
*An Environment
For Growth.*



ADAM SMITH
INSTITUTE

A N E N V I R O N M E N T F O R G R O W T H

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Cover illustration: The Blue Water Park proposal, promoted by Shearwater Property Holdings and Blue Circle Industries, combines retail and leisure facilities in an old quarry area.

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'Laws frequently continue in force long after the circumstances which first gave occasion to them, and which could alone render them reasonable, are no more.'

Adam Smith, The Wealth of Nations, pp361-2

THE MYTH AND REALITY OF GREEN BELT POLITICS

Eamonn Butler
Adam Smith Institute

PERCEPTION AND MISUNDERSTANDING

The public choice imbalance

The picture which troubles almost everyone when the words 'green belt' are mentioned is straightforward enough. Our precious heritage under threat; unfeeling developers determined to eat up rural Britain; concrete monstrosities where green meadows used to glisten in the sun; urban semis marching in still greater numbers over formerly unspoilt countryside; bulldozers shattering the pastoral way of life; juggernauts charging through once-quaint villages; endless demands for new building projects once the green belt principle has been broken; the irreversible consumption of a priceless asset.

The real argument, however, is quite different and much less one-sided, although the full measure of the debate is rarely grasped by politicians and the general public.

That may disappoint those who expect and seek a rational approach to policy formation on such issues, but it should come as no surprise. In all the wrangles about particular development projects, it is the chorus of complaint from the local objectors which grasps most loudly at the public's attention and stays ringing longest in our minds. The arguments of potential beneficiaries are scarcely voiced: how can they be, since most of those who would derive the benefit from a new housing project or a new shopping and leisure centre are either too distant and diffused or too young to appreciate the fact. Few people would screech in outrage over the blocking of projects that would bring an incremental boost to the economy as a whole; plenty shout with fury against the same projects for bringing unwelcome new activity to their placid area.

This imbalance -- the local few whose interests are concentrated, organised, and direct versus the general many whose interests are diffused, impossible to organise, and marginal -- is a typical example of the 'public choice' problem and explains much of the prevailing antipathy to green belt development of any kind. It also explains why governments tend to placate local interests rather than pursue any coherent policy that would work more in the interests of the public as a whole.

The present government is in a particularly difficult position,

and therefore apparently less able to formulate a coherent policy than most. First, the pace of economic change has brought a demand for large and accessible new sites in the South East. Second, those most actively opposing any change to their current lifestyle and surroundings are precisely those who support the Conservative Party and the Members of Parliament who represent them. The prospects of a rational policy are inevitably dimmed when such powerful partisan forces are at work against the vast but unmustered interests of the general public.

Function and fables

The policymaking imbalance is manifested not just in the relative degrees of organisation found in the local and more general interests, but also in terms of their ability to present the public and the decision-makers with a favourable image of what they are hoping to preserve or achieve. It is not surprising that those with concentrated interests should be best equipped for the propaganda battle; but more subtly, local objectors are usually defending a tangible piece of ground, and draw their strength from people's personal experience and appreciation of the countryside; while the developers have to make their case with only a concept, a drawing, an assurance of sensitivity in the design, a theoretical projection of the overall benefits.

Not really green: While the defenders may be able to conjure up a touching image of rolling downs and charming farmsteads, the reality of the green belt is quite different. A large amount of it, for example, is not even green. Much is the brown, waterlogged, uneven aftermath of gravel extraction. More is the blackened, damaged result of filling in rubbish pits. Some is marred by unsightly khaki heaps of mining slag. Other parts are the concrete and rust of disused factories, warehouses, and quarries, overtaken by industrial change; or the blue of broken glass from long-abandoned market garden greenhouses. Some has been turned the sad and faded colours of household debris and abandoned scrap metal.

Much of the green belt is already built on, with uses that are far distant from the popular conception of rolling greenery. Old industrial and residential developments, not all of them pretty rural villages by any means, break up the green belt and turn it into a series of green wedges rather than an solid ring.

