

Labour's land policy: no answer to injustice

THE MANY problems of farming stem from the fact that we try to operate policies within a framework of land injustice. This distorts the roles of farmers, farming and farmland from the outset.

We have placed ourselves in the absurd position of being a people without a land ethic, presumptuously busying ourselves with questions about the management of land. It is hardly surprising, then, if it turns out to be mismanagement most of the time, which is why Britain's Labour Party must abandon its proposal to nationalise farmland occupied by tenants.

In the first place, the issue of land reform is not one that applies just to agricultural land. Land is the basic resource of all production, and has to provide us not only with food; it has to supply, to each one of us, in the first instance, our living and working space.

It is obvious then, that the principles of land tenancy for a society must be worked out with scrupulous justice equally for all members of that society, as the first matter to be considered by it.

Farmland is in no special category at this elementary stage. A true land ethic starts from this pertinent observation once expressed by someone: "I have never seen the Creator's name on a title-deed to land" . . . a pithy reminder that we are all but tenants of this Earth and thus on an equal footing with one another in that basic respect.

Our "absurd practice of parcelling up portions of the planet and selling them to one another" must therefore go, having no starting-point in logic or in justice.

Land is not a capital asset. Or rather, it may be the Creator's capital, but it is not our's. For, the natural world being the source of our life here, its value is beyond our computing. What can be computed, however, is the value of its occupancy to individual members of a society.

We are perfectly familiar with this idea in the term *land rent*; and the starting-point of justice — for any society that pretends to place justice at its foundations — is that occupancy of land is placed equally, for all, upon an annual rental basis.

Since this rental value, the value of



Analysis by Shirley-Anne Hardy

occupancy, is community-created (it arises only where there is pressure of population upon land), so there is nothing impertinent in its payment to the community; although, by the same reasoning, there is much impertinence in its payment to anyone else.

IT WAS Henry George who pointed out that it is not necessary for the State to take land for that society to be placed on a just foundation, but only necessary for it to take rent. And the clear principle of this land rent justice, which he set out fully in *Progress and Poverty*, defeats, from the outset, the concept of land nationalization. (He also pointed out that the whole of our tax edifice has arisen as a false substitute for this one naturally-occurring source of public revenue).

The protestations by Labour that the State would be a good agricultural landlord — indeed, a model landlord, setting us all an example! — leaves one between laughter and tears. Suffice it to read '80s — The Land Decade' and 'Britain's Biggest Growth Industry: Creating Derelict Land!' to grasp that "delinquent" rather than "model" would better describe the State's role in today's land-owning scene.

As a Scotswoman, in particular, there is much I could observe about the State's role in landownership in Caledonia.

As for agricultural land, that is the very last kind of land with which the State is to be entrusted.

We need only survey the history of its dealings to date — the whole gamut of soil-exploitative and backward-looking policies of agro-business, propped up with equal assiduousness by Labour as by Tory administrations — and what possible grounds for further State dealings in agriculture are here?

It is, of course, to *individual* initiative that one has to look, to see where the

new farming — with its intelligent, imaginative and ecologically-viable techniques — is beginning to emerge, such as in the Permaculture movement in Australia and elsewhere.

Such initiatives — the real ones that move any society forward — could not come from the State, since the State is not, in itself, a caring being, nor has it any moral life. The caring and moral dynamic issues only from the individual. Hence the best thing the State can do — beyond standing fast against the trespass of one individual upon another (as in the private appropriation of land rent) — is to leave the way as free as possible for the initiative of its individual members to operate.

The last way this can be done is, of course, by the huge impertinence of State monopoly power (via land nationalization) over land use.

Fortunately, once land rent reform has been implemented, no need arises to "appoint" those wearisome committees so beloved of politicians, to be made up in this instance of tenant-farmers, workers from the estate in question, plus other representatives of the community where appropriate, the whole to act as a "logically-based advisory committee to the man responsible for running the estate from the point of view of the agricultural landlord." *What a set-up!*

This reveals the urban background of the Labour Party throughout its history which has left it out of touch with the soil.

As one who works the soil myself, I can say that the relationship between the soil and its (true) worker is a relationship of the most intimate kind — more intimate even than that between a man and a woman, and imagine that being run by a "committee"! True knowledge of the needs of the soil comes through the fingertips of the one who works it day by day.

In that fortunate society which does not suffer from the absurdity of trying to discuss land management without having a land ethic as a starting-point — in a society, that is, which places all of its members on an equal footing, as tenants of the land they occupy — we

cease the foolishness of categorizing people as "tenant farmers" and "farm workers", such as those "committees" had need to feed upon.

Nor will the anachronism of those "estates" exist any more to invite further such false set-ups for the long-suffering soil.

Nor shall we need to embroil ourselves in all those false arguments Labour is currently engaged in, as to what and how much land ought to be nationalized, and in addition all those various viewpoints about whether or not there should be "a pluralist system of ownership".

