

## **Lie of the Land: Marion Shoard suggests that the ban on building on Green Belt land in the south-east should be lifted.**

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There can come a time when changing circumstances require us to reappraise even the most time-honoured and firmly entrenched planks of our creed. For environmentalists, the time has come to look again at one of Britain's oldest and most wildly understood instruments of environmental protection.

The Green Belt countryside round certain of our towns and cities has become such a sacred cow that not even Mrs Thatcher's ministers dare challenge its status. But in the circumstances now emerging, the inviolability of Green Belt is no longer simply a cause for rejoicing. Paradoxical though this may seem, it could help bring about an environmental catastrophe. If this is to be averted, the blanket ban on building on Green Belt land must now be lifted. Why?

This year it has become clear beyond doubt that a wave of new building of awesome proportions is destined to break over southern England. Environmentalists have urged that this development should be redirected to the broad acres of the north where it could more easily be accommodated or, if it has to stay in the south, that it should go to places already built-up, like the run-down inner areas of cities.

It has become clear that this can only happen within strict limits. London Docklands cannot absorb all the growth industries which want to set up within reach of the capital, the airports and the Channel Tunnel. If they were offered no choice but the dank banks of the Tyne or Clyde, some would undoubtedly head instead for the emptier hectares of continental Europe. Let them go, some might say, but not perhaps the 2 ½ million unemployed and certainly not Mrs Thatcher's Government. Environment Secretary Nicholas Ridley told local authorities in January: "It is not our policy to discourage development and economic growth in the south-east in the hope that it will transfer to other areas, for in that way we risk losing it altogether."

Economic growth requires the immigration into southern England of people with special skills at a time when the rate of household formation among the indigenous population is increasing sharply. So Mr Ridley is reckoning to see 610,000 new dwellings in the south-east between 1991 and 2001.

Around 180,000 of these are likely to be built in London, leaving the surrounding counties to accommodate 430,000 houses as well as the roads and intersections, hypermarkets and attendant car parks the people living in them will require. And this is just one decade's demand. Growth generates further growth.

Inevitable or not, this is all bad news for the environment. The gentle South Country is at least as much of a national treasure as the wilder uplands of the north and west. But how bad the news is depends on how the development happens.

### **Savage Blow**

Left to itself, it would tend to attach to the edges of existing settlements. This way developers would get the cost and amenity attractions of green-field sites without having to forego the benefit of established infrastructure and facilities. The science park on the edge of Cambridge provides an example of what this might mean.

Few of us may want to see London and other southern towns and cities expanded in this way, but if there has to be development, this would be the least environmentally damaging way of accommodating it. The alternative is creating new settlements in virgin countryside. And the south of England is so densely settled already that each new settlement would deal a savage blow to the character of the countryside, turning another swathe of it into urban hinterland until the whole region became a shapeless, monster suburb.

At present, however, development on the urban fringe looks like proving the exception rather than the rule. Instead, official minds seem to be looking more and more to new green-field communities. There are different ideas about the ideal scale. One possibility is for 'super-villages', and already landowners can be heard pushing forcefully to be allowed to grow houses on land no longer needed for food production. Often they emphasise that they only want to build a small settlement (and they only need to, with development land worth 300 times what farmland is worth) but even one executive estate can destroy the charm of hitherto remote-seeming countryside.

Developers, on the other hand, tend to push for the full-scale new town. The 'Stone Bassett' proposal by Consortium Developments for building over nearly two square miles of mid-Oxfordshire is only one of a rash of proposals for new 'country towns' in the south-east. Yet its 6,000 houses and associated facilities at the end of the M40 would be sufficient to destroy what remains of the rural feel of the whole stretch of countryside between London and Oxford. The Government nonetheless seems disposed to accept both new towns and super-villages rather than the expansion of many existing settlements.

The reason is straightforward enough - if unedifying. Open countryside may be of more environmental importance than the urban fringe, but nobody lives there. So there are few to complain, petition and lobby against development proposals. Try to build on the edge of a town or village, and however suitable the site may be for development, a howl of protest will go up from residents out to defend their views and property values. In going for the green fields, the Government is literally taking the line of least resistance.

Now is therefore the time for environmentalists to mount a counter-attack designed to push the wave of development in the south-east back where it belongs - into the often already sterilised landscape of the urban fringe. But here we encounter a problem:

### ***Green Belt.***

Green Belt was introduced just 50 years ago in circumstances very different from those confronting us today. The size of the built-up area of London had been seen to quadruple in the first four decades of this century. In the 1930s there were real fears that cities popular with developers would burst out and swamp communities surrounding them. A cordon sanitaire of countryside defining limits to the most threatened towns and cities seemed a clever idea. It was and it worked: the built-up area covered by London has hardly changed in the last 30 years. Understandably, the idea of Green Belt won popular acclaim like no other planning concept has done before or since. On the basis of this acclaim, however, it proceeded to grow wildly out of control.

### ***Bogus Authority***

Residents saw that if they could get their areas designated Green Belt, they would be safe from the threat of development. Quickly the Green Belts grew to cover areas vastly greater than were needed to signal city limits. The London Green Belt, for example, now includes almost the whole of Hertfordshire and Surrey. And instead of planning decisions merely taking Green Belt status into account, Green Belt land soon became almost completely sacrosanct.

Some of the scruffiest, dreariest semi-urban countryside in England therefore became far better protected than the 'real' countryside beyond the Green Belt. Now the magic phrase 'Green Belt' lends bogus authority to the squeals of the NIMBYs (Not In My Backyard) who are anxious only to push development away from them. As a result, the fate of the unmatched countryside of areas just beyond the London Green Belt like central Oxfordshire, central Berkshire, north Hampshire, mid-Sussex, west and north Kent, mid-Essex, central Bedfordshire and north Buckinghamshire hangs in the balance.

When the Thatcher Government came to power, the question of building on Green Belt land was briefly re-opened. The howl of protest from the NIMBYs in the Stockbroker Belt was immediate and the Government, worried about losing Green Belt seats to the Alliance, immediately came to heel. So ignominious was the retreat that a Department of the Environment circular had to be repealed - an unusual occurrence. Now the Green Belt is safe under Thatcherism, NIMBYs are constantly reassured. "While the south-east has maintained its share of house building, it has not encroached on London Green Belt" Nicholas Ridley proudly announced in March.

In fact, there has been the occasional incursion. Harlow, for example, has been allowed to expand into 'interim' Green Belt land to cope with the expansion of Stansted Airport. But typically, appeals to build on Green Belt land are turned down flat. Hertfordshire County Council has been forbidden to make even minor incursions into the London Green Belt to provide new homes. At the end of May, Mr Ridley refused permission for two large developments in the south-east part of the London Green Belt, even though developers were ripping up large stretches of bluebell woods beyond the Green Belt border in Kent.

The most celebrated planning decision the Conservatives have taken was their refusal to allow a new country town to be built on Green Belt land south-east of Havering, at Tillingham Hall in Essex. Environmentalists applauded. But might it not have been better for the unprepossessing fields of Tillingham Hall to go under concrete than the more remote and attractive countryside which Mr Ridley now looks set to release?

Of course our Green Belts contain much beautiful countryside which no-one would want to see developed. But the dreary and nondescript land which they also contain, much of it already marred by roads, quarries, tips and the other detritus of nearby urban civilisation, should be released. Such land would dearly provide a less environmentally damaging home than green fields further away for development which cannot be shifted to the North or tucked away in inner-city wastelands.

The Green Belt idea has served us well. But we must not cling to it blindly if the cost of doing so is building suburbopolis in the real countryside of the south-east.

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