

## STRAWS IN THE WIND

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**FUNDAMENTAL** land reform is still a long way off. The likelihood of tapping the full rent of land as a source of public revenue in place of today's many repressive and regressive taxes does not appear to be an immediate prospect.

Still, there are indications — perhaps no more than straws in the wind as yet — that there may be some progress toward sensible land reform. Here are some developments in the USA:

**Assessments.** Around the country there is a growing realization that real estate has not been properly valued for tax purposes. Abuses, inequities and fractional assessments abound, but more and more attention is being paid to the problem. Resistance to change is profound, and all sorts of persuasions and pressures are being put forth to prevent full assessments, but the best professional opinion is in favour of assessment reform. The highest court in New York State has determined in favour of 100 per cent real estate assessments, and in many other states a drive in this direction is gaining force.

**Distinction between land and improvements.** This is an even tougher nut to crack, but to some extent the distinction is being made. The anomaly of vacant land in cities getting away with low taxes is gaining more attention. Another point receiving recognition is the unfairness of taxing every new improvement that enhances the community. It is also being noticed that the grossest under-assessment is usually with respect to land rather than improvements. So far, authoritative opinion asks only that land should bear "its fair share of the tax load" rather than become the chief source of revenue — but that is still a big step in the right direction.

**Land use planning.** This is an area fraught with perils and pit-

falls. It promotes temptation for ill-advised governmental controls and costly mistakes. But for all that, it represents at least an awareness that a problem exists: that land, a basic and necessary resource, is being misused as things are today. Much of the support for land use planning is based on this thought, as in an editorial on the subject in the *St. Petersburg Times* which stated: "Increasing numbers of citizens, *The Times* among them, argue that the national interest now requires that land owners no longer exercise absolute property rights over land. Land is an important, non-renewable resource. Land owners are custodians temporarily entrusted with its care." A great idea—but the job is to direct it toward the implementation of equal rights to land rather than the creation of one more bureaucracy.

**Land reform movements.** A newly enhanced appreciation for the land in this age of decaying cities has given rise to a number of grassroots movements. The environmentalist movement seeks the conservation of natural resources and the reduction of pollution, and has become aware of the power of land monopoly as an obstacle toward these goals. Various land reform groups on the rural front are battling large land owners and are promoting the interests of small farmers, tenant farmers and migrant workers. The land trust movement is also growing. A "land trust" purchases a tract of land large enough and cheap enough to permit settlement by homesteaders, leasing rather than selling the land. These movements indicate a recognition of the need to pay more attention to land and land tenure than has been the case.

**Public lands.** The public domain in the USA comprises a surprising one-third of its land area. While much of it is what is left over after the better lands have been

appropriated, there is much in the public domain that bears attention. Valuable resources exist on public lands and more are being discovered—timber, grazing land, oil, shale-oil, natural gas, minerals—and they are leased out on a bidding basis. Year by year revenues from this source are growing to significant proportions. Whereas the 19th century saw much squandering of the public domain, the Department of the Interior seems now resolved to conserve and manage it in the public interest. In addition, off-shore oil reserves are being leased by the federal government, bringing in more millions of dollars in revenue.

There are many more developments on the world stage—such as international conferences on the use of the ocean, the world-wide energy crisis, the need for land reform in developing countries. All these happenings may develop in a number of different ways and have not as yet shown a clear move in the right direction. But they show that the land question is very much a "now" thing and create an atmosphere in which the philosophy of fundamental land reform—equal rights to land via community collection of rent—is quite relevant and very much to the point.

## REVENUE BENEATH ITS FEET

Councilmen Robert F. Wagner Jr. and Henry J. Stern, both of Manhattan, have urged that the city stop under-assessing its 60,000 vacant lots and raise assessments to true value to increase revenues by \$18-million a year. They said this would provide an incentive for private owners to develop vacant land.

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