

the common heritage of man, so too are the resources that lie under the land masses. Many accept that the opportunity to discover, harness and enjoy the fruits of these resources belongs to whoever, or whichever country, has the guts, the capital and the know-how, the time and imagination to set about it – with the proviso that in return for the privilege of so doing, a percentage return is made to the common purse – via the U.N. – to be distributed for the common good.

Exploration of the seabed is one thing; claiming ownership of tracts of the seabed is quite another. The U.N. has for long been moralising about the ownership of the seabed – yet is there any need for ownership? There is simply a need to return the annual rental for its use. Risk capital must of course find due reward but the rental income from the 'site' could be disbursed for the benefit of all in need – and how better than to channel such a return through the U.N.

There could be a time when it need not matter who or which country moves into an area, mounting their flag on a raft in the middle of the ocean to mark the spot – provided they make a suitable financial return to the U.N. annually. Such an income would certainly grow rapidly so that they would be in a position to hand out increasingly large benefits to Third World countries, to assist multi-national projects both large and small.

The seabed, like dry land, is God-given. In equity it cannot be a marketable commodity. Only the site can claim an annual return for its use, the value thus finding its way back to the people of the world.

Leaving aside the acquisition of land by force, fraud or patronage, the present owners of land bought it or inherited it from a forebear who bought it. The landless today have little chance of buying land, or homes, except at inflated prices. It would be tragic to think that the seabed might be treated in the same way with absolute possession or ownership until there was no more seabed left for the unborn. With a U.N. rental system in operation the economic development would not only be dramatic, but there could be a natural move of human resources away from the negative activities associated with the present social structure towards exciting and stimulating activities by the year 2000 that could add up to national well being, adventure, success and happiness.

# CORRUPT!

**T**HE LAND boom in the early 1970s turned Sir Eric Miller into a millionaire.

But it took more than the crash in 1974 to ruin him. He had to sell his shares to pay back the money which he had used as bribes. Then he took a gun and shot himself in his garden on 22 September, 1977, the Jewish Day of Atonement.

A Department of Trade investigation was launched to unravel the affairs of Miller and Peachey Properties, of which he was chairman.

The inspectors, Raymond Kidwell and Stanley Samwell, decided that "we are investigating the affairs of the Company, not the affairs of the nation."<sup>1</sup> This restricted perspective

has been rightly criticised,<sup>2</sup> for Miller's lying, cheating, forging and speculating exemplified a particular – corrupt – system.

It is easy to exonerate that system by emphasising the psychological characteristics of one man; the inspectors say that Miller had "mesmeric qualities."

The value of the report, however, is that it illuminates the ethos of a society which encourages people to seek their fortune at the expense of others. It is, therefore, an indictment of the system itself.

**M**ILLER spent £188,700 on "introductory commissions" – a euphemism for bribes.<sup>3</sup> The inspectors declare:

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**Sir Eric Miller: branded for bribery – but not for speculating. P. E. Poole reports.**

"In the property world it is often necessary to pay substantial sums to intermediaries. The nature of the services varies, but the payments may be conveniently and compendiously referred to as 'introductory commissions'."

Why were these payments necessary? The report explains:

"Thus an intermediary may have gone to the trouble of sounding out the respective owners of contiguous land as to the price they would accept, and can then put together a development site for presentation to a property company. Other less salubrious activities, such as bribing public officials, can be subsumed under the same term, as a euphemism."

The stakes were high, as can be seen from the Rushden land deal. A farmer sold the option on 210 acres (deposit: £10,000). Agreed price: £1m. The option expired on 31 August, 1973, and was conditional on the buyer securing planning permission for houses to be built.

This was in 1971, "when there was something of a gold rush for potential development property."

The speculator who bought the option then sold his rights to Miller for £810,000 – *although planning permission had not been secured.*

Miller then paid the farmer £1.2m. (for more land was taken in than was included in the original option). Total cost to Peachey: £2,024,392.

Was this a prudent investment? The inspectors conclude:

"The decision was taken in the heady days of 1973, which provides some explanation of the purchasers' conduct. It constituted a big gamble on the granting of planning permission."

No permission to build has yet been granted, and the value of the land has been written down in the Peachey books. As prime agricultural land it could be worth about £300,000.

**E**RIC MILLER began his career in an estate agent's office.

He worked his way up to the chairmanship of Peachey Properties, and the value of his shares in 1972 stood at £850,000. With other assets, he hit the million mark, a financial success which was crowned when he was knighted in the honour's list produced by retiring Prime

Minister Harold Wilson in 1976.

The shares dropped to £230,000 in 1977, which he sold to pay off his debts to his bankers.

He was, we are told, a generous man – with other people's money . . . which is how the world came to learn of the Saga of the Suitcase.

Miller bought jewels worth over £250,000 and other gifts like silver tea sets for people. He entertained lavishly, in jet-set style – with money sucked out of Peachey Properties.

But eventually the books had to be made to balance. The solution was a simple one. Miller withdrew money which he needed, he said, to bribe people. He then took the bundles of pound notes in his suitcase to his bank in Paddington, where he deposited the money. The cash was then transferred to another of his accounts, and then used to reimburse Peachey Properties for the cost incurred – at his behest – in buying jewels and silver tea sets!

**A**BOVE ALL else, it seems, Miller thirsted for social prestige.

He employed the late Reginald Maudling, a former Tory Foreign Minister, as consultant. To hedge his bets, he served as treasurer of Socialist International. He supplied champagne worth £3,300 for Sir Harold Wilson's Downing Street party when the Labour Prime Minister resigned. He was benefactor of Fulham Football Club, to which he attracted international soccer star Bobby Moore.

He craved status, and envied those who were prominent in London's top social circles.

He died a man branded a liar, cheat and forger. He was also a land speculator; but given today's attitudes, that was nothing of which he needed to be ashamed.

**REFERENCES**

1. *Peachey Property Corporation Ltd.*, London: HMSO, 1979.
2. Adam Raphael, 'Peachey: Nagging doubt,' *The Observer*, 4.2.79.
3. *Peachey*, op. cit., p. 118.

**Peachey Properties**

	Pre-tax profits	Share prices
1967	£1.1m	—
1968	—	27p
1972	£3.3m	189p
1974	£1.2m	16p
1976	£0.7m	—
1977	—£0.2m	—