

Arctic landrush



Following in the footsteps of Cook and Peary, a race for geological information is being run between scientists from Russia, Canada, Denmark and the US. The four nations are all forcing scientific excursions north of the Bering Strait – not competing for the right to issue Father Christmas stamps, but in order to claim the geological riches under the ice cap. On the 2nd of August the Russians planted a flag on the North Pole in order to lay a claim to its gas and oil reserves. The Americans are understood to be in hot pursuit. Canada and Denmark are also making claims, based on the line of an obscure underwater ridge, and the geological subtleties of whether Greenland is in fact linked to the North Pole.

By 2014 the UN will be looking at the scientific evidence gathered by the various national expeditions. Ultimately it is the UN's International Court of Justice in The Hague that could decide who gets to sit on top of the world.

The great haul of China

China's crazy real estate boom has led to an escalation of illegal land grabs, chiefly administered by local Communist Party officials. Of the 14,700 hectares of land illegally appropriated in the first four months of 2007, a staggering 80% was stolen by local government bodies, and in many cases given to friends and business partners of Party officials. In a system that is rife with corruption, only the small fish are punished, says Li Yafang, a standing member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. "The more powerful officials were 'overlooked', and that has led to more land grabbing" he told *Asia Times*. [The last issue of *L&L* reported China's forthcoming *Real Rights Law*, which will establish a unified system of private property and a land-use rights scheme. Ed].

Greek landlords linked to arsonists

There is mounting evidence that this summer's epidemic of forest fires ravaging Greece has been an extreme consequence of a well-known local problem: developers, dissatisfied with local planning decisions, turning arsonist. Land razed of protected forestry might find development consent more easily.

The government has offered up to €1m in reward for information leading to arrest. Tragically, there may be murder charges. The state has a poor record of dealing with such arsonists.

The obscurity of political strategy

Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh. June 21, 2007, 17.04. Abstentions: Harper, Robin (Lothians) (Green), Harvie, Patrick (Glasgow) (Green).

The Presiding Officer: "It has gone very quiet all of a sudden. The result of the division is: For 64, Against 62, Abstentions 2. Motion, as amended, agreed to. Resolved, that the Parliament believes that local income tax, which is based on ability to pay, is a fairer system of local taxation than the discredited and unfair council tax and notes the position of the Green Party in regard to land value taxation."

Brian Hodgson

Brian Hodgson, chair of the Labour Land Campaign and former Labour group leader on Oxfordshire County Council, has died from a heart attack after a short illness. From 2001 Hodgson was the political driver of the Oxfordshire land value taxation trial project.

Friend and colleague Dave Wetzel, President of the Labour Land Campaign, said that Hodgson "will be sadly missed, not only because of his immense contribution to socialism and the land tax campaign but because of his humour, his honesty and also because he was a smashing bloke."

Sunshine estate

Florida's land preservation programme is running out of money. The funds allocated were supposed to last until 2010. "But the state's wallet is empty", says programme director Keith Fountain to *St Petersburg Times*. The land is turning out to be too expensive to buy.

Property tax goulash

The 386 members of the Hungarian parliament, the Országgyűlés, will be voting this autumn on a number of bills prepared by the Finance Ministry. Perhaps the most significant of these is the introduction of a general property tax which will combine a number of existing taxes on land and property. The reform is not intended to bring in any greater revenue than the €1/4b brought in by the current taxes – around 1% of government revenues.

Finance Minister János Veres said to the daily paper *Napi Gazdaság* that there is still a lot to do to meet the provisions of the contract between Veres' Socialist Party and its coalition partner, The Free Democrats. The nature of the proposed property tax is still undecided. Indeed, the lawmaking schedule does not yet mention the property tax by name.

Miklós Tátrai, Secretary of State at the Finance Ministry, said the property tax – which will be strictly value-based – would be levied by local governments using a unified methodology. However, it would be the task of local governments to decide on tax rates, allowances and exemptions.

The law is expected to take effect from 2008, but the actual reforms will not be introduced until 2009.

After a mid-nineties economic recession, Hungary's government has concentrated on a number of reforms of the tax system, public services and local government finance. These have had the overall goal of preparing the country for its entry into the European Union, and the possibility of joining the Eurozone sometime between 2010 and 2014.

Historically, between 1848 (when serfdom was abolished) and the Communist takeover a hundred years later, a great number of land reform schemes were proposed and implemented. Most adhered to Marxist doctrine. But there was also a strong contingent of land reformers influenced by the American economist Henry George. The leaders of the 1918 republican revolution included land value taxation in their programme, but the counter revolution a year later abolished their reforms.

