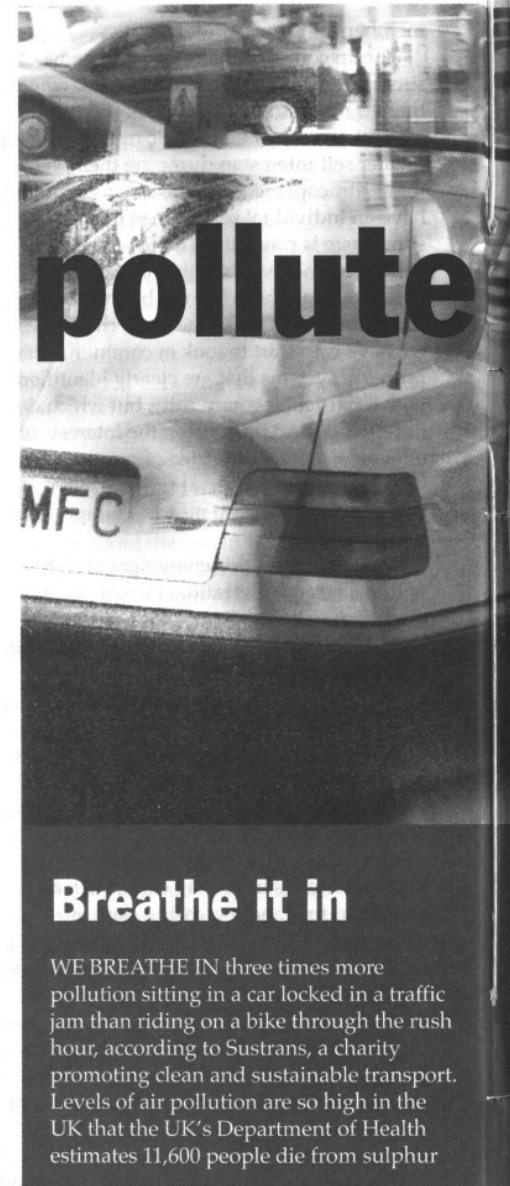
Ciaran Jennings reveals the disturbing extent of the problem facing people in the UK

WE LIVE IN a time of unparalleled change. The familiar social institutions within which we grew up, and in which we now participate as adults, are not what once they were.

It has always been the case that our institutions shift and change shape, develop and decline, supplant and finally are supplanted. As the American poet James Russell Lowell once wrote:

*When the travail of the Ages wrings
earth's systems to and fro;
New occasions teach new duties; Time
makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still, and onward,
who would keep abreast of Truth.*

The 'truth' and the 'good' of an age must manifest themselves in its social institutions. Today our 'earth's systems', in terms of both



Breathe it in

WE BREATHE IN three times more pollution sitting in a car locked in a traffic jam than riding on a bike through the rush hour, according to Sustrans, a charity promoting clean and sustainable transport. Levels of air pollution are so high in the UK that the UK's Department of Health estimates 11,600 people die from sulphur

natural and human ecology, are being 'wringed' to the point of imminent rupture.

Society's institutions are now changing to a degree and at a rate that is unprecedented. It seems that much of our social landscape will become unrecognisable in our lifetime. What might the new landscape look like?

Surely it must be: leaving behind the time of statist control, and entering the time of participatory governance; leaving the time of authority and knowledge controlled by cabal, and entering the time of popular enlightenment, empowerment and knowledge accessed by information and technology; leaving the time of work as an inadequate commercial bargain, and entering the time of work as a gift; leaving the time of community as a fiscal burden to be borne, and