

Land grab would have hurt the landless

PRESIDENT Mugabe of Zimbabwe thought he had hit on a clever electoral ruse, *writes Paul Knight*.

At the end of last year he announced that his government would seize five million hectares from white farmers to resettle landless peasants. So far, since independence from the colonial rule of Britain, Mugabe's government has succeeded in resettling about 60,000 people on previously white-owned land.

That was a pathetic accomplishment for a government that came to power on the back of a campaign to restore land rights to the dispossessed people of colonial Rhodesia.

But Mr. Mugabe was *damned* if he was going to pay compensation to the white landowners! So at the

Commonwealth conference in Edinburgh, Mr. Mugabe attempted to persuade British Premier Tony Blair to pay compensation to the owners of 1,732 commercial farmers whose land he intended to acquire. He failed.

The country's 4,500 commercial farmers work 24 million acres, about 40% of arable land. Over eight million peasants occupy the remaining arid land.

Zimbabwe is the land of land grabs.

- White settlers pushed people off their ancestral lands in the 1890s.
- After the Second World War the Rhodesian government seized the best farmland from the tribes for resettlement by British immigrants.

Zimbabwe relies on commercial farmers for the inflow of much of its foreign currency. Observers feared that transferring land to black farmers would result in a catastrophic drop in productivity and loss of jobs for an estimated 100,000 workers. Their fears were realised. The Z\$ crashed against the US\$.

So the IMF and World Bank were called in, and that was when President Mugabe's land grab came unstuck.

As hundreds of people rioted in protest against escalating prices of the food staple - maize meal - the financiers imposed a price for the \$144 million in loans: a written undertaking to abandon the land grab without compensation.

Last November the government had issued a list of 1,480 farms which it proposed to acquire.

The government tried to blame the street riots on a "white conspiracy", claiming that farmers were financing the trouble makers in revenge for the threat to grab their land.

L&L COMMENT: The government does not have a coherent model of economic development which integrates social justice with economic efficiency. President Mugabe could achieve the best result by a tax-driven solution to economic growth and full employment. The eradication of poverty is now conceded as a priority objective in any plan to achieve sustainable development. Displacing white farmers may fulfil the feeling for revenge, but it would not restore the right of every person in Zimbabwe to an equal share of the land of his or her birth. The one policy that would simultaneously solve all the major developmental and environmental goals would be a restructured public finance. The rent of those farmlands is the birthright of all Zimbabwe's citizens, not just the relatively few who would be resettled on the land grabbed from white tobacco growers.

Anatomy of Our Land

THE SOCIAL war over rights to land in Britain is well told in a new edition of Marion Shoard's *This Land is Our Land* (Gaia, London, £10.99). It has become a reference work for The Land is Ours campaign, whose activists are committed to action against landowners who put their interests above those of everyone else.

Ms. Shoard documents the land story largely from the rural aspect (she is lecturer in rural policy and environmental planning at University College, London), but she ranges widely and authoritatively over fundamental issues such as the distribution of power in society. She notes:

"For most of the last thousand years, the central political struggle in Britain

has been between landowners and the landless. After the Millennium, the twentieth century's pre-occupation with urban economic questions may come to seem a temporary and peculiar aberration. It is the endless contention over the land on which we all must live which is the most natural source of conflict in human life".

A new introduction summarises not just the UK experience of the past 10 years, but some of the highlights around the world in which indigenous groups are making successful bids to reclaim traditional rights to land. Perceptively, Ms. Shoard recognizes that we may be too close to the ground to see the broad sweep of history in its correct context.