

The Labour Party, agricultural policy and the retreat from rural land nationalisation during the Second World War

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Abstract

By 1945 the Labour Party had abandoned its historic commitment to the nationalisation of agricultural land. Labour retreated from rural land nationalisation not for reasons of pragmatism or for fear of antagonising an electorate suspicious of ideological commitments, but because such a policy did not provide an economic solution to the question of agricultural productivity nor did it guarantee improved nutrition. The war-time agricultural executive committees demonstrated the benefits of state intervention as an alternative to the state ownership of rural land. By 1945 Labour had come to recognize that land nationalisation was an irrelevance to the immediate problem of post-war food shortages which might compromise its relationship with the farmers in the drive for increased productivity.

Land nationalisation was an important element of that body of debate and policy which is collectively known as the Land Question. There is now a well-established body of historical work on the Land Question covering the Edwardian and the inter-war period, but little has been published on the way in which the policies of the main political parties developed after 1939.¹ This article will explore how the Labour Party's policy on rural land nationalisation evolved in response to the impact of the Second World War and ask why – by 1945 – it had retreated from a policy of the state ownership of all agricultural land.

The Land Question encompassed a wide range of progressive issues, including a desire to protect the special role of agriculture in society; increase agricultural productivity by encouraging labour back to the land through smallholdings and resettlement; and generally reversing the deterioration of rural life. This was part of an anti-urban and anti-metropolitan tradition in British cultural life. On the eve of the First World War the question of land ownership in both town and country, and the complex changing legal and political relationship between landlords and the state had been amongst the causes of the constitutional crisis between Lloyd George and the House of Lords. The 1909 Budget reflected the need to find new revenue sources for government: it was also a direct political attack on the rights of the landed aristocracy. By

¹ A. F. Cooper, *British Agricultural Policy, 1912–36. A study in Conservative politics* (1989); M. Fforde, *Conservatism and collectivism, 1886–1914* (1990); I. Packer, 'The Liberal Land Campaign and the Land Issue, 1906–1914' (Oxford University, D.Phil thesis, 1994), now published as *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the land. The land issue and party politics in England, 1906–1914* (2001); A. Offer, *Property and Politics, 1870–1914* (1981); B. Short, *Land and Society in Edwardian Britain* (1997); C. Griffiths, 'Labour and the countryside: rural strands in the British Labour movement, 1900–1939' (unpublished D.Phil thesis, Oxford University, 1996).

the outbreak of the Second World War the Land Question had lost the political controversy of the pre-1914 period and had fragmented into a series of separate but related political issues. Economic, social and cultural change after 1914 had combined with political developments to bring about a transformation in the way in which land reform was understood. These changes included the continuing economic decline of agriculture in the face of foreign competition; the effect of economic depression on the countryside; rapid and unregulated urban growth, particularly in the suburbs; changing patterns of land ownership, especially the increase in institutional and public ownership and the growth of owner occupation in both town and country; the emergence of a popular and class-based outdoor movement; and not least the declining economic and social fortunes of the traditional landed elite, and in particular what was left of the gentry. The break-up of the Liberal Party led to the eclipse of the related policies of free trade and taxation of land values after 1930. Politically the landed aristocracy, and in particular the gentry, was no longer a focus for radical opposition after it had lost a significant part of its social position in rural society during the inter-war period. Political interest thus moved away from attacking the landed aristocracy as a class and focused on the development and control of land-use, particularly in urban areas, and the protection of agriculture and the landscape from urban despoliation.²

Labour Party policy on the Land Question was made up of a number of different and sometimes contradictory elements. At times it supported the demand for land nationalisation, whereby the state would acquire the freehold interest on behalf of the nation, with compensation to the owners. At other times it supported the alternative policy of taxation of land values, which would have left private ownership intact, but would have imposed a levy or a charge on the value of land. Sometimes it supported taxation as a means of achieving public ownership. These policies were major features of the early history of the Party. Before 1914 the Party resisted socialist demands for land nationalisation, but supported a policy of land ownership based on decentralisation and devolution to district and parish councils. This was designed to guarantee the status of the free and independent rural artisan, both labourer and tenant farmer. Such a policy fitted in with the view that agricultural efficiency could be increased by encouraging labour back to the land by means of smallholdings and allotments.³

During the inter-war period the Party began to take an increasing interest in town and country planning and the complex issues of compensation and betterment; access to the countryside for recreational purposes; and the protection of agriculture and the landscape from uncontrolled urban developments. Agriculture continued to be a major feature of the Land Question throughout this period, although the emphasis of Party policy changed. By 1939 the Party had largely rejected the 'back-to-the-land' option as an economic remedy for the ills of British agriculture. Attempts to encourage smallholdings had failed to attract any significant support in rural areas. The Party had always been ambivalent about their virtues, placing the social and economic improvement of the farmer and the agricultural labourer above their right to own and cultivate a small plot of land. Party policy for rural areas shifted during the 1930s towards support for producer marketing, import boards and aimed to achieve better nutrition by larger scale

² M. Tichelar, 'The Labour Party and land reform in the inter-war period,' *Rural Hist.* 13 (2002), pp. 85–101.

³ M. Tichelar, 'Socialists, Labour and the Land: the

response of the Labour Party to the land campaign of Lloyd George before the First World War', *Twentieth Century British Hist.*, 8 (1997), pp. 127–144.

production and market gardening. Labour began to treat agriculture as an important industry requiring state support, and not as a special case based on an agenda of other strategic concerns such as unemployment and the recreation of the peasantry. However, rural land nationalisation remained a constant feature of Party policy before 1939 with demands becoming more insistent after the final demise of the campaign for the taxation of land values in the early 1930s. (Taxation of land values, which characterized the pre-1914 Land Question, had almost disappeared from political view by the end of the 1930s despite some vociferous voices in the party.) Interest had shifted from the taxation of all land, including the traditional agricultural landlord, as a radical panacea for the Land Question, to the taxation of rising land values in urban areas as a means of generating additional income for local authorities.⁴

The Second World War reinforced these pre-war trends and added significant weight to demands for state intervention, centralized land-use planning, land nationalisation and the protection of the countryside. The further demise of the traditional landed establishment created the opportunity for Labour to argue that the state should replace the landlord. This, it was held, was the only way to increase agricultural production, bring derelict land back into use, guarantee capital investment, enhance the rights and conditions of farmers and labourers, revive rural life and protect the landscape. During the war there emerged, as part of both central and local government intervention to rebuild blitzed areas and plans for post-war reconstruction in both town and country, a powerful movement to control land-use and ownership in the national interest, including a growing demand for land nationalisation, particularly amongst intellectuals and certain pressure groups.

