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Public Land Ownership: Framework for Evaluation. Toronto:
D. C. Heath and Company, 1976. \$17.00

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BOOK REVIEWS

Kehoe, D., Morley, D., Proudfoot, S., and Roberts, N., editors. Public Land Ownership: Framework for Evaluation. Toronto: D. C. Heath and Company, 1976. \$17.00.

In November 1975, York University held a Conference on public land ownership. The idea for the Conference grew out of the belief that although public land ownership as a technique for government activity has become accepted in western democracies, intellectuals and academics in the urban field have not explored the subject matter. With this in mind, a group of York academics decided in 1974 to commission some papers and organize a Conference on the subject. The date of the Conference coincided with preparations for the 1976 United Nations sponsored HABITAT Conference and in fact, the York Conference served a dual role, in addition to exploring a subject area it also served as one of a series of National HABITAT Symposia held to generate the Canadian position at the HABITAT Conference.

In the introduction, the editors state that: "The book explores the current debate on public land ownership from the standpoint of the main actors involved in making decisions with regard to land: politicians, public planners and land managers, civil servants at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, developers and users. Since the statements emerged from the Conference forum, they are a presentation of idea and a generation of debate" (p. xi). The volume has chapters on objectives of public land ownership and the relationship of public land ownership to planning and the management of natural resources. The second half of the volume concentrates on case studies in Canada - involving all three levels of government - and in developing countries. The speakers to the Conference included some well-known figures in planning and urban affairs from Canada (Jane Jacobs, R.W.G. Bryant, Kenneth Hare, Hans Blumenfeld, Michael Dennis), the United States (Ed Logue, Fred Bosselman) and Europe (Peter Hall). In general,

the debate appeared to be more of a state-of-art review than a pioneering exercise.

When discussing public land ownership in Canada it is important to keep in mind that just over 10% of Canada's lands is held in private ownership. The federal government owns close to 40% of Canadian lands - mostly in the territories - and the provincial governments own the rest. Nevertheless, the 10% of the lands in private ownership is located where over 90% of the Canadian population lives and where the competition for land is the greatest. The orderly conversion of land from agricultural to urban use, the rationalization of land use in built up areas, and the problems associated with agricultural land uses not only in the urban fringe but also in the hinterland provide examples of the tensions surrounding the management of our land resources.

Land is perceived to be a natural and finite resource by many urban experts. They believe that since not much land can be produced (eg., infilling water bodies, highrise development), land values reflect demand and supply factors. With increasing population, incomes, leisure time and mobility, the demand for land increases with a corresponding increase in land values because of the limited supply. The development values generated by social and economic trends are, in turn, allocated in Canada mostly by governmental actions via infrastructure developments (highways and sewers) and the regulation of land use by a variety of techniques such as zoning, subdivision regulation and policies on severances (ie., the division of farms into estates and building lots in non-urban areas). As a consequence, public actions have a financially beneficial impact on some land-owners to the disbenefit of others - an inequitable process - and public land ownership is recommended as an answer to such equity problems.

It is alleged that if the public owned the land then activities such as planning and infrastructure servicing would not result in the

inequitable treatment of individuals. Conversely, the problem today with our finite land resources is that public activities create windfall profits for some while deprive others from profits by the allocation of development value generated by social and economic trends. This argument is also sometimes paraphrased. It is believed that even though no one is really deprived from reaping the benefits of land price appreciation - downzoning is not frequent in Canada - the greatly increased land values provided to some land-owners by public action (up-zoning or the construction of a highway) create a windfall to these land-owners at public expense and that these "unearned increments" should be "recouped" for the public.

In addition to responding to equity concerns public land ownership is also recommended for ensuring an effective planning process. It is widely believed that current Canadian planning efforts are hampered or at least strongly influenced by a system of private land ownership. Land-owners can exert pressures on the planning process via sitting on planning commissions and city councils, via the preparation of costly and well-argued briefs to elected and appointed officials, or by merely not complying with plans. Public bodies usually plan but leave implementation to private enterprise and the private sector is not bound to implement plans. Hence the argument that public land ownership would make it possible to implement plans - there would be no "holdouts" in urban areas, good agricultural lands would not be sold to developers and fragile ecological areas could be preserved for the public instead of developed with private cottages with a consequent pollution of the natural environment.

Although the equity and planning arguments have been gaining popularity, many counter-arguments have also been posed. The gist of the counter-arguments is that we have sufficient public power right now - legal and economic - to deal with equity and planning issues and that these powers are much less costly to apply than the acquisition of huge chunks of land. For example, zoning is a powerful tool and with sufficient political will it could be used to preserve fragile lands and

good agricultural lands - there is no need to acquire them. In addition, the equity concern should be tackled head-on by tax measures - such as a land transfer tax taxing away a large part of the profits - and not indirectly by land acquisition.

In turn, the pro-public lands people claim that there is yet to be a method which is capable of fairly assessing profits and which would not be politically controversial. Entrepreneurs do take risks and risks should be rewarded - how much reward should be given for what kind of risk? These kinds of questions lead to interminable arguments with a frequent conclusion that public land ownership is the best solution to both equity and planning concerns.

The main options for managing our land resources are between a total market-oriented approach and the nationalization of land or the replacement of the market allocation system by a bureaucratic allocation system - a distasteful possibility for the private enterprisers who question governments' competence in this field. There have been many other approaches in between the two extreme positions - all concerned with equity and planning matters. The British have tried a number of approaches concerned with compensation and betterment with no real success to date. In England, various approaches to the land issue have become associated with political parties. In the United States the private enterprise ideology has been too strong to date to let the idea of public land ownership take hold. In contrast, in Canada, public land ownership is perceived to be a technique for the implementation of limited governmental objectives such as social housing and new towns. As such, the subject has been kept generally free of ideological and political overtones and has been gaining a measure of popular acceptance.

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