

Lie of the Land: We need a master plan to conserve the countryside of the whole of south-east England, not just the Green Belt areas, says Marion Shoard

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My suggestion that certain parts of the green of the green belt of south-east England should be released for development provoked a predictable flurry of protests. Those protests did not convince me that I was wrong: but they did convince me that there is something wrong with the environmental movement. It is something we need to put right, and not only for the sake of the landscape of one part of England.

Historians of a conspiratorial bent may look back on the Great Green Belt Row of the 1980s as the centrepiece of a cunning and successful plot to destroy the countryside of south-east England without incurring any of the fierce resistance from environmentalists which such a step might have been expected to generate. Consider the facts.

Extensive development is to come to south-east England. The most environmentally damaging way of accommodating it would undoubtedly be the creation of new settlements in the region's few remaining stretches of undisturbed countryside. Unfortunately, this solution appeals to developers who like greenfield sites and to a government which knows that development will upset fewest residents if it occurs where fewest people live. So it is this solution which is selected, and the suburbanisation of a whole region once known for some of the most glorious countryside on earth becomes a real possibility.

Where is the environmental lobby while this monumental crime is being prepared? Is it mobilising every ounce of its energies to resist the despoliation of the woods and fields of Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Hampshire and Sussex? It is not. Its big battalions are engaged instead on the Great Green Belt Battle, which is not only the wrong battle but, on the whole, a non-battle.

The green belts of south-east England do not enshrine the region's most attractive countryside. They were never intended to do that, but merely to provide buffer zones between towns and cities. Their proximity to built-up areas means that they are already partly despoiled by roads, railways, sewage works, pylons and other clutter. They undoubtedly contain areas of little landscape value which could be yielded to development with far less environmental damage than would be caused by new settlements in real countryside. And those green belt areas that are genuinely attractive are already so well protected by some of the most vociferous and influential citizens in the land that the government would not dare lay a finger on them.

Yet environmentalists have encouraged the media, wittingly or not, to identify the future of south-east England's countryside with the fate of the region's green belts. In the process they have handed the government a propaganda triumph it could not deserve less. We end up with the spectacle of the government solemnly pledging to maintain the integrity of green belt land it never intended to threaten, to polite applause from the environmental lobby and the media. Meanwhile, behind the smokescreen of the green belt issue, it unleashes environmental mayhem on countryside which is infinitely more important. You can see why it might all look like a plot.

Knee-Jerk Rejectionism

In fact, it wasn't. Environment Secretary Nicholas Ridley did not have to invent the green belt issue. It was generated by a combination of the entirely understandable determination of the energetic residents of the London Green Belt to protect their own environment and the knee-jerk rejectionism of some environmental lobbyists. The media followed the sound of gunfire and the government needed only to sit back and reap the benefit. The outcome is fast proving an environmental tragedy.

The developers who plan to shatter the rural character of central Oxfordshire with the vast Stone Bassett development appear to have a good prospect of success. But a relatively harmless proposal by the same company to develop a patch of dull land at Napsbury in Hertfordshire has been turned down-because the land is green belt. Close by Napsbury, a dismal area of reclaimed gravel pits at Smallford has also seen off development plans recently.

On the other side of London similar situations arise. Dull green belt sites are protected but look beyond its edge and you find a glorious area of unspoilt fields and woods like north-east Hampshire facing the real threat of major development at Hook, Eversley and Foxley Wood. Around Poole in Dorset, the heathland homes of rare birds and reptiles are being developed, rather than less important land nearby which happens to enjoy the magical green belt status.

Right across the south-east, planning officers helplessly confront paradoxes like these every single day. They know that they can recommend rejection of proposal; to develop high-quality landscape and wildlife sites: but the government can overturn planning refusals on appeal. It now looks like doing this in many cases unless the land involved enjoys special designation.

