



Land Commission: Pious Hopes for Planners

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"There is in the Land Commission a new and shining bright plough for the use of local government, the housebuilding industry and developers."—Sir Henry Wells.

SIR HENRY WELLS seems to be devoting considerable time to the public relations side of his work.

The Land Commission Act has been criticised on many valid and pertinent grounds, both inside and outside Parliament, and it still remains to many people, as one leading legal expert put it, "a large, ugly, and puzzling infant." For the benefit of members of the Town Planning Institute, Sir Henry Wells explained how the Commission would assist the town planning process by using the powers of compulsory acquisition under Part II of the Act as "a National Land Dealing Corporation with a strong social and economic conscience."

The Commission is empowered at present to buy land for the following four purposes:

- (1) To secure development at an early date if insufficient land is put on the market to meet the needs of the housing programme.
- (2) To ensure that land is developed "as a whole" where the Commission, with or without the support of the planning authorities, considers this necessary.
- (3) To obtain land for other bodies who in any event have their own powers of compulsory purchase.
- (4) To buy land for disposal on a concessionary crownhold basis.

While the Commission is building up its land trading fund by retaining the 40 per cent development levy "profit" it will concentrate its activities on five categories of land:

- * Land allocated for development but which does not appear to be offered on the market.
- * Land allocated for development but which for lack of local services the local planning authority *does not wish to see developed at present*, although private developers would be willing to do so!
- * Land proposed to be allocated for development by the Commission, an owner, a developer or a local planning authority.
- * Land in fragmented ownership or where owners cannot be traced.
- * Land out of which the Commission hopes it can make substantial profits for its land trading fund, i.e., undeveloped land.

Sir Henry went on to emphasise that the Commission wishes to assist planning authorities, developers, small builders and housing associations but that it will be unable to buy all the new building land that will be allocat-

ed even if it thought this was wise. He continued with this revealing statement: "In any case, in many places, particularly in areas of high demand for housing, the natural market pressures will often ensure that land is developed at the right time, but the Commission may need to intervene to stabilise prices and look after the interests of the small builders."

However keen Sir Henry might be to foster the image of the Land Commission as a dynamic instrument of social and economic reform, the more statements he makes the more the inadequacies and conflicts of the political concepts behind the Commission's powers are thrust into the harsh light of reality.

Referring to the betterment levy to be raised under Part II of the Act, Sir Henry declared: "It is possible that the effect of the levy will result in some owners being reluctant to sell in the hope of a change in the law, or they may increase the price of land on account of the levy."

Following Sir Henry's talk, Mr. J. K. Boynton, a legal member of the T.P.I. put his finger neatly on the reason for the Commission's compulsory powers, i.e., to enable it to step in and ensure that land was not being kept off the market because of the betterment levy.

As for assisting the planning authorities, an annual tax on land values would do far more than the Commission and the levy could ever dream of. In the first place, there would be a substantial annual charge on land allocated for development which would have the dual effect of prompting owners into action to build, let or sell, and of reducing selling price. In the second place planning authorities would encourage the redevelopment of land by re-valuing immediately it had been designated for a higher use. In the third place, where the land-value tax had not been paid because the owner had ignored the demands or could not be traced, the local authority could resume the title as a right, or effect a transfer to anyone willing to pay the taxes due. This is already common practice in some countries.

In spite of Sir Henry's optimism, evidence of the failure of the Land Commission Act to make more land readily available at a cheaper price is mounting every month. Town planners, who are particularly concerned with urban development, will find little to help them in the Commission's current policies. Sir Henry's shining bright plough is already showing signs of rust. And the Commission may "watch the effects of the levy" for as long as it wishes, but it is powerless to do anything about it!