A number of major wartime government reports examined aspects of the Land Question. The Barlow Commission (1940), set up in 1937 to examine the geographical distribution of the industrial population, recommended a system of national planning. The Scott Report (1942) on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas also proposed a national system of planning to prevent despoliation of rural areas. The Uthwatt Report (1942) on compensation and betterment, established at the height of the blitz at a moment of growing public concern about property speculation, recommended the control and taxation of land use and development, but specifically rejected land nationalisation as too controversial. The Dower Report on National Parks in England and Wales (1945) proposed the establishment of a National Parks Commission.

Land nationalisation proved to be a major issue within the Labour Party during the war. This controversy arose partly out of the debate on the Uthwatt Report after 1942. Land reform policy was also influenced by the demands of Labour local authorities for powers to re-plan their blitzed city centres and the constraints imposed on the national party by their participation in the Coalition Government. There was widespread support for land nationalisation amongst the war-time intelligentsia and planners, such as Sir Daniel Hall, Sir George Stapledon, and C. S. Orwin.⁵

⁴ M. Chase, 'Nothing less than a revolution? Labour's agricultural policy', in J. Fryth (ed.), *Labour's High Noon. The government and the economy* (1993), pp. 79–95; Cooper, *British Agricultural Policy*; Griffiths, 'Labour and the countryside'; R. J. Middleton, 'The formulation and implementation of British agricultural policy, 1945–1951' (unpublished Ph.D thesis, University of

Bristol, 1992).

⁵ Sir Daniel Hall, *Reconstruction and the land* (1941); Sir George Stapledon, *Make fruitful the land* (1941); C. S. Orwin, *Speed the plough* (1942). Even populist commentators like A. G. Street proposed national ownership, see his *Farm cottages and post-war farming* (1943) and *Hitler's whistle* (1943).

However, support for land nationalisation was increasingly questioned within the Labour Movement, particularly by its parliamentary leaders. Other possible policies, such as wider and speedier powers of public acquisition, land taxation and town and country planning, attracted those who questioned the private ownership of land. The Party's previous commitment to land nationalisation was significantly diluted by the experience of the war. In 1943 the Party compromised its position by supporting the Uthwatt Report as an interim measure. Uthwatt rejected land nationalisation in favour of the nationalisation of development rights in land and the introduction of a system of compensation and betterment in order to control property speculation during and after the war.⁶ But support for rural land nationalisation remained much stronger owing to the influence of the trade unions. George Dallas, Chief Agricultural Organizer of the Transport and General Workers Union was influential in keeping nationalisation on the policy agenda. However, the expense, complexity and administrative difficulties of the state becoming the freeholder of all rural land became more apparent during the course of the war. As a result, the Party's commitment to the immediate nationalisation of rural land was compromised by 1945. In *Let Us Face the Future* (1945) land nationalisation was considered as a long-term aim rather than as an immediate objective.

The existing secondary literature explaining these policy developments is sparse. Only Malcolm Chase has given any detailed consideration to the reasons behind Labour's change of direction. He argues that before 1939 a combination of electoral calculation and Labour's slender interest in rural areas created a policy vacuum, while during the war the sheer scale of the enterprise (260,000 farmers), the enormous financial cost involved, and potential opposition from agricultural interests at a time when their co-operation was required to increase food production, led the Party to drop its historical commitment to land nationalisation.⁷ This article will explore in more detail the reasons for this shift in policy. It will argue that Labour retreated from rural land nationalisation not for reasons of pragmatism or for fear of antagonising an electorate suspicious of ideological commitments, but because it no longer provided an economic solution to the question of agricultural productivity nor offered improvements in nutrition. While the sheer scale, expense and administrative complexities were relevant factors counting against nationalisation, and the Party was aware of these constraints both before and during the war, it was the experience of the wartime agricultural executive committees which demonstrated the benefits of state intervention (as opposed to the large-scale state ownership of rural land). Up until 1943 Labour reiterated its traditional support for the state ownership of agricultural land. But after this date it began to retreat from a policy of land nationalisation. Thereafter the experience of the war and its support for guaranteed prices after the war reinforced and accelerated this trend.

⁶ *Report of the Expert Committee on compensation and betterment* (1942) Cmd. 6467. The issue of *compensation* and *betterment* was concerned with what level 'the state should compensate land owners whose land is acquired (either by agreement or compulsion) for public or community purposes; and whether or not, and at what level,

the state should seek to collect increases (betterment) in land values created by private capital or government action'. D. H. McKay and A. W. Cox, *The politics of urban change* (1979), pp. 69–106.

⁷ Chase, 'Nothing less than a revolution?'

I

Debates within the Labour Party during the early years of the war on the condition of agricultural workers and nutrition of the urban population strengthened party and trade union support for the traditional policy of land nationalisation. The Labour Party continued to seek improvements in the wages and conditions of rural workers to bring them onto an equal footing with industrial workers. It argued that backward rural areas and their added needs as a result of evacuation should be addressed by increased grants to rural councils. The Party 'should continue and extend its active campaign in rural areas, War or no War' - a rhetorical demand unrealized as a result of the disrupting impact of the war on political activities and the inherent difficulties of organising in the countryside.⁸ The experience of the ploughing-up campaign reinforced the support of the agricultural trade unions for land nationalisation.⁹ By 1941 the Labour Party could congratulate itself that its role in the Coalition Government had increased unemployment benefit for agricultural workers to a maximum of 41s. a week and had introduced a new national minimum wage of 43s.¹⁰ By 1942, in line with increased public support for wartime planning and the control of profiteering at a time of rationing, the Party conference was calling for the national ownership of agricultural land to enable its full utilisation by the development of a planned system of agricultural production. It also pressed for the merging of the Ministries of Food and Agriculture into a single new ministry. The aim was to achieve an adequate and varied diet, a fair return for the producer at a fair price to the consumer, and a higher standard of living for all people engaged in food production.¹¹

In October 1941 the Party set up a Land and Agricultural Reorganisation Sub-Committee as part of the machinery to develop post-war reconstruction policy. It was chaired by George Dallas, the Chief Agricultural Organizer of the Transport and General Workers Union (T&GWU) during the inter-war period, influential member of the National Executive Committee and long-time supporter of land nationalisation.¹² The T&GWU had reiterated its policy of land nationalisation to the Scott Committee.¹³ Other members of the sub-committee included Lord Addison, Labour Leader in the House of Lords, Minister of Agriculture in the 1929–31 Labour Government, and Chairman of the Buckinghamshire War Agricultural Executive Committee; Joseph Duncan, leader of the Scottish Farm Servants Union; and Tom Williams, Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture in the Coalition Government.¹⁴ However, the National Union of Agricultural Workers (NUAW) was not represented. It was only following complaints at the May 1943 party conference that Edwin Gooch, its President, was invited to take part in a two day conference convened in August 1943 to agree a final policy statement.