The land rent system will itself most effectively bring about parity in occupancy of land by the removal of that monopoly hold upon rental power which so thoroughly distorts the land pattern. People will then form their own co-operative ventures, or not, as they wish, in free association with one another and without interference from the State.

LABOUR'S thinking on land reform is stale. Why? A Labour spokesman on agriculture, after admitting that huge estates are unjust in their origins, most earnestly assures us that compensation must be paid to their owners under Labour's land nationalization scheme!

Labour's thinking suffers from viewing land as a capital asset. But this was not the original *people's* view of it. It is a view that grew up with the land-grabbers of history — against the people's idea and will. Surely, then, that view cannot be the starting-point of a radical programme of land reform? Let me recommend "Claim of Landowners to Compensation", in Henry George's book, which was a hundred years ahead of its time.³

Labour expresses concern over the question of access to land. This is the all-important question! But the nationalization of rent, not of land, will bring about the maximum public access to our national heritage. For the land rent reform will enable those who wish it to claim their fair share of our national heritage once more — and to possess it on a real living and working basis, thus restoring dignity of work to thousands lacking it in their false urban "confinement", and bringing a true flow of life to the countryside again.

REFERENCES

1. Anthony Wiggins, *The Clandestine Farm*, London: Granada, 1981.
2. *Land & Liberty*, Jan.-Feb. 1980.
3. New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1979, Bk. VII, Ch.3.

AROUND AMERICA

Dallas deal

DALLAS-based developers have bought most of the small town of Buckingham for \$40m. That is twice what a developer offered a year ago.

Said Bob O'Donnell, a former mayor: "People who bought two acres and a home 10 years ago for \$55,000 will end up getting around \$550,000 out of the deal.

The fate of the sleepy rural town was sealed when neighbouring Dallas sprawled towards Buckingham — and pushed up land values in its wake.

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WALT DISNEY Productions could one day become ripe for takeover, say business analysts. But investors would be "more interested in its vast land holdings than in Mickey Mouse," reports Thomas Hayes (New York Times, Sept. 25).

Breeding ground

HIGH LAND values are forcing the ducks from the South Shore waterfront on Long Island. Duck farmers have occupied the stretch of coastal land since the late 18th century, and they now produce more than four million birds annually.

The pressure is now on the farmers to give up their prime sites and move inland. And new techniques which make it possible to breed birds without the need for close proximity to water is also encouraging the farmers to cash-in on their assets.

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OKLAHOMA Cherokee Kathy Dalrymple, observing the difference between Indian and European cultures, says: "To sell Manhattan to the Dutch, that was the biggest joke for [the Indians]. How could you possibly sell a piece of the earth? The Indian measures his wealth by how much he could give and share. That's why it was impossible for him to comprehend owning land." (New York Times, Sept. 18).

Land Baron

THE NEW York Times (September 25) identifies Howard P. Ronson as "Manhattan's Newest Land Baron".

The British businessman has driven a big wedge into New York's real estate, despite the scepticism of local dealers.

"The old New York families didn't think I would last my first deal," he says. "Now they're saying, 'We didn't want to be as big as you, anyway'."

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would become a key feature in the annual accountability review process.

The notional rent would not result in annual charges for accommodation. In effect it would be a performance indicator which, when related to other relevant indicators, would show the effectiveness or otherwise of an authority's use of capital assets.

During the annual accountability review, instances of low performance would be identified, for example, where an authority's notional rent was high compared with measures of service delivery and other comparisons.

Failure to reduce the level of notional rent would be a matter for examination at a subsequent annual review. We hope that such cases would be rare and could be resolved by persuasion. If not, a form of financial penalty might be necessary."

Health authorities, says the committee, should be allowed to buy land next to their vacant properties, to enhance the resale value of their assets. But they should not be allowed to acquire land for "purely speculative purposes."

**Underused & Surplus Property in the National Health Service, London: HMSO, £3.95.*

'DISCLOSE INFORMATION' DEMANDS

DEMANDS are mounting for more official information about the British land market.

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has pointed out that statistics relating to trends in the ownership and occupancy of agricultural land should be treated with "great caution".

The Institution now wants the Ministry of Agriculture to monitor land ownership in its annual census.

The Economist, the weekly business newspaper, went further on August 20 and advocated a new Domesday survey of all property.

The survey could be carried out by volunteers at parish level, and the results published by 1986 — the 900th anniversary of William the Conqueror's Domesday.

And the *Estates Times* (August 12) declared in an editorial that rent review negotiations were a farce —

because rental data was unreliable.

Surveyors, said the newspaper, were hampered in their job of establishing rental values by the paucity of data on comparable properties.

In Scotland, rents on first lettings, together with prices from the sale of property, are registered. The same should happen south of the border.

**Contractual Relationships in Farming, London: RICS, 1983.*