



David Richards on the Oxford land conference

Politics and the taboo question

THE FIRST Minister of Town and Country Planning was appointed in 1943, charged with "securing consistency and continuity in the framing and execution of a national policy with respect to the use and development of land . . ."

Forty years on, that brief has been abandoned¹ and the chosen policy of regulatory land use planning, instituted by the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, "is itself coming under critical scrutiny among politicians, and among land use planners themselves"²

It was to review this situation that Patsy Healey of the Town Planning Dept. at Oxford Polytechnic and Sue Barrett of the School for Advanced Urban Studies at Bristol called a conference at Oxford on Land Policy: Problems and Alternatives.

The conference's stated aim was "to interrelate the discussion of land ownership, values, land use planning and development policies, and to review the extent to which recent theoretical work and research findings contribute to our understanding of this area of policy, to evaluation of current policy and proposals for change".

In the event, little inter-relating was attempted other than between planning and development policies. A variant of Parkinson's Law ensures, in these circumstances, that the private games of the planners take up all the time allotted.

This was far from being the wish of the organisers. Barrett and Healey's introductory paper opens thus:

One reason for calling the conference is that "the land question" is once again on the political agenda in Britain with the abolition of 1980 of the Community Land Act. Yet in our view a serious criticism of the post-1947 attempts to review the land question in the UK is that the issue of State intervention in land ownership and land values has been repeatedly discussed *in isolation* from the more firmly established system of regulatory land use planning, and, more broadly, the role of state intervention in the ownership and allocation of land and property in relation to social and economic policy . . .

One of our main concerns in calling this conference has been to re-integrate the discussion of land use and land values in the UK, frequently treated in recent years as separate activities. We believe that this division has arisen because of the way land policy has been institutionalised in the UK (with planning departments and planners concerned with land use matters), and the separation of the more politically contentious parts of land policy (land values) from the more generally accepted programmes (concerning the control of land use).

Their attempt to reverse the momentum of decades was, however, defeated. A cloudy

verbiage whipped up by 100 or so theoreticians and practitioners of the established mode of land policy rolled over the land question, which disappeared from sight.

Their mistake was to "take a broad definition of land policy . . . The 'land question' in any society involves bringing together consideration of land ownership, use, management and development, and the role of deliberate State intervention in pursuit of social and economic goals."

The net was cast so wide that the fish they were really after were lost amidst a teeming, slippery mass of distractions.

Only the first two of these concerns is the land question ("To whom does the land rightfully belong?"); the rest are economic questions, to be answered only after the land question has been settled.

THE LAND question, however, was not asked. Ad hoc land answers, such as those of the UK, USA, Sweden, Holland, West Germany, Israel and Taiwan, were referred to for their bearing upon economic questions rather than for their solutions to the land question.

In fact the very reverse of Barrett and Healey's intentions was realised. The conference bemoaned the intrusion of politics into the arena of land policy.³ It pleaded that questions of ownership and betterment be put into cold storage, the institutional framework of land policy frozen, and the

land use technocrats freed to implement their plans.

The majority of participants, in effect, adhered to a view explicitly rejected by Barrett and Healey — Nathaniel Lichfield's view of "land policy as merely the set of instruments and mechanisms for achieving *land use planning* objectives." These "do not express policy ends of their own" but "policies defined elsewhere."⁴

On the contrary, Barrett and Healey "would argue that many policies in the land field have underlying ends related to the distribution of property rights between the State and the individual (or private company), and the distribution and redistribution of benefits arising from the ownership and use of land and property."

Alas, the conference had not ears to hear. Only one paper addressed these "underlying ends", 'Changing Patterns of Land Tenure: The American Experience', by Arlo Woolery, Executive Director of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. Its main thrust was to uphold indiscriminately "the sanctity of private property", as "promulgated by the Constitution" without distinguishing between property in the gifts of nature and property in the works of man.

However, in a workshop session, Arlo Woolery did commend the two land taxes of Taiwan for distributing the benefits of land ownership over the whole population. Nevertheless, he later held it against "Henry George's theory" that they had not kept down land prices. Of course, there are many exogenous variables, he added.

As for the rest of the conference, it proceeded as though Lichfield's definition had been adopted. Any policy under the sun with a land-use component was fair game — housing, employment, inner cities, the regions, local government structure and so on. Only the land question was taboo.

Consequently, another of the convener's major goals was thwarted, that of overcoming "the intellectual fragmentation of the land policy field." Robin Thomson, Chief Planning Officer of the London Borough of Southwark, was able to conclude in the final session that fragmentation had deepened over the past three days. And Patsy Healey's parting words were to apologise for being unable to avoid compartmentalisation — the scale of the subject was so vast.

Had they stuck to their guns and asked the right question at the beginning, no apology would have been necessary.

REFERENCES

1. W. Solesbury, 'Defining and Defending the National Interest in Land Use', Conference Paper, p. 3.
2. S.M. Barrett and P. Healey, 'Land Policy: Towards a Policy and Research Agenda', Introductory Review Paper, p. 1.
3. S. Markowski, 'Urban Land Policies for the 1980s: An Economic View', Conference Plenary Paper, pp. 33, 34.
4. Barrett and Healey, op cit., p. 4.



● SUE BARRATT



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