⁸ *The Report of the 39th Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, May 1940, pp. 175–6.

⁹ *The Land Worker* 21 (May 1940), p. 2; Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), HLG80/65.

¹⁰ *Labour in government. A record of social legislation in wartime* (1941), p. 7. (The Labour Party archives have been used in the Harvester Press microform edition of the Labour Party Archives, hereafter LPA, in this case part 2, pamphlets and leaflets, 41/10).

¹¹ *The Report of the 41st Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, May 1942, pp. 120–3.

¹² J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds.), *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (10 vols, 1972–2000), IV, pp. 69–74.

¹³ PRO, HLG80/34.

¹⁴ Bellamy and Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, II, pp. 406–7; see also T. Williams, *Digging for Britain* (1965).

Attempts by the T&GWU to take over the smaller union before the war, compounded by problems of poaching and workers' representation on the war agricultural executive committees, prevented co-operation between the two unions on policy matters. The NUAW considered that the T&GWU 'should get out of the agricultural industry and leave the field to them'.¹⁵ A. E. Monks, who was the NUAW full-time Organizer for South Lincolnshire, was on the sub-committee as a party member. He played an influential role both through his membership of the Scott Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas (representing the NUAW) and his employment by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1943 as the liaison officer between the ministry and the war agricultural executive committees.¹⁶

The sub-committee relied heavily on the advice of experts and agricultural modernizers who saw rural regeneration in terms of increasing agricultural productivity in contrast to those ruralists opposed to modernisation.¹⁷ Amongst the other members of the sub-committee were Professor A. W. Ashby and George Walworth. Ashby, the elder son of Joseph Ashby of Tysoe, was a Methodist lay preacher from a radical reformist tradition. Ashby junior had fought for smallholdings and allotments as a teenager. He was an agricultural economist and social anthropologist. As a teenager he had fought for smallholdings: before the war he had been active in countering the eugenic notion that rural people were of low intelligence.¹⁸ Ashby was a firm believer in rural land nationalisation.¹⁹ Walworth, the agricultural organizer of the Cooperative Union was author of *Feeding the Nation in Peace and War*. He had argued before the war for capital investment in larger-scale farming and against small holdings, which he regarded as depressing living standards.²⁰

The sub-committee took as its starting point the 'The Land and the National Planning of Agriculture' issued by the Party in 1932, which had demanded that all agricultural land should be nationally owned. In addition it called for the setting up of a National Agricultural Commission and County Agricultural Committees; a minimum wage for the farm worker; and national and local commodity boards to purchase and regulate imports.²¹ Professor Ashby thought that it 'now makes rather dull reading', and recommended that there should be a clearer statement of objectives taking into account dissatisfaction with the operation of the various agricultural

¹⁵ Rural History Centre, University of Reading (hereafter RHC), papers of the National Union of Agricultural Labourers (NUAW), B.X.1 (misc. papers of Edwin Gooch which contain transcripts of heated meetings between the two unions in 1938 and 1944 to discuss amalgamation or federation). Modern Record Centre, University of Warwick, Papers of the Transport and General Workers Union, MSS126/TG/3.

¹⁶ *Land Worker* 26 (Mar. 1945), p. 5. He stood for election as the General Secretary of the NUAW in 1945 and as Labour candidate in South Lincolnshire in 1945, on both occasions unsuccessfully.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the anti-modernizers see R. J. Moore-Colyer, 'Back to Basics: Rolf Gardiner, H. J. Massingham and a "Kinship in Husbandry"', *Rural Hist.* 12 (2001), pp. 85–108.

¹⁸ Ashby was head of the Department of Agricultural

Economics at Aberystwyth. A. W. Ashby, 'The effect of urban growth on the countryside', *Sociological Rev.* 31 (1939); id., *The English countryside and the psychology of scenic change*, typescript evidence to the Scott Committee, 1942, PRO HLG80/92. For biographical details see M. K. Ashby, *Joseph Ashby of Tysoe 1859–1919. A study of English village life* (1974); *Dictionary of National Biography, 1951–1960* (1971), p. 34; and *The Countryman* 48 (1953), pp. 311–16.

¹⁹ PRO, HLG80/92.

²⁰ British Library of Political and Social Science (hereafter BLPES), Fabian Society archives, J23/2 and K28/1; G. Walworth, *Feeding the nation in peace and war* (1940); and *Marketing schemes: their effect on the Industrial Co-operative Movement* (1934).

²¹ LPA, RDR2/Oct. 1941, 'Memorandum for the agricultural and land reorganisation sub-committee'.

marketing boards set up during the late 1930s.²² While the Party had been closely identified with their creation in 1931 (when Addison was Minister of Agriculture), they had become associated in the late 1930s, and especially during the war, with producer interests, high food prices and profiteering by middlemen. Before the war the Party had come under pressure from rural divisional parties to wind up the marketing boards and replace them with smaller commissions with independent chairmen.²³ The sub-committee therefore agreed to some revised policy objectives that reflected wartime concerns about nutrition, agricultural production and price controls. These placed renewed emphasis on the supply of an adequate and varied diet based on healthy home-grown vegetables and milk, secured by obtaining a higher contribution from British agriculture; a higher standard of living for all those engaged in food production; and increased and improved amenities for the general rural population. In support of these new policy developments, Lord Addison was asked to review the working of the marketing acts, and Sir John Boyd Orr, the nutritional expert, was invited to prepare a policy on food and nutrition.²⁴

The Party's agricultural policy was therefore driven primarily by concerns about nutrition and the cost of food. Before the war the Party had been strongly influenced by Orr's *Food, Health and Income*, the first scientific study linking diet and income.²⁵ The war created a wave of public interest in nutrition brought about by the activities of the new Ministry of Food and the political impact of rationing. After Dunkirk the Treasury found it difficult to resist popular demands for the introduction of non-means tested food supplies, such as the National Milk Scheme. Thus fear of inflation, blockade and industrial unrest combined with anxieties about nutrition brought the question of food and rationing onto the top of the Coalition Government's domestic political agenda.²⁶ In these circumstances, the Party's Land and Agricultural Sub-Committee looked to the continued expansion of the home market after the war for health-giving foods such as milk and vegetables. But as a Party of free trade it considered that the country would still need to rely on the importation of cheap supplies of basic foodstuffs such as wheat. To this end it pushed for the setting-up of a powerful central food supply organisation to control the importation and distribution of food and the prices of imported food in the interests of the consumer.²⁷ In 1943 the Party adopted the report prepared by Sir John Boyd Orr, *The Nation's Food. Labour's Nutrition Policy* with only minor amendments and issued it as party policy. This noted how the war had brought about 'a revolutionary change in our food policy'. It recommended that the Ministry of Food should be strengthened by a permanent Food Commission which would act as a national wholesale buyer and seller; that school children should be adequately fed by the state; and that wartime communal restaurants should be extended into peacetime.²⁸

Lord Addison argued for a central organisation to exercise control over price margins and the vested interests involved in the system of wartime controls set up by the new Ministry of

²² LPA, RDR15 (b)/Oct. 1941, 'Note of the work of the committee by Professor A. W. Ashby'.

