



# CRITIC OUT ON A LIMB

By P. R. Hudson

*THE GROUND FROM UNDER YOUR FEET* by Louis Wulff  
(E. D. O'Brien Publications Ltd. 2s.)

**T**HE MAIN THEME of this song is land. Your land. My land. Our land." These are strong words indeed. They are particularly significant when published as they are in a booklet in this pre-election year. Rising land prices, fabulous gains made in the real estate business and the resulting shortage of inexpensive housing have been the subject of attacks on the political front by Socialists, Liberals and some Conservatives at frequent intervals. There has been some under-current in recent months to suggest that the "land question" might again become a major topic in party politics, although there has been reluctance in both Liberal and Socialist parties to force the issue firmly into the public eye. There may or may not be good reasons for this reticence: political strategy is a complex art beyond the comprehension of many of us! The publication of this booklet suggests, however, that at least one person is sufficiently concerned about the probability of land reform in the future to praise the merits of the present system of land tenure and decry the would-be reformers.

Mr. Wulff first turns his attention to the Socialist proposals for land reform as outlined in *Signposts for the Sixties*. In this document it is suggested that under a future Labour Government a Land Commission would administer the transfer to public ownership of the freehold of land on which building or rebuilding is to take place. The land would then be leased back to the original holders on terms which would ensure that the community obtains the benefit of any future rises in the price of land. In his criticism of this policy Mr. Wulff makes two important and valid points. The first is that the cost of purchase of the freeholds would be borne by the taxpayers and that it would incur capital expenditure for ever. The second point concerns the vast army of bureaucrats which would be required to administer such a scheme. Unfortunately Mr. Wulff is not prepared to rest on his laurels. Having laid bare the practical arguments against land nationalisation he then attempts to justify the status quo with moral and emotional arguments of a most dubious nature.

Limitations of space do not permit an exhaustive analysis here of all the points the author makes, and this task I shall leave to the interested reader who should find no difficulty in pitting his wits against Mr. Wulff's arguments. There are, however, good reasons for stimulating the reader's appetite, and this I shall attempt by analysing two aspects of criticism. Quoting Mr. Harold Wilson ("God gave the land to the people"), the writer continues, "Quite so. And who is Mr. Wilson to take it away again?" Acknowledging the existence of God, is it to be assumed that some people have been granted the

sanctified right to privileges and monopoly over others? Surely Mr. Wulff's reasoning implies this. I suspect that Mr. Wilson meant that land was given to *all* the people, and it would be very hard to disprove this. Putting this plea on slightly more rational grounds Mr. Wulff states that such proposals for reform would be steam-rolling the property rights acquired over 1,000 years of history and Common Law. The implications here are that the writer sees no difference between land and personal wealth gained by labour, and further that modern man must accept willy nilly legal precedent evolved in the past, without questioning either its moral validity or its effects on modern society. Are we to assume that man must serve the law rather than that the law should serve man's greater interests?

Turning his attention to the Liberals, the author points to the Land Development Corporation which the party claims would finance development with Government sponsored loans, enabling the community to share in any profits that accrue. This is viewed with as much horror as Socialist policy. Conservative policy, however, is viewed much more favourably, and as this amounts to a continuance of the status quo, one could hardly accuse Mr. Wulff of being "progressive", although from the tone of his words he appears to consider himself and that party to be worthy of the term.

The truth of the matter is that Mr. Wulff's work is potentially dangerous. It is attractively presented, and combines an unfortunate mixture of truth, half truth, special pleading, illogical reasoning and clever humour. What it does show indirectly is that there is only one effective way of ensuring that the community benefits from the increasing land values which it creates — by the taxation of land values! This approach to the problem is not mentioned by the author. The tragedy is that most readers of this booklet will probably not be aware of any practical alternative to the Socialist and Liberal proposals as criticised.

## Expensive Space—(6)

**T**HE FREEHOLD SITE comprising 156/158 High Street, Slough, Buckinghamshire, with a frontage of thirty-nine feet, and occupying one of the finest trading positions in the town was sold April 25 for £133,000. This is approximately £3,400 per foot frontage. The site has planning permission for redevelopment.

—Reported in *The Estates Gazette*, May 4.