Those new buildings which have been allowed in the green belt, for one reason or another, frequently fail to live up to the image of rustic bliss. The corrugated aluminium grain stores, the high-tech cattle sheds or the skyscraping silos dominate the landscape far more aggressively than the nineteenth century farm cottage beneath. Such is the nature of rural planning that abrasive new structures can be imposed on farmland without the need to ask permission, while sympathetically designed housing or leisure projects spend years being shuffled around the planners and politicians at both local and national levels.

Sterility: Even those parts of the green belt which are genuinely agricultural often fail to live up to the rustic image. Often, the green gives way for a time to the violent yellow of oilseed rape, encouraged by the strategists of the Common Agricultural Policy. Elsewhere, the hedgerows and coppices that were once rich with birds, insects and animals have been torn up so that ever bigger harvesting machinery can crop ever bigger fields. Nitrate fertilisers, their use promoted by generous financial provisions, wash into neighbouring streams and ponds, poisoning them. Wheatfields, again encouraged under the CAP, stretch across steep valleys that are plainly a better home to sheep. Tax concessions have populated the remainder of the hilltops with regular ranks of identical conifers that can support little life beyond the lumber industry. Nearly all the lush meadows that once supported so many of our wild flowers and butterflies have disappeared under waves of barley. The schoolbook picture of a verdant, rolling countryside is out of date: our policies have generated a new brand of intensive agriculture that has turned it into a sterile prairie. The outrage of ecologists such as Penny Anderson is not difficult to understand.

Inaccessibility: It is not just wildlife that suffers from the sterility of intensive agriculture. Human beings also lose as the countryside they once rambled across becomes inaccessible. Efficient farmers hardly want members of the public trespassing across their crops (though fortunately for them, perhaps, the public's desire so to do is diminished as large bleak fields replace the meadows). Many of those who argue for the preservation of the countryside are in fact arguing for something that is as completely out of bounds to themselves and others as any other private factory would be.

Growth and change: Another item that is often lost in the debates on the green belt is that it has, in fact, grown enormously in recent years. In fact, the areas of specially protected green belt has more than doubled in the Thatcher government's term of office. Again it is the imbalance in the public debate which explains the misconception: extensions of a particular planning regime are not exactly newsworthy nationally; new plans for housing, shopping centres, leisure facilities, or roads always are. Those on the outer edge of the area designated as green belt naturally want to be included in it so that they can enjoy what economists call the 'economic rent' of restricting access to others. The result is a steady spread: at present rates, it will not be too long before the London green belt sprawls from Cornwall to the Wash.

The very spread of the designated area has meant that it has absorbed areas that scarcely perform the agreed functions of green belt. No longer a thin corset around burgeoning cities, it has become a large series of restricted wedges, many drawn quite arbitrarily in response to local electoral pressures, including many sites which can give little pleasure to the country lover and which only suffer even more by the absence of economic growth

in the vicinity. A systematic reappraisal of green belt sites, and the function they perform, is long overdue.

The costs of planning restriction

While those who are fortunate enough to get their neighbourhood restricted against outsiders enjoy an economic rent, people in other localities have to pay its price.

House prices have been bid up considerably in the London area, for example, as people from the depressed North attempt to move towards new job opportunities but find that planning controls have restricted the supply of accommodation in the metropolis and the surrounding cities. Professor Alan Evans, reviewing studies of planning restrictions in Reading, for example, points to a 10% planning premium on prices that are already bid up by demographic pressure.

Such high prices are an obvious barrier to labour mobility, so that the increased property prices due to planning restrictions have the secondary effect of dampening economic activity by creating artificial shortages of labour and skill in the areas where new industries would choose to locate.

Those who still migrate, despite the cost, will probably find themselves living a long way from their place of work. Some who work in inner London find they can afford to live only in one of the satellite cities that exist and grow only because of the intervening void of green belt. Longer travel times and higher commuting costs for individuals, more expenditure on railways and motorways for the government, and greater congestion on the roads for the public are the inevitable result.

Higher costs for people are matched by higher costs for goods. More items need road haulage because economic activity has been pushed outside the enchanted ring. More heavy lorries rumble through the villages.