²³ Resolution submitted by the East Norfolk Divisional Labour Party to Transport House (1937/38), RHC, NUAW, B.X.1.

²⁴ LPA, Minutes of the land and agricultural sub-committee, 13 Nov. 1941; RDR 38/Dec. 1941, 'Progress report of the Central Committee on Reconstruction

Problems'.

²⁵ Sir J. B. Orr, *Food, Health and Income* (1936).

²⁶ R. J. Hammond, *Food and Agriculture in Britain, 1939-45* (1962), pp. 140-53.

²⁷ LPA, RDR85/Apr. 1942, 'Problems of marketing and distribution'.

²⁸ Labour Party, *The Nation's food. Labour's nutrition policy* (1943).

Food.²⁹ There was much anger within the Party about the level of agricultural subsidies contributing to the inflated profits of the food companies.³⁰ Clement Attlee was concerned in the early war years about the policy of the Ministry of Agriculture of increasing productivity through guaranteed prices. He objected to farmers earning disproportionate profits, thereby increasing the rents of the owners of the better land.³¹ The sub-committee therefore sought to maintain a difficult balance between the interests of consumers, or the desire of the Party's traditional urban constituency to benefit from a policy of cheap food, and the interests of producers, or the farmers and farm workers which the party had sought to cultivate politically by its inclusive pre-war agricultural policy. This dilemma was reinforced by the war. The *Fabian Quarterly* pointed out that only a powerful Ministry of Food could ensure that after the war 'cheap food was available in ample quantities for the industrial population while the agricultural worker at home and the food producers overseas were alike assured of a decent livelihood'.³²

Labour was traditionally an urban party supporting a policy of cheap food based on an historic commitment to free trade. The desire of the party to be identified with a policy of cheap food was reaffirmed at the 1942 Annual Conference. The national ownership of agricultural land was approved as the basis of a planned system of agricultural production, involving the merging of the Ministries of Agriculture and Food, and as the best means of providing an adequate and varied diet for the people.³³ The policy of merger proved to be controversial. The Miners' Federation succeeded in referring-back this proposal on the grounds that the gap between consumers and producers was too big and that a strong Ministry of Food was necessary to defend the interests of consumers against the vested interests of the marketing boards (recalling earlier debates in 1917–18 about the policy of the Food Controller). The Sub-Committee had been discussing the need for a Central Food Supply Organisation (with individual commodity boards reporting to it) but emphasising that its personnel should not be drawn from producers as in pre-war years.³⁴ The Co-operative Movement and the Standing Joint Committee of Working Women's Organisations had also been pressing the Party (and the Government without success) for the creation of a Consumers Council (similar to that created at the end of the First World War) with housewife representation, to control prices and rationing. The TUC did not feel able to support such a demand, arguing that such a proposal was impracticable during wartime, not least because it was anxious to protect the role of its own Food Committee set up at the request of the Ministry of Food.³⁵

In practice therefore, the Party found it difficult to reconcile the competing demands of consumer and producer interests. A policy of cheap food based on the nutritional needs of the people could not be achieved by subsidising inefficient small-scale mixed farming. But this was a system of agriculture supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, the NFU and the agricultural trade unions on the grounds of soil fertility and the maintenance of high levels of employment

²⁹ LPA, Minutes of the land and agricultural reorganisation sub-committee, 17 Dec. 1941, 18 Feb. 1942.

³⁰ D. Thomas, 'Food and agriculture in post-war Britain', *Socialist Commentary*, Mar. 1944, pp. 193–6.

³¹ BLPES, William Piercy Papers, 8/36 (Agriculture 1943–46), note by Evan Durbin to the Deputy Prime Minister on agricultural policy (1944).

³² *Fabian Quarterly*, Spring 1942.

³³ *The Report of the 41st Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, May 1942, pp. 120–23.

³⁴ LPA, Minutes of the land and agricultural reorganisation sub-committee, 16 Apr. 1942.

³⁵ *The Report of the 40th Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, June 1941, pp. 9–11; LPA, Research 14/Apr. 1942, Report to the policy sub-committee on food policy.

on the land.³⁶ The Party's sub-committee recognized the need for encouraging larger scale, more specialist farming at home producing nutritional foods, although the merits of small and larger farms continued to divide opinion within the party as it had done since before 1914. It was aware that the capital investment required for encouraging larger scale farming was less costly than continuing to subsidize traditional farming methods after the war, which would have been exorbitantly expensive.³⁷ The *New Statesman* maintained that the country could not afford a post-war policy of high agricultural subsidies to keep a greatly enlarged agricultural industry alive, particularly one based on its existing structure.³⁸ A policy of encouraging large-scale specialist farming producing nutritional foods implied the need for greater mechanisation and less labour on the land. It was not clear how these considerations related to a policy of the state ownership of agricultural land.

