

SURPLUS LAND SALES

Oliver Letwin and I visited Department of the Environment to see the Register of Unused Land and quiz officials. We found that there were 12,000 parcels of land over 1 acre, owned by public authorities, that were registered as unused under the 1981 Act. With Herculean energy, the Department had issued 50 directions to sell unused land this summer which, after being whittled down, may result in 21 sales. Following this glorious triumph, the Department was about to embark on regular monthly sales of 10 parcels of land. On our reckoning, this will clear the backlog of unused public land in approximately 200 years!

The Department put up the following excuses:

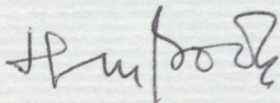
1. Staff. After some hesitation, they admitted they had 30 staff in the DoE and in their 8 regional offices. They did not agree that achieving one order directing sale every 3-4 months per person employed was poor productivity. They claimed that for each parcel of land sold, a number of unsuitable sites for sale had to be vetted.
2. The Department felt there were good reasons why much of the land need not be sold. They took the extraordinary view that one-quarter of the land was totally worthless.

This was the decision of officials, and they would not allow the market to decide whether or not the land had in fact any value.

3. The Department was baffled by bureaucratic manoeuvres by local authorities. For example, if a local authority claimed that a tiny part of any larger piece of land was either going to be used for a genuine purpose, or if part of the land - even two square inches - were not properly owned by the council involved, then on both these instances the whole direction under the Act had to be halted and the whole procedure begun from scratch.

Conclusion

We were appalled by the total failure of the administration to carry out properly your clear guide on this issue. It was hardly any mitigation for the officials to claim that, for each order directing sale, any other sales were precipitated. On the subject of Mr Bradman, there was strong resistance to his alleged claim to have first option on much of the land; but DoE agreed that it was a sensible policy to sell land without planning permission, and allow developers to clear the red tape themselves. They already followed this policy occasionally. We are following this matter, and will report again.



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