
Time to cut our feudal ties

Who Owns Britain?

Kevin Cahill

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Kevin Cahill tells us that Tony Blair "cut the umbilical cord of history when he ejected 66 peers from the House of Lords.

Cahill's big and meticulously researched book shows how aristocratic landowners have dominated Britain for centuries and that their control has become the dead hand that hampers every aspect of the economy and society.

This book uses the word "conspiracy twice in the preface and begins by examining why all efforts to collect and publish a register of all the holdings of land in the UK have been frustrated up to now.

Today the buying and selling of small properties is duly recorded. How is it that the holdings of the big aristocratic landowners have avoided public scrutiny? Why is there one system for the ordinary citizen and another for the great? This book lists the major registered holders of land, and compares the 1872 Register's lists of named top landowners, by acreage and value, and those of 2001. Through this comparison Cahill challenges us to think about the way ahead. Inexorably pursuing his central theme, the author explains with facts and figures and names the major players and how they operate.

In Ireland the redistribution of land at the end of the last century entailed the buying out of the big landlords, a revolution which, in the author's opinion, has much to do with the successful economy of Ireland today.

How is it, for instance, Cahill asks, that there is no council tax there, and better old-age pensions? In England one of the strongest criticisms he makes is on the question of land prices. The cost of development land continues to rise and the consequent strains are many.

Half a million people lost their homes between 1990 and 1997 and tenant farmers are now giving up because they cannot pay the rent. On the other hand there is no tax on farmland and some 157,000 landowners receive £21 billion in subsidy. Cahill sees it as vital for the future of England, to find peaceful ways to break the link between wealth and power: power that has historically been used ruthlessly to increase wealth against a background of a largely landless and powerless population.

The book reaches farther than questions about how to recover community value. Cahill wants land to become part of our democracy and not the possession of a small group of people whose influence is harmful to the great majority. The question is how to achieve this when our constitution is so tilted toward those who hold the economic power.

The author wants us to analyse the economic consequences of the over-mighty landed aristocracy and has provided the means to do just that. As we look, with some envy, at the way our European neighbours seem to handle their land, housing, health service, taxation and transport system, maybe the penny will drop.

We missed out on modernising our land tenure. It is high time we got on with it.

Alan Laurie