II

By the time the sub-committee came to produce a first draft of its policy in the spring of 1943, the Party's position on the general question of land nationalisation, both rural and urban, had been influenced by the recommendations of the Uthwatt Report. Uthwatt offered the prospect of a short-term solution pending full nationalisation in the longer-term, and a means of attacking the Coalition Government's reluctance to deal with post-war reconstruction. The report of the National Executive Committee to the Annual Conference in June hinted at the continued existence of private rural landownership at least in the short-term. Uthwatt's recommendation to nationalize development rights in undeveloped land (i.e. in rural areas) proved to be an attractive option. In this respect, the National Executive Committee affirmed its general agreement with the principle of fixing a total national compensation figure to purchase these rights. However it realized the controversial nature of this position by adding rhetorically that 'it is convinced that there can be no final and satisfactory solution to the problems of either physical replanning or of agriculture until the land itself becomes the property of the nation'.³⁹

Debates within the Government's reconstruction machinery during 1942 drew attention to the enormous financial commitments and administrative complexities involved in any proposals to nationalize rural land. On the Reconstruction Problems Committee the Treasury firmly resisted demands from Attlee and others that the landowner was an anachronism under modern conditions.⁴⁰ The Scott report had avoided any reference to the issue of nationalisation of land in rural areas but the Uthwatt Report had advocated the nationalisation of development rights as an alternative to full-state ownership. The Treasury made the Cabinet fully aware of the financial and other implications of such a course of action. Buying out development rights would have a dramatic impact on the post-war National Debt. The Inland Revenue would not be able to process an estimated 250,000 claims from aggrieved landowners for compensation

³⁶ *Staples Reconstruction Digest. What people think No. 6, Agriculture* (1944).

³⁷ Viscount Astor and B. Seeböhm Rowntree, *Mixed farming and muddled thinking* (1946), p. 107.

³⁸ *New Statesman*, 10 Oct. 1942, p. 230.

³⁹ *The Report of the 42nd Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, June 1943, pp. 4–5.

⁴⁰ J. B. Cullingworth, *Environmental Planning, 1939–1969* (4 vols, 1975–1980), I, *Reconstruction and land use planning, 1939–1947*, p. 46.

arising from the nationalisation of development rights, let alone cope with the task of valuation. Widespread opposition was forecast from landowners based on a rising sense of unfairness.⁴¹

The questions of urban and rural land nationalisation began to merge into one during 1943 as a result of the way that the Party responded to the recommendations of the Uthwatt Report. Uthwatt offered a resolution to both sides of the question. The first draft of Labour's Agricultural Policy produced in April noted for the first time that it needed to take into account matters affecting urban land.⁴² This did not please the NUAW. Their resolution at the party conference in June calling for land requisitioned by the County Committees to be retained after the war as first step in a new plan of public ownership was referred back to the NEC. The union questioned whether all the public improvements introduced by the county committees should go back into the pockets of the landlords when the war was over.⁴³

The sub-committee produced a first draft of its policy in April 1943. Most of its recommendations were uncontroversial and reflected pre-war policies, which it argued, had been justified by the experience of the war. It recommended the creation of a National Land Commission which would hold all land belonging to the state and manage the county committees (which should continue after the war on a permanent basis as local agents of the central state). The sub-committee proposed a Food Production Programme based primarily on protective foods (such as milk, eggs, vegetables and fruit) which, it argued, British agriculture was exceptionally fitted to provide. It supported the permanent establishment of the Ministry of Food with responsibilities (distinct from those of the Ministry of Agriculture) to control overseas supplies of food, determine prices and promote nutrition. The Ministry of Food would also play a key role in the formulation of international arrangements for food supplies and price stabilisation on a large scale in order to prevent the widespread famine conditions that were envisaged after the war. A National Agricultural Council would deal with employment, rural development and education, while the National Wages Board would be preserved. Responsibility for rural housing, and the controversial issue of tied cottages, would be taken away from district councils and given to the Ministry of Works and Buildings.⁴⁴

It was in the area of land ownership that the sub-committee proposed the most radical change to pre-war policy. Labour's draft policy stated that the most practical way of obtaining the fullest use of the land was that it should belong to the people. However it noted that this was not the only way of securing the adequate utilisation of land in the interests of good husbandry. The Land Commission would have the power to purchase land if the existing owner was unable or unwilling to provide such capital outlays as buildings, roads, water supplies and other provisions that attach to ownership. This was a policy being actively and effectively pursued by the wartime county agricultural executive committees. Their success undoubtedly strengthened the case for continuing with these arrangements after the war. The experience of the committees reinforced the case against nationalisation. The Fabians promoted the view that these committees 'have given us a very good line on how you could get control of the land and its use without necessarily taking over ownership of the land or making every

⁴¹ PRO, CAB 117/14; 117/128.

Labour Party, June 1943, pp. 200–2.

⁴² LPA, RDR 209/Apr. 1943, 'Labour's agricultural policy'.

⁴⁴ LPA, RDR 209/Apr. 1943, 'Labour's agricultural

⁴³ *The Report of the 42nd Annual Conference of the* policy'.

farmer a little black-coated appendage of Whitehall'.⁴⁵ Hugh Dalton noted in the summer of 1943 that the planning of production by the committees had been far greater and more detailed than he ever imagined possible. 'They not only have the power but actually use it in some counties to decide how every field should be cultivated'. Dalton confided to his diary:

that of course all this should go on after the war; a typical policy of 'sensible, Socialistic Conservatism'. This rather than any wholesale nationalisation of agricultural land would be the line. Many public and semi-public agencies, of various kinds, would increasingly own land; not only these committees, but the Forestry Commission, the National Trust, universities and charities.⁴⁶

Dalton had taken over the influential position of chairman of the Party's Policy Committee in July and his first act was to wind-up the Central Committee on Reconstruction, controlled by the left-winger Emanuel Shinwell. The direction of policy after this date therefore came under the influence of Dalton, although it is clear that internal party opinion was already moving against wholesale nationalisation. The Party's draft policy on the land produced in April 1943 tentatively suggested that the new Land Commission might approve purchase by a private individual or corporation, pending total nationalisation. Private ownership could be allowed so long as the conditions of ownership guaranteed capital investment to secure increased productivity.⁴⁷ In this case rent courts would be necessary to determine fair rents. The main concern therefore was not an ideological commitment to nationalisation but how to increase capital investment in the land in order to achieve the main objectives of the Party's agricultural policy, namely increased productivity, better nutrition and a higher standard of life for farm workers. Nationalisation was one, but not the only means, of achieving this end. Discussion on post-war reconstruction, and in particular the recommendations of the Scott and Uthwatt reports raised the possibility of other alternative solutions.

In the light of the debate at the Annual Conference in June and the criticisms raised by the NUAW, the Party's Policy Committee recognized the controversial nature of these changes to traditional policy. In August it convened a special two-day conference to discuss the draft statement and invited Edwin Gooch and William Holmes of the NUAW to take part.⁴⁸ The conference discussed the whole range of policy, and confirmed in particular the control of land through a proposed Land Commission and county committees, and the international planning of food supplies.⁴⁹ In relation to land nationalisation a rearguard action was fought, and it was agreed, in line with previous policy, that a General Enabling Act was necessary to give the state power to purchase land compulsorily and pay compensation. Payments were to be based on the value of land estimated by landowners in schedule A of their income tax returns. This, it was felt, would overcome all the difficulties about changing land values brought about by the war. Although the question of some land being nationally acquired while other land was left under private ownership was disputed, it was agreed in principle that it was quite proper to consider alternatives to nationalisation.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ L. F. Easterbrook, 'Plan for the land' in G. D. H. Cole *et al.*, *Plan for Britain. A collection of essays prepared for the Fabian Society* (1943), p. 75.

