

-And The Rights Of Civil Society

trade and commune with them again. If he could receive just a fraction of the potential benefits of such trade and community he would know himself to be better off. If he were told he could enter fully into the community and receive all its benefits minus the amount his own land was worth, he would surely rejoice at the bargain? Would he not be thinking it his privilege to be able to pay to the community his land's value in exchange for the greater benefits the community can confer on him as a member of it? It is not the community that is privileged in gaining effective access to 'his' land, but he who is privileged to find that his land, and he with it, is now a part of a wider community.

LET US look at our pioneer's rights to rent from another perspective, introducing an analogy.

In 1928 Sir Alexander Fleming produced penicillin, the antibiotic drug. Suppose that, unlike most inventions, the secret of this drug's formula could not be discovered by anyone who studied the drug

with a view to producing it himself. In principle, it would then have been possible for Fleming to make a vast fortune in his own lifetime; and his heirs, if given exclusive access to the secret, could continue to amass similar or greater fortunes in the future.

Meanwhile, society would be producing other major innovations, just as in the past; but because these innovations are readily imitated, no monopoly rent is captured by the inventor, except temporarily. Instead, the price of such things as are produced by the new techniques will fall and society as a whole will benefit. Sir Alexander Fleming and his heirs also benefit in this way from all these other inventions. Why then, society will ask, should Fleming monopolize the benefits of his invention? He would be asked to reveal his secret, or the Monopolies Commission would recommend nationalization. If Fleming then refused to produce any more of his drug he would be universally despised. He would be ostracised and deprived of society's benefits. And rightly so.

Is our pioneer any different from

an inventor who owns a secret or a product that no one else can replicate? And does not the landowner, like the monopolist inventor, become wealthy because a society exists around him? The greater the population and the greater its productiveness (borne of its accumulated stock of knowledge and capital), the greater the wealth that the landlord, like the monopoly inventor, can demand in exchange for what they possess.

Land, like a strict secret, is in strictly fixed supply. A responsible member of society who discovers new knowledge seeks to share that knowledge with his fellow men. While others may seek to hide knowledge from their fellows, it is fortunate that such concealment is usually short-lived. It is our great misfortune that we do not treat land in the same way as we treat knowledge and demand that it be common property. There is a fixed amount of knowledge at any point in time but we strive to make that knowledge as freely available as possible to all men. Why not treat land in the same way?

RENT CONTROLS: THE OBVIOUS 'PROOF'

PROVING the obvious with statistics is one of the growth industries of the social sciences. Gathering statistics, in fact, has become a substitute for advancing knowledge.

The latest example is based on research into the attitudes of private landlords and tenants.*

Sponsored by the Department of the Environment, Bobbit Paley sought the opinions of 1,000 tenants and their landlords. He found some remarkable facts which are truly designed to make us raise our eyebrows in astonishment.

◆LANDLORDS were more likely to be satisfied with the rents they received where these were privately

agreed with tenants, rather than fixed by rent officers.

◆LANDLORDS expected that nearly 40% of lettings which fell vacant would not be relet.

◆FORTY five per cent of the tenants said they would prefer to be buying rather than renting their homes.

This information, billed as affording "an insight into some of the factors affecting the privately rented housing market," must come as a bombshell to anyone who has given the British housing market just a cursory glance!

Interference with the provision and administration of housing aris-

ing from bureaucratic attempts to solve shortages needlessly aggravates problems. For example, the enormous loss in rentable homes because of the dissatisfaction caused among people who have capital tied up in buildings could be minimised for a small price: of those landlords who felt that the rent they were receiving was inadequate, 43% would have been satisfied with an increase of £3 or less. Will the politicians take note of that vital piece of hard-won statistical evidence? Very unlikely. . . .

*Attitudes to Letting, HMSO: £4.75

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