

Land Registration and Land Value

BY DAVID B. ASCHER

MOST PEOPLE, according to Dr. Ascher, tend to under-rate the significance of the Domesday Book, compiled in England after the Norman Conquest and completed in 1087. It recorded with surprising accuracy and detail the fiscal rights of the Crown at that period, the assets and boundaries of the townships and manors, and even windmills and plough-teams as sources of revenue. All sub-tenants and peasants were listed, with their values and military service, and there were entries regarding mints and markets.

About one-fifth of all land was in the hands of the Crown, three-tenths was held by the Church and the rest was divided among the nobility.

At that time the idea that all countrymen "might bear an equal share of the public burden" was widely held and Anglo Saxons seldom seemed to grumble at taxation, "so long as the burden was distributed in a fair and just manner, and nobody was able, by way of exemption, privilege or trick, to evade it."

The yard-stick by which the burden was measured was a simple one, understood by Lord of the Manor and peasant alike—the value of the land holding. Even today there could be no better or simpler yard-stick than land value, just as it was at the time of Domesday.

However, since few entries were ever revised, the Domesday Book was eventually made useless as a guide to land holding or to the fiscal rights of the Crown. With this in mind we should remember that the ideal land-value tax must be based on *up-to-date* information and that the tax itself should be periodically revised.

At the time of William the Conqueror land values changed very slowly, but change they did, and it is a pity that Domesday failed to keep pace with events. A national land value tax, based on a similar record, could today very easily be kept up to date with maps and plans, with no land transaction valid unless registered in this modern Domesday.

Both good and bad systems of land registration and of land surveys exist in different parts of the world today. There are computerised systems with punched cards. There are reliable maps and plans. We have an army of specialists—surveyors, economists, administrators and learned professors. Our present system, therefore, should be vastly superior to that introduced by William of Normandy. In fact, we have been struggling along with a system so patched and adapted that it bears little relation at all to the simple approach used in Domesday. Land registration is so unreliable and haphazard, that it would be foolish to suppose that a fiscal policy, property taxes or rates can be fairly based upon it.

Before any advance can be made in this direction it will be necessary to carry out a thorough cadastral (land tax) survey, to print land-value maps and to register the

value of all land as it is without improvements. The registrar would then record the facts on punched cards, two cards for each property. One set of cards would be arranged in accordance with blocks and parcels of land, the other set in alphabetical order of names of owners. Changes of ownership, lease, or mortgage, changes of planning order, restrictions, etc., would all be faithfully recorded from day to day. With push-button efficiency the computers could produce a variety of information with economy, speed and accuracy.

As soon as the new system had been introduced, no land transaction would be binding on either party unless registered at the land registry.

Taxes on income, on land sales, on commodity sales; property taxes, land increment duty and land transfer fees all suffer from their own special short-comings. But in the case of land-value taxation there can be no tax evasion, circumvention or trick. If one owns a plot of land one is obliged to pay the tax on it. Land cannot be hidden or its value disguised or altered. All that is needed to administer this efficiently is a system of land registration similar to the Domesday Book already described.

Political Philosophies in Great Britain

BY RONALD BANKS

AT THE END of the nineteenth century Britain led the world—supreme in technology, shipping, finance, and banking. She was close to achieving land-value taxation, and freedom of trade had already been won. But despite this happy position, the land problem still bedevilled the economy and poverty was widespread. Just how the various political parties contributed to the growing confusions is told by Mr. Ronald Banks, and his paper serves to illustrate how the many confusions arose.

Broadly speaking, one party grew out of another or fragmented when a great issue was at stake. Each party was based on some kind of philosophical thinking but too often the ideas were muddled or incomplete. A philosophy based four-square on true economic principles has never been more than partially understood by the few, while the many have chased their own notions of government without reference to the destiny of man as a whole.

The background of the three main parties is given in detail. The Liberal movement emerged from the growing industrial power centred in the new towns such as Manchester. The Whig merchants and manufacturers who had embraced the economic thinking of Adam Smith and held to Cobdenite policies, were its leaders. Over the years the Liberals have pressed for many humane reforms, including the abolition of slavery and have demanded justice, land reform, free trade, sound money and personal freedom.

The Conservatives grew out of the old Tory party, re-