⁴⁶ BLPES, Dalton Papers, Diary, 24 Aug. 1943.

⁴⁷ LPA, RDR 209/April 1943.

⁴⁸ LPA, Minutes of the policy committee, 5 Aug. 1943.

⁴⁹ LPA, Land and agricultural reorganisation sub-committee, 21, 22 Aug. 1943.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Part of the debate centred on the difficulty of finding trained staff for taking over land which was not being properly used. Tom Williams commented that the new Land Commission would need suitable staff to administer estates, and that this would take time. The administrative problems of state ownership of rural land was increasingly recognized during the war. G. D. H. Cole had admitted to Lord Scott that

As for state ownership of land, I find it very difficult to envisage any proper capitalisation of agriculture save under public ownership. I don't see how the private landlords are to be induced to put in adequate capital under existing conditions, without bribes from the state that would be altogether excessive in justice and impossible politically. But I agree that the problem of public ownership may have to be approached by stages.⁵¹

The technical advice commissioned by the Nuffield Social Reconstruction Survey pointed out the practical difficulties of achieving immediate and comprehensive nationalisation of the land, especially during but also after the war, given the pressure of other problems. For example, the West Midland Group on Post-War Reconstruction and Planning advised Cole that although the best way of securing planned development was by state ownership of land, 'we regard this as [being] immediately impracticable owing to the difficulties of administration that would arise in present circumstances'. It argued that while a procedure is being devised for the acquisition of all land, 'the first practical step towards the attainment of this ideal is the vesting in the state of the development rights in all land'.⁵²

These arguments proved difficult to resist, not least because of growing backbench Conservative opposition to any threat to property rights, and pressure from within the Party to make more rapid progress on post-war reconstruction. The Party's Policy Committee, under the new chairmanship of Dalton, came out in support of the Uthwatt Report in September 1943, and instructed George Dallas to redraft the report on Land and Agriculture for publication.⁵³ In doing this Dallas forged an effective compromise designed to placate those who continued to support the traditional policy of immediate nationalisation. The question became one of timing. In the final policy document *Our Land: The Future of British Agriculture*, published in December 1943, the party advocated a dual approach. First it supported the principal recommendations of both the Scott and Uthwatt reports. Second it agreed that the party should continue to support a General Enabling Act giving the state power to acquire all agricultural land and laying down the basis of compensation. It argued that the necessity for national ownership was too urgent to leave to a very gradual and piecemeal procedure over a long period of years, and specified certain indispensable conditions that had to be met if agricultural land was to avoid being purchased by a National Commission. In practice therefore, the question of immediate land nationalisation was deferred in favour of the short-term remedies offered by Scott and Uthwatt, a change noted by the *Times*.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Nuffield College Oxford, papers of the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey, C2/22 (letter from G. D. H. Cole to Lord Scott, 21 Feb. 1942). Cole's oral evidence to the Scott Committee also acknowledged that powers of compulsory purchase for specific purposes might be a more realistic policy than total nationalisation: PRO, HLG80/61.

⁵² Nuffield College Oxford, papers of the Nuffield College Social Reconstruction Survey, H1/8: 'West Midland Group on post-war reconstruction and planning, progress report', Oct. 1941.

⁵³ LPA, minutes of the Policy Committee, 21 Sept. 1943.

⁵⁴ *The Times*, 6 Dec. 1943, p. 2.

Our Land also reflected other wartime influences. First, it supported the main outcomes of the Hot Springs Food Conference held in June 1943 in the emphasis it placed on the need for the expansion of production and consumption of food after the war.⁵⁵ Second, the final document was largely silent on the question of smallholdings. The changes brought about by the war in agricultural production, such as mechanisation and the ploughing-up of large areas of uncultivated land, undermined the traditional case for the small farm. This in turn weakened the argument of those campaigning for large scale land settlement by the unemployed and ex-servicemen. The agricultural trade unions had always been opposed to the idea that smallholdings fostered economic and political freedom on the grounds that it undermined their ambitions for improved working conditions for farm workers.⁵⁶ Edwin Gooch came out clearly during the war against the state re-establishing the small unit of production and agreed with Sir Daniel Hall that the development of large farms was necessary to enable production to be carried out with greater efficiency.⁵⁷ The presence of the agricultural unions on Labour's Land Committee ensured that this issue did not divert attention from more realistic economic questions and that land should not be used as dump for the unemployed and derelict people as it had been after the last war.⁵⁸ The annual conference in 1944 specifically rejected the resettlement of ex-servicemen into agriculture on a large scale.⁵⁹ Larger-scale farming was also supported by the Fabians during the war who argued for the buying-out of all private landlords and occupiers, area by area, and the re-planning and re-equipping of the land on up-to-date lines by the State, which would eventually let the new farms to competent tenants.⁶⁰ Third, the final policy statement was also clear on the controversial question of tied cottages. The NUAW had been campaigning for their abolition over a long period.⁶¹ *Our Land* promised to carry this out, and to transfer responsibility for rural housing from the local authorities to a new Rural Development Board working closely with the County Executive Committees (and not, as originally proposed, to the Ministry of Works and Buildings).⁶²

At the end of 1943 the party was still committed to the nationalisation of the land. However, the possibility of leaving land in private ownership in certain circumstances in exchange for guarantees about productivity and efficiency was accepted as was the option of nationalising development rights of land in rural areas. But by 1945 even this traditional commitment to immediate rural land nationalisation had to all intents and purposes been dropped. Labour's manifesto, *Let Us Face the Future*, contained only the promise that 'if a landlord cannot or will not provide proper facilities for his tenant farmers, the State should take over his land at a fair valuation'. The emphasis of policy was on the planning of agriculture 'to give us the food we can best produce at home ... Our good farm lands are part of the wealth of the nation, and

⁵⁵ *Final Act of the United Nations conference on food and agriculture (Hot Springs, May to June 1943)*, Cmd. 6451.

⁵⁶ LPA, LP/AG/30/24 (letter 27 Aug. 1936).

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 10 Dec. 1941, p. 5; *Land Worker* 23 (Feb. 1942), p. 9 ('Large or small farms').

⁵⁸ LPA, Minutes of the land and agricultural reorganisation sub-committee, 21, 22 Aug. 1943.