REAL CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM

Technical and economic change

The UK economy is experiencing two major changes. Firstly, a world recession brought about by the oil price rises in the 1970s engineered a serious dip in the manufacturing output of most developed nations. That decline was reinforced by anti-inflation policies which have hit manufacturing industries particularly.

Secondly, better education and increasing prosperity in the Far East and other regions have led to the export of many UK manufacturing jobs to those countries where costs are cheaper. Accordingly, the balance of the UK economy is changing away from manufacture and towards services, high-tech, new and lighter industries, leisure, tourism, and so on.

Such changes have caused the worst problems in the old industrial centres of the North and Midlands. Brighter prospects in the South-East and in out-of-town areas generally have put demographic pressure on the green belts ringing London and other important towns.

In a way, the economic upturn of the early 1970s has contributed equally to a pressure on the green belt, since many of its gravel pits, now potential sites for new retailing and leisure developments, were dug then to provide materials for the housing and construction boom.

Mobility: Another factor is that greater mobility, a rise in car ownership, faster rail services, the spread of telex and fax services, and easier communications generally have meant that people are able to travel further by road, and are less limited to city life. Many specialists can now work from home, travelling into the centre only occasionally each week or month; new small businesses can set up outside the central area without any loss of convenience; and new highways like the M25 increase personal mobility and improve access to out-of-town sites even further. All this puts a quite natural development pressure on rural areas which it is hard to resist.

The revolution in shopping and leisure: A further factor is the changing shape of retailing, partly in response to this new mobility. The plans drawn up in the early 1970s seriously underestimated the amount of retail space which the UK would need, as Brian Waters suggests. Rural planners drew up their own local plans in cheerful ignorance of the pressure that was building up and which could not be accommodated by town centres. People today are wealthier; they spend more time shopping, they buy things which they would formerly do without or even make themselves; they treat shopping as much as a family recreation as a serious business; they rely less on public transport and expect to be able to park near to where they shop. Old city centres have insufficient space and access for them.

The leisure aspect of shopping has led to the popularity of new combined retail and leisure centres. In Canada and other countries, adventurous new shopping malls have their own hotels and leisure facilities on hand to cater for those who make special trips to enjoy shopping weekends.

Housing for independents: Changing family size has also put a pressure on out-of-town areas. More independent young people want their own housing; people marry later; families are smaller. All those factors mean that the same population requires larger numbers of houses, although they may want smaller houses than before.

Planning causes

The green belt was originally conceived as a corset to stop urban sprawl and keep communities separate and distinct, but as such it

raised an unnatural barrier to the normal spread of cities. Unchecked economic forces soon turned it into an unusual green doughnut ring within otherwise unbroken cities, with the result that the pressure on the area it covers is not just from one direction -- the inner city outwards -- but from two -- outwards from the inner city, inwards from the satellite towns.

Playing the odds: The confusion generated by this stereoscopic pressure is compounded by the effect of planning delays and uncertainties. Local planners are reluctant to take decisions on using land designated as green belt, no matter what its condition; small developments are often subjected to lengthy public debates and political wrangling, and even shunted up to the national government for a decision; large developments always are. To the developers, it must resemble a lottery, and naturally they play the odds, putting in more proposals than they really want all at once, in the hope that at least one will eventually get through all the political barriers. It looks as if the green belt is under attack from a vast army, while the numbers are really quite few.

The politicisation of planning restrictions within cities has undoubtedly contributed to the problem. Inflexible and complicated planning rules are bad enough, and might well tempt those who can do so to develop, or at least put in a sheaf of applications to develop, outside the city. They are made worse when the political aspirations of local planning departments bar off particular types of development. Councils holding large tracts of land, some of them vacant sites, in the vain hope that they may one day have enough resources to build council housing developments, drive people and housebuilders further and further out. Only radical changes and simplifications in planning policy, as in the London Docklands case for example, are likely to relieve this pressure.

