

# Figuring out an Ulster fallacy

IT'S YET another case of how statistics can lie. George Thomas Kurian, the author of a compilation of statistics, correctly notes:

"More revolutions have been caused by inequities in land ownership than by any other single reason in history. The owners of land have traditionally been the privileged class, while the renters have been the hewers of wood and the drawers of water."

Unfortunately, he then concludes that "The most glaring inequities have been corrected in most countries through a combination of reform and revolt to the point that farm operators constitute the majority of farm owners in the majority of the reporting countries."

Kurian then publishes a list of 59 countries, ranked according to the percentage of owner-operated holdings. At the top of the list? Northern Ireland, where — according to data from the early 1970s — 86,827 holdings were 100% owner operated.

Is this evidence that, in at least one place on this earth, there is perfect economic equality and justice? Not so far as the native Catholic population is concerned! Their tribal forebears owned the

## INSITE ANALYSIS

land, and they were dispossessed — completely, it would seem — by the mainland Protestant settlers during the colonial era. It was the disparities in wealth, and the absence of any political power, which caused the uprising in the early 1970s.

Kurian, of course, does not intend to lie with his statistics. Nonetheless, this example demonstrates the need to take care when drawing conclusions from bald data. What conclusions, for example, would one draw from the figures on the distribution of landownership listed in the

## LANDOWNERSHIP

Percentage of total land area owned

	TOP 10%	BOTTOM 10%
Barbados	95	0.5
Peru	93	0.1
Colombia	80	0.2
Mauritius	80	1.8
El Salvador	78	0.4
Guatemala	76	0.5
Jamaica	74	1.6
Nicaragua	67	0.1
Dominican Republic	63	2.0
Lebanon	57	1.0
Tunisia	53	0.5
Turkey	53	0.9
Morocco	49	1.0
Indonesia	48	3.0
Pakistan	46	0.4
Brazil	45	1.5
Panama	45	1.0
Mexico	37	0.3
Bangladesh	34	1.0
South Korea	28	2.0
Greece	27	2.6
Lesotho	22	3.0

SOURCE: U.S. Agency for International Development, quoted in George Thomas Kurian, *The New Book of World Rankings*, New York: Facts on File Publications, 1984, pp. 162-163.

table? Surely they imply some thing about political instability (in countries like Nicaragua) and repressive military action against the civilian population (in countries like Guatemala and Nicaragua)?

The maldistribution of land determines living standards and social relationships. The FAO World Census of Agriculture reveals that there are 138.3m farms in 83 of the larger countries of the world. Of these

- 54 million (39%) are less than one hectare and occupy 1.1% of the land area and 3.4% of the cropland;

- About 109m farms (78.8% of the total) are less than five hectares in size and occupy 6.8% of the total land area and 21% of the cropland;

- Holdings of 200 hectares or more represent less than 0.8% of all holdings but account for 66% of the total land area and 25% of the cropland;

- In Asia, 40% of the land is comprised of farms (accounting for 80% of holdings) of less than five hectares in size.

## FROM 'UNCLE' ALEC!

past editions of the *Source Book*," ALEC reports in a review of its work since its founding in 1973.

The Pro-Enterprise Act is patterned after Pennsylvania's law enabling local jurisdictions to tax land at higher rates than buildings, but with several differences:

- The two-rate property tax may be adopted by popular referendum as well as by an act of the local governing body;
- Any city or county in the state may make use of the option; and
- The differential rates once enacted, apply to all property taxes levied within the jurisdiction's boundaries. (In Pennsylvania, only municipal rates are changed, while overlap-

ping school and county property taxes continue on the old basis.)

The model act stresses uniform practices. In most states this simply means obeying laws frequently ignored.

The *Source Book* clarifies that its 59 model laws may be modified to meet special circumstances in different states. Legislators or citizens pushing for implementation thus need not feel bound by the details of the model.

Assemblyman William J. Filante of California, an ALEC member, initiated this project. The Center for Public Dialogue drafted the model act and worked with ALEC staff and members who eventually selected the land tax proposal from among several dozen competing suggestions.