⁵⁹ *The Report of the 43rd Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, Dec. 1944, pp. 179–82.

⁶⁰ F. W. Bateson, 'Farm sizes and layouts', in Bateson (ed.), *Towards a socialist agriculture. Studies by a group of Fabians* (1946), p. 121. Bateson was the Statistical Officer to the Buckinghamshire War Agricultural Executive Committee.

⁶¹ *Land Worker* 23 (July 1942), p. 7 ('Free homes, not tied houses').

⁶² Labour Party, *Our Land: The future of Britain's agriculture* (1943), p. 9.

that wealth should not be wasted. The land must be farmed, not starved'.⁶³ The NUAW was highly critical of the Party's abandonment of its traditional policy and its executive committee made it clear that there was no question of the the union reversing its stance on nationalisation.⁶⁴ Replying to criticism at the annual conference in 1945, Herbert Morrison justified the dilution of Labour's policy on the grounds that it was not necessary to nationalize all land in order to achieve an efficient agriculture.

What we are proposing is that where a landowner, either through his own fault or owing to financial circumstances that the poor man cannot help, is in such a position that he cannot adequately discharge his duties as a landowner by the provision of buildings and other facilities necessary for the efficient conduct of farming operations, we will move him out and compensate him on a fair basis, taking into account those deficiencies, and that land will become publicly owned. That is because it is necessary and expedient for the efficient conduct of agriculture. But where a landowner is doing his job well, or where a farmer is himself the owner of the land and doing the job well, there is no urgency in making that land publicly owned at this stage.⁶⁵

A number of factors accounted for this significant shift in policy during the latter stages of the war. Clearly by 1945 the institution of private ownership no longer seemed to represent a political evil that could only be corrected by a policy of outright nationalisation. A Fabian commentator drew the conclusion that private property in rural areas could not any longer be 'thought of as a crime, something morally abhorrent, an ugly survival from a cruder form of society'. He questioned whether this attitude to the agricultural landlord was still relevant.

Certainly very few farmers share it, however much they may grumble about their own landlords. A programme of complete and wholesale nationalisation, even one excluding owner-occupiers, would have to be carried through in the teeth of opposition of the great majority of British farmers, and in many areas it might prove impossible to get local agriculturalists of any standing to sit on the County and District Committees that will be essential if the transference is to proceed smoothly and equitably ... If private ownership is, as certainly it appears to be, a decadent institution, it can be relied on to pass naturally into total inanition. Any danger that it may still be a public nuisance, even in its last phase, can be obviated by an imaginative system of State control, such as the democratised ... County Agricultural Executive Committees.⁶⁶

Effective public control of land-use had thus replaced the previous policy of nationalisation. Control of the land was all that was needed to deliver the main objectives of Labour's rural policy which was based on the urban priority of a cheap supply of nutritional food. This, it was held, was dependent on an efficient and mechanized agriculture producing health-giving foods. Large-scale capital investment was necessary to achieve these improvements in productivity. By the end of 1943, Attlee welcomed the direction of the Coalition Government's post-war policy

⁶³ Labour Party, *Let us face the future* (1945).

⁶⁴ RHC, NUAW, minutes of the Executive committee, 27 Apr 1945.

⁶⁵ *The Report of 44th Annual Conference of the Labour*

Party, May 1945, pp. 133–4.

⁶⁶ F. W. Bateson, 'The ownership of agricultural land', in Bateson (ed.), *Towards a socialist agriculture*, pp. 168–86.

on agriculture on two grounds, despite his reservations about the appreciation of land values in rural areas during the war. First he recognized that the main objective of policy was to meet nutritional requirements, and 'this involves, at least for this country, an emphasis upon the production of milk and meat'. Second, he accepted that the powers of the Ministry of Agriculture should be continued after the war to maintain productivity, while 'stable prices should be used to stimulate the consumption of animal products and not to maintain unnecessarily high prices for cereals'.⁶⁷ By 1944 Attlee had accepted the principle of the Annual Price Review on the basis that the Wartime Agricultural Executive Committees would continue after the war.⁶⁸

By the end of the war these policies had become important features of Labour's agricultural programme. Tom Williams pointed out that Britain had the most highly mechanized agriculture in Europe, and that during the war over £100 million of investment had been made in machinery. High levels of mechanisation and productivity needed to be continued after the war to protect the country's trading relationships. He looked to the farmers to continue their wartime efforts into peacetime particularly in the light of post-war food shortages. In these circumstances, 'the farmers must feel reasonably sure of their future; and if they are to have the confidence to plan ahead, they must be assured of a stable market at reasonable prices for all the food the country wishes them to produce'.⁶⁹ Hugh Dalton had recognized that the country's post-war balance of payments 'will be so difficult to establish that we must strive to grow as much, and import as little, food as possible'. He sought to convince officials at the Board of Trade to overcome their traditional resistance to 'quartering the farmers' on the rest of the community.⁷⁰ The main emphasis of party agricultural policy by 1945 was therefore improved rural facilities based 'on an assured market for our agricultural produce.'⁷¹ Ernest Bevin argued at the 1945 party conference that the farmer 'must have a guaranteed price, not only nationally, but internationally' if agriculture was to be made efficient.⁷² Lord Addison confirmed on the eve of the general election that Labour's policy was amongst other things based on 'security of price and tenure for the good cultivator'.⁷³ Labour therefore envisaged the continuation of the Annual Price Review mechanism, set up in 1944 to guarantee prices up to 1948, as a permanent feature of post-war policy. Land Nationalisation would have threatened the co-operation of the farmers, a large proportion of whom were owner-occupiers, in the productive effort required after the war. By 1945 therefore, rural land nationalisation was seen not to offer a solution to the economic problems of British agriculture and had been dropped from the Party's manifesto.

III

In conclusion it is clear that debates during the early part of the war over nutrition and the role of the new Ministry of Food reinforced the Party's traditional support for the nationalisation

⁶⁷ BLPES, Piercy Papers, 8/36 (Agriculture 1943-46), note by Evan Durbin to the Deputy Prime Minister on post-war agricultural policy, 4 Oct. 1943.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Note by William Piercy and Evan Durbin to the Deputy Prime Minister on agricultural prices, 27 Nov. 1944.

⁶⁹ *The Times*, 30 Jan. 1945, p. 2; *Land Worker* 26 (Mar. 1945), p. 1 ('Agriculture and industry': a report of a

speech made by Williams in Liverpool on 30 Jan. 1945).

⁷⁰ BLPES, Dalton Papers, Diary, 15 Oct. 1943.