Subsidy and misallocation: National economic planning shares some of the blame. Years of support for intensive agriculture has forced us to produce expensively what we could have bought more cheaply from abroad. At last, economic reality is asserting it in this sector like so many others, and our over-extended agricultural sector is now in a slump. Instead of using that opportunity to allow and encourage new small industries on formerly agricultural sites, current policy threatens merely to replace the wheatfields with tax-aided forests. This represents a serious underuse of land that could be supporting services, housing, and sunrise industries. It is clear that a fresher policy is needed, one which really addresses the issue of how to use the surplus of agricultural land in the context of the other structural and demographic changes going on in the economy.

Cost and benefit asymmetry

Within the mechanism for dealing with planning applications for sites in the green belt, there is a serious asymmetry which almost invariably generates a restrictive, sub-optimal outcome.

In all such issues, the rational decision-maker would consider the costs and benefits not just to the locality but to the country as a whole. A new retailing centre on a disused gravel pit, for example, might be regarded as an unwelcome disruption by those who live nearby, but as a great boon to much larger numbers of people within easy access of it by car or train. New housing might disrupt the peace of a village, but bring enormous benefits to the many families who can now find accommodation and to the city industries that are short of their skills. In each case, the stimulus to economic development, or the absence of arbitrary restraints upon it, could yield national benefits.

The decision, however, is most commonly a local matter; and as John Trustram Eve points out, however much local residents might try to be objective, their decisions are inevitably clouded by local factors. Outsiders, and even future generations of locals who will be affected by the restrictions, count for nothing in the discussions because they have no votes. Planning decisions with national cost-benefit consequences are being made by individuals dominated by local cost-benefit concerns.

There has long been a lack of any broad planning policy which will overcome this asymmetry in planning policy; to impose a more rational structure over the heads of local representatives has always been thought a prickly political problem.

Such inaction might have been relatively unimportant throughout much of our recent history, but it has certainly left us with serious deficiencies today. The structural and technological changes within the economy have assumed major proportions in the last ten years; city planning policies have become even less flexible as the political divide between Whitehall and the local authorities has widened and opinions have polarised. Spiralling London house prices, the lack of new facilities for growing businesses, the shortages of essential skills needed for economic recovery have all become urgent problems which call for an imaginative new strategy.

FUTURE STRATEGY

Surveying the problem

A useful first step towards filling the policy void would be a systematic survey of green belt land. Such a survey is needed to appreciate what functions each parcel of green belt land actually performs. For rational policy-making, it is important to know precisely which sections are damaged or so unsightly that they would be better developed, which are unusable for agricultural purposes, which are the inaccessible, intensively farmed prairies so sterile to people and wildlife, and which form a pointless barrier which traps the economic revival of small communities.

Following on from the survey must be an appraisal of the options for each parcel. Some unquestionably perform all the functions

of green belt and are additionally both charming and accessible. Others are just eyesores or deserts that have no such redeeming features. The question in each case must be whether the green belt functions of the land can be improved or whether some other use could bring national and local benefits.

Admitting planning failure

Another step must be the acknowledgement that existing policy structures have failed, and that economic circumstances and public attitudes have all changed. Rising house prices are seen clearly to be a barrier to labour mobility and economic revival; better trade links make the public less willing to support domestic agriculture; improved communications are encouraging the out-of-town alternatives in work and leisure; people no longer feel locked into the city centres. All these factors have generated a growing stratum of people who believe that more effective use, albeit sensitive in nature, can be made of rural land.

We must also accept our inevitable ignorance of what the future holds, and recognise the shortcomings of all our attempts to plan for it. The unexpected demand for retailing space, pointed out by Brian Waters, is just one element of this; the manufacturing collapse and the rise of lighter industries and services which shocked us with its speed in the 1980s was not just unplanned but even resisted by policymakers through Selective Employment Tax in the 1960s.

A policy which tries to predict the shape of the economy in the future and attempts to block off any other outcome will no more work today than it has in the past. In deciding land use, we need a strategy which is flexible enough to accommodate new and unexpected opportunities while preserving what is best; a policy which takes national costs and benefits into consideration when local planning decisions are made; a policy which is quick and predictable in its operation.