Designation as area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) or site of special scientific interest (SSSI) is protecting certain areas, but not enough to preserve the character of the countryside of the region. There are of course no national parks in the south-east. Meanwhile, planning officers know that they cannot grant permission for development on green belt sites, however sustainable they might be and however much such development might relieve pressure on more valuable countryside.

Somehow, the environmental movement seems to have been co-opted into supporting these priorities. What has gone wrong? Why have environmentalists not succeeded in forcing the real issues to the surface? And is not our ineffectiveness in this subject matched by similar ineffectiveness in other areas where true environmental priorities are not being made to prevail?

It seems to me that the heart of the problem lies in the reactive tradition of environmental protest: we respond to Outrages as they seem to be perpetrated. As a result, our fire is directed by chance events and media interest rather than overall strategy.

As far as I know, no environmentalist intended to promote the sacrifice. Of the virgin countryside of the south-east in order to preserve nondescript green belt land. Indeed, the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) has registered objections to the development of the new 'village' settlements that appeal so much to the government. But it might as well not have bothered. Few have noticed its remarks on this issue, though its vigorous stand on green belt has been well covered.

The media cannot be blamed for failing to present environmental issues properly if we have failed to articulate them. Surely, in the case of south-east England, what the environmental movement should have tried to do is to draw up a comprehensive, realistic and persuasive programme of its own for the future of the region once the scale of the development Pressure had become apparent. This would have taken thought, conferences, effort and imagination. But it would also have taken something else - the willingness to face up to unwelcome choices.

Setting Priorities

It is easy to say that as much as possible of the development facing the south-east should be shunted off to Tyneside and Merseyside instead. It is easy to say that as much as possible of what remains should be concentrated in inner London rather than the countryside. But insofar as some of it has to go into the countryside, then it is not so easy for environmentalists to set priorities about which fields and woods should be sacrificed. This is not necessarily because it is not obvious where the true environmental interest lies. It is because nobody wants to tell people in south Hertfordshire that some of their countryside is less important than that of north-east Hampshire. Yet if we are not prepared to take this kind of decision, then we are never going to control events.

I was sorry to see that in his reply to my July Column, Richard Bate of CPRE showed little enthusiasm for grasping such nettles. All he had to offer the threatened countryside beyond the green belts was the proposal that the government should refrain from using the appeals system to intervene in the planning process. This is exactly the kind of proposal which is easy but pointless to make. The government is not going to abandon its role in the planning system because its critics dislike the way it is exercising that role. It may, however, be prepared to exercise its role differently if presented with a case for doing so that accommodates its key objectives.

Rather than seek to develop such a case, Richard Bate returned to the blanket defence of the green belts. He suggested that if the possibility of development in green belt areas were entertained, there would be more 'farming to quit' and a resultant surge of planning applications which would put pressure on planning authorities. Of course these phenomena occur to some extent in any area where development is a possibility. Is it really better that they should be concentrated in the countryside of south-east England beyond the green belt, rather than shared more evenly with green belt countryside?

According to Richard Bate, there would be no point in suggesting that unattractive green belt sites should be developed rather than remote and beautiful countryside, since that way both sorts of land might be lost. This attitude seems to me to reflect exactly the kind of thinking that threatens to condemn environmentalism to the margins of public debate. We must not forever fearfully guard ground we happen to hold at the expense of our true objectives. Surely we should devise, campaign for and achieve an overall solution for south-east England in which we believe, not settle for defending green belts because that is easier?

The planning system with its appeal machinery allow, the landscape of south-east England to be shaped in anyway whatsoever. We do not have to endorse the government's programme of development in the Countryside, nor should we endorse automatically the arbitrary exceptions it makes to suit its own ends.

If we fail to rescue the real countryside of the south-east, the continued inviolability of the green belts will be no consolation. So far, we have not failed because we have not even tried. A serious effort in the little time that remains might be painful as well as hard. But it might do wonders not only for some magical countryside but also for the credibility of the environmental movement as a whole.

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