⁷¹ Morgan Phillips, 'Labour and the Land', *Land Worker* 26 (Mar. 1945), p. 4

⁷² *Ibid.*, 26, June 1945, p. 2.

⁷³ Lord Addison, 'Labour's record and policy on agriculture', *ibid.*, 26 (July 1945), p. 2.

of agricultural land. But after the publication of the Uthwatt Report in 1942 this began to change. By 1945 land nationalisation had become an irrelevance to the problems of post-war reconstruction. It provided no solutions to food shortages or the problem of increasing agricultural productivity and nutrition.⁷⁴

Labour recognized that the war had made agriculture efficient for the first time in a generation and that the co-operation of the farmers in running the county committees was essential. Labour therefore looked to the continuation of the Annual Price Review mechanism as a permanent feature of post-war policy despite earlier wartime reservations about subsidies benefiting inefficient farms and swelling the rent rolls of landlords. In these circumstances Labour was not prepared to jeopardize their relationship with the farmers by pursuing a policy of land nationalisation, as argued by Malcolm Chase.⁷⁵ Nearly 40 per cent of farmers by this date were owner-occupiers, which was in stark contrast to the position in the First World War when the traditional landlord-tenant system was still a significant feature of the country's social structure. The Party was increasingly sympathetic towards small farmers who owned or leased their farm. It was only prepared to allow the county executive committees to buy out inefficient farms if their landlords could not provide the capital to maintain productivity. By 1945 therefore Labour's emerging policy on agriculture had undermined its traditional stance on rural land nationalisation. It was no longer necessary to nationalize all land to resolve the problem of the inefficient landlord. The traditional rural landlord had been so badly affected by the war that the evils of 'landlordism' no longer posed political or economic questions that needed to be redressed. Indeed it was only the tenants of really inefficient landlords that needed to be rescued by state action.

Land nationalisation was only ever wholeheartedly supported in the 1930s when it coincided with growing support for centralized economic and physical planning. Historians have argued that after this date, and especially after 1945 enthusiasm for extending public ownership in general declined as it was doubted whether nationalisation was the most efficient economic weapon at Labour's disposal.⁷⁶ Martin Francis has maintained that the ideological dimension of this retreat from nationalisation reflected Labour's inability to agree on what the ultimate purpose of public ownership should be: 'was it intended to facilitate greater economic efficiency and modernisation, or was it designed to secure social justice and the redistribution of power, both within a given industry and in society as a whole?'⁷⁷ Support for rural land nationalisation before the 1920s was clearly based on the desire to redistribute political power away from the traditional landed elite to small-scale local ownership. But after 1930, with changing patterns

⁷⁴ Labour also retreated from support for urban land nationalisation at the same time for different but related reasons. Again, it was not that it feared the creation of internal divisions or damaging its electoral chances (support for land nationalisation was anyway running high in the opinion polls), but it responded to pressure from Labour local government for more immediate housing and town planning reform. M. Tichelar, 'The conflict over property rights during the Second World War: the Labour Party's abandonment of land nationalisation,'

Twentieth Century British Hist. 14 (2003), pp. 165–88. A Gallup opinion poll in April 1945 showed support for the nationalisation of land at 51%. G. H. Gallup (ed.), *The Gallup International Public Opinion Polls, Great Britain, 1937–1975* (2 vols, 1976), I, p. 108.

⁷⁵ Chase, 'Nothing less than a revolution'.

⁷⁶ S. Brooke, *Labour's War: the Labour Party during the Second World War* (1992), p. 331.

⁷⁷ S. Francis, *Ideas and policies under Labour, 1945–1951. Building a new Britain* (1997), ch. 4.

of landownership, the debate shifted to the question of how to make agriculture more efficient. The experience of the Second World War demonstrated the virtues of state intervention to replace the inefficient landowner. But it also established that it was not politically necessary to threaten owner-occupation (in either town or country) nor economically efficient to take over all land to achieve agricultural modernisation.

If the Labour Party had tried to nationalize agricultural land after 1945, how easy would it have been compared with other industries and services? The Labour Government would have found it extremely difficult to justify taking into state ownership an industry that had not failed, but, on the contrary, had saved the nation economically during the war. This was not the case for the railways and coal. It would also have been politically difficult to defend after 1945 when the country's economic position was dependent on the farmers' co-operation in increasing domestic food production to protect the balance of payments by reducing imports from dollar areas. Nationalisation could not therefore be justified on economic grounds. Neither was it acceptable politically at a time of food rationing. A good comparison might be iron and steel, which Labour was reluctant to take into state ownership after 1947 because it had a relatively good war record in terms of production, the lack of enthusiasm for nationalisation on the part of the trade unions and ministerial scepticism that it would lead to greater efficiency.⁷⁸ Furthermore, although Labour had recommended during the war a state commission to purchase land, there was no clearly identifiable model of management control that would have worked in an industry where – unlike the railways for example – ownership was not concentrated. The only comparison might be with road haulage, where ownership was spread amongst a large number of small operators. This was one of the few areas which generated acute controversy and opposition largely around the issue of the threat to the liberty of the individual. Land nationalisation would have threatened the property rights of a very large number of farmers at a time when owner-occupation both in town and countryside was spreading. In practice Labour took measures after 1945 to secure the tenancies of tenant farmers rather than to attack the rights to ownership.

Labour's Agricultural Act 1947 continued with the system of annual price reviews introduced in 1944. It was an urgent measure to address postwar food shortages and rationing. This heralded an era of structural surpluses, continuing rural depopulation and environmental despoliation. The debate on land nationalisation re-emerged during the 1950s when it was realised that although home food production had increased by 40 per cent since the war, farming profits had gone up by 400 per cent.⁷⁹ Some in the Party, like G. D. H. Cole, continued to think that the post-war Labour Government had missed a 'great opportunity' in failing to nationalize the land. As late as 1956 he could maintain that '... nothing short of this can bring about a right balance in the use of land or ensure that development follows lines consistent with public advantage'.⁸⁰ It is an interesting speculation whether land nationalisation would have advanced or hindered the achievements of agriculture in the three or so decades after the 1947 Agriculture Act and whether those, who like Cole, lamented the loss of the 'great opportunity', were right to do so.

⁷⁸ K. O. Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945–1951* (1984), pp. 95–141 for the best discussion of nationalisation.

– a debate between Michael Foot and George Brown).

⁷⁹ *Fabian J.*, Oct. 1954 ('Is land nationalisation necessary

⁸⁰ G. D. H. Cole, *The post-war condition of Britain* (1956), p. 366.