

LAND and LIBERTY

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• COVER PHOTO: Norwegian land speculator Niels Bugge scans the acres of Limehouse, West London, in which he invested £10m before the Stock Exchange crash. What are they worth today? See pages 7 & 9. Photo by Peter van den Berg.

SCARCELY THE WAY TO PLAN FOR PARADISE

ARE WE suffering from a "surfeit" of land?

Britain's surveyors and town hall planners seem to think so, to judge by the title of their joint conference in November: *Planning for A Surfeit Of Land?*

IT IS TRUE that Britain's cities are afflicted with the dereliction of seemingly abandoned, wide-open spaces - 200,000 acres of it, at least. According to Peter Hall, a professor of geography, the British are now experiencing the urban blight which appeared much earlier - in the 1950s - in the United States.

IT IS TRUE that about 20% of agricultural land could fall out of production, if the criminally wasteful policies of the Common Market are changed to take account of the fact that Europe now produces more than it can consume or dump on the world markets.

But that does not mean there is a surfeit of land, as John Loveless, a lecturer at King's College, London, pointed out. On the contrary, he reminded the experts that land was in fixed supply and therefore had to be treated as scarce.

Lord Young, the Minister for Trade and Industry, presented the keynote speech, which took the form of a review of government policies. These, he explained, were designed to renew the inner cities and reduce the high levels of unemployment that afflict these communities.

Partnership was the key concept, said Lord Young: a partnership between government and the private sector. And the objective of this partnership was to encourage individuals to help themselves. How was this to be achieved?

• Not by the government spending much more money: taxpayers could not be tapped for more cash, warned Lord Young.

• But this did not mean the government was pursuing a hands-off policy. On the contrary, jobs-for-the-hoys bodies such as the urban development corporations and the so-called "task forces" were charged

with the task of co-ordinating action.

But as John Loveless pointed out: new policies had been thrown at all the factors associated with urban blight.

Property taxation too high? Rates are being abolished for home-owners, and the proposed property tax on businesses will be "capped" if councils try to charge too much!

Expensive to reclaim derelict sites? Grants are available!

Owners hoard land? Development corporations have the power to compulsorily purchase and reallocate sites to new users!

And so on.

There is just ONE problem about which the government is doing nothing: high land prices. And that, explained Mr Loveless, was the key problem. He had a matching solution; he reminded the professionals that a tax on the value of land would curb hoarding and reduce prices to levels users could afford.

Mr Loveless is right, but Mrs Thatcher's Minister did not hear him: he had departed to make another speech about the need for the individual to be more self-reliant. Meanwhile, nearly three million workers continue to struggle against their strait-jackets, unaware that their taste of unemployment is apparently evidence of a lack of personal enterprise.

Time is running out. Past mistakes - the ones that now give the impression that there is a lot of free land going begging - are being over-taken by new events, such as the enormous shift in the distribution of the population in favour of the south - similar to the drift to the Sun Belt in the United States.

Lop-sided economic development leads to a waste of land and a maldistribution of wealth. In common with all Western industrial nations, Britain urgently requires a dose of corrective action.

The needs of the individual and of society must be balanced in a sensible political programme from which the reformists of Moscow and Peking could learn a thing or two.