Such a policy must correct the cost-benefit asymmetry that makes the present system so restrictive, uncertain, and time-consuming. It should seek to avoid the public choice pitfalls: for example, the proposal of Nicholas Baker and Jerry Wiggin to create categories of 'protected green belt' and 'permanent green belt' -- agricultural or woodland spaces between communities -- presents a hostage to fortune, in that everyone on the edges would demand 'permanent' status for themselves, and the permanently barred area would spread outward as remorselessly as the existing green belt has done, whatever its merits as landscape.

Practical measures

There may be a case for narrow corsets to bring at least some accessible countryside within the easy reach of city dwellers, but it is hard to see why we should accede to every demand to

broaden that corset ever further.

Indeed, perhaps the 'green wedge' policy might be a better way of achieving such aims. Establishing truly green areas within city boundaries, allowing cities to grow around rural areas that are regarded as particularly fine, might preserve the quality of city life and the best of the rural landscape without choking off economic development.

The very 1930s sprawl of housing that the green belts were designed to resist in fact represented just such an attempt to combine the convenience of town life with the benefits of leafy streets and gardens. The popularity of those suburbs might make us doubt the planners' ex-cathedra advice that they were really not what we wanted.

We should not fear that such flexibility would drive development to the outskirts and depress inner cities even further. Indeed, the restriction of growth at the edges of cities has contributed to that decline, arbitrarily truncating the natural constituency of those who support and rely on inner-city industries.

Correcting the cost-benefit imbalance

A strategy to correct the cost-benefit imbalance of local decision-making could take many forms, and indeed the mechanism by which the Secretary of State for the Environment has to make decisions on large-scale developments is an attempt to do this. It is not altogether successful, because politicians at all levels are naturally wary of offending vociferous interest groups, giving in to objectors and hearing little or no argument on behalf of the invisible victims of restriction.

Nonpolitical planning body: Taking the decision-making out of political control might be one possible strategy. A development commission or planning body for the green belt as a whole, balancing local interests with national representation and with disinterested outsiders, could provide a vehicle that would be hard for politicians to manipulate and which could take some of the difficult decisions which are so often shelved within the political process.

Such a commission would of course have to be charged with ensuring that rural land should be used sensitively as well as productively, and proper cost-benefit analysis would undoubtedly be one of its major functions. Like the Monopolies and Mergers Commission, its decisions should be capable of being made quickly and on clear guidelines, reducing the costs and uncertainties of planning delays.

National use guidelines: Another possible strategy would be to set national guidelines about the use of particular parts of the green belt, allowing pockets of development on land which the national survey reveals as not fulfilling adequately its functions.

Such guidelines could also stretch to the type of developments that would be allowed in green belt areas, and how such sites would have to be used. Plainly, developments which were sensitive to the environment would be preferred, while unsightly structures, even those intended for agricultural use, would not. Even more attractive might be those developments which actually restore an area of damaged land or land which was not sufficiently fulfilling the functions of green belt. In many cases, the proposal is for a retailing or leisure development on a large and damaged site, only a small fraction of which would be absorbed by buildings: a general guideline that schemes would be considered sympathetically for approval if they restored, say, 80% of the site to accessible and attractive woodland, lake, or open space, and budgetted for the perpetual maintenance of that area .

Limiting site numbers: One further prospect would be similar to that employed by the French government in allowing limited development around the Paris ring road. Under this proposal, the government would determine that only a limited number of developments would be approved in particular areas -- say, three or four around London, one or two near Manchester, two in Central Scotland, and so on -- and refuse to consider other applications for ten years or more. Then it would be up to cost-benefit analysis to decide which sites were the most suitable, and interest groups in other areas could relax.

Any such policy is restrictive, however, and increases still further the benefit to a developer who is fortunate enough to possess one of the chosen sites. Yet the prospect of such enormous economic rent will do nothing to dry up the pressure for further projects being mooted by the developers, nor will the public's disquiet at such planning gains going into the pockets of developers be stilled.

Possible ways to deal with this would certainly include taxing away much of the planning gain once the sites have been decided, so that the developers make a good return but do not enjoy the full profits of their privileged position, their planning windfall. The tax revenues can be used to restore other parts of the green belt to their full attractiveness and function, or to help towards the inner city programme. Alternatively, developers might be asked to restore neighbouring sites themselves in lieu of the tax payment.

Another approach would be to take the site into public ownership through compulsory purchase and then auction it between those developers who were able to draw up acceptable plans for its use. Once again, the revenue raised would match the planning gain and could be used to restore green belt sites or inner city areas.

CONCLUSION

New forms of taxation, compulsory purchase, or the creation of

quangos are not generally welcomed by economists as likely to raise the efficiency of the market process. However, in the present circumstances, where the commitment to planning restrictions outside our cities is so strong, such interventions could well bring us to a second-best solution that is better than the present lack of direction.

The need for a new policy strategy has become overwhelming as the structural changes in the economy have occurred so rapidly and so strongly. Attitudes have changed, and the costs of planning restrictions on house prices, in terms of skill shortages, as a barrier to mobility and as a block on economic revival, have become more widely appreciated.

Whatever policy option is chosen, it should combine the flexibility that is needed to harness new economic opportunities with the sensitivity that is expected of rural developments today. Most importantly, it should limit the politicisation of decision-making by establishing strategic policy guidelines at the national level, incorporating sound cost-benefit analysis techniques into the decision on specific sites.

THE NEED FOR PLANNING FLEXIBILITY

Brian Waters

Boisot Waters Cohen Partnership

The need for planning

We all get frustrated by the delays, complexity and uncertainty of the process involved in getting planning permission. The minutiae often seem irrelevant; the inconsistency of the views of technical planning officers and their masters -- elected laymen in committees -- seems hard to justify; and the time it all takes -- and the cost -- often seem out of all proportion to the perceived benefits. After all, 85% of all applications are eventually granted permission; 95% of detail applications likewise, and close to half the appeals to the Secretary of State are won by appellants.

Nevertheless, planning cuts across party lines. The left might have a clearer commitment to planning in the strategic sense, but landowners are quick to call on the system when someone else proposes to prejudice their interest -- by extending next door, by building a housing estate in the green belt at the bottom of their garden, or by proposing an out-of-town shopping centre which will compete with their established pattern of trade.

The planning system

The planning system has evolved from its earliest days as a method of land-use planning, to embrace the wider scope of socio-economic issues -- employment and population growth for example. Town planning has become a tool in governments' direction of resources. A hierarchy of policies has been developed which relate to a hierarchy of planning control -- departmental circulars, regional strategies, county structure plans and local plans made by district and borough councils. In recent years the system has polarised with a concentration of power in central policy directives and local plans.

In parallel, the legislative planning system has evolved from the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act, to become a sophisticated and extensive process in its own right. It deals with everything from mineral extraction to hazardous materials, from compensation to aesthetic control and on to historic building. It has evolved a baggage of procedures and case precedents and its power and inertia are not to be underestimated.

A small example of contemporary interest is the Use Classes Order. This defines categories of use for buildings and land and permits changes of use within categories which do not require

planning permission. Following radical proposals by the Planning Advisory Group in 1985, and lengthy consultations, a new order came into effect recently. The Government's aim was to free up the system of development control and the previous order of 18 use classes was reduced -- but in the end to only 16 classes and several of these with new subdivisions. Advising a wide range of clients as I do, I can confirm that the inevitable has happened. The introduction of a new order, despite important changes, has in practice added to the complexity of the system.

At town planning school I learned the dictum: 'Survey -- Analysis - Plan' (and not a great deal else!). Plan -- the noun -- is all pervading. It's the document which for many areas still talks about 'policies of restraint' and the need to limit such things as industrial development which might cause an increase in employment in areas which are today crying out for new job opportunities of any kind!

But what happened to plan -- the verb? As the planning system has matured it has also taken on board the 1960s demand for public participation. The whole package may not yet be moribund but it is showing distinct signs of middle age. Plans are increasingly less about strategy than about tactics. They get bogged down in detail and stipulate policy constraints which are frequently used as a basis for planning authorities to negotiate 'planning gains' in exchange for relaxing such policies. Twenty years ago, after twenty years of development control, Richard Crossman (the minister responsible) criticised planning