

Breaking ground

The scandal of hand-outs to landowners

Administrative confusion engulfed the Committee stage of the Land Registration Bill. Kevin Cahill reveals how it emerged that £1.5 billion of taxpayers' money is annually handed to mysterious millionaire landowners – whose identity the Government does not officially know.

Without a properly functioning Land Registry introduction of any tax on land owners is difficult

THE LAND REGISTRATION Bill was supposed to be so non-contentious it would go through both Houses of Parliament on the nod. Then in strode Bill Cash, Conservative MP, shadow attorney general, lawyer and Shropshire landowner with 80 mind-numbing amendments.

During this Cash marathon last December, the Labour whips tried to introduce a new member to the Committee considering the Bill, but forgot to add his name to the Committee list or indeed to tell the MP, Sian Simon what they were doing. As a result Simon suffered the embarrassment of being refused a seat, while Lib Dem MP Adrian Sanders nodded off.

The Land Registry staff in attendance took great delight in the theatre, but failed to realise it was that their own position that was to become the true absurdity.

It was their own minister, answering a query from Sanders, who finally exposed their vulnerability. But when Sanders asked Michael Wills MP, the Chancellor's Minister in the Commons, to tell him what the Land Registry knew about land ownership in England and Wales, Wills revealed: "The Land Registry tells me that in its estimation,

around 65 per cent of the acreage of England and Wales is the subject of a register of title. This is an estimate because the Land Registry does not possess information about the total acreage of England and Wales. It creates titles without recording the acreage of each parcel of land they register, and its registers relate to interests in land."

The minister further turned the screw by explaining: "The [Land Registry] records are not kept in a manner that would enable the

Registry to establish with any certainty what land was owned by an organisation or individual without looking at each title one by one. There is a separate Index of Proprietors Names available for inspection, however this reg-

ister was not properly maintained prior to computerisation."

The country had a nascent Land Registry in 1876. The Return of Owners of Land was put together for England and Wales by clerks with quill pens in only two years. There are about 18 million titles in the Land Registry, the bulk of them covering domestic dwellings. Out of 37.2 million acres in England and Wales, 13 million are unrecord-

ed in the Land Registry.

Outside the urban redoubt, which covers 3.7 million acres, the bulk of England and Wales is still agricultural. This is officially an area of 26 million acres. The rest – about nine million acres – consists of roads, rivers and waste. The 26 million agricultural acres are owned by around 115,000 families, who receive on average 75 per cent of the annual handout of £4 billion of subsidy that is available in England and Wales. The money comes from taxpayers through the EU's Common Agricultural Policy and the UK's Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs.

In violation of a basic constitutional convention, which says that recipients of public funds have their names publicly identified, Government has refused to divulge the names of those riding this gravy train, which has doled out over £30 billion over the past 10 years. Wills reveals that the Government doesn't know who half the recipients of the money are. As much as £1.5 billion of public money is going into unknown bank accounts each year.

Within the landowning group of between 135,000 and 147,000 rural families, there are 41,000 families who own over 340 acres each.

The scandal is that landowners get paid from the public purse to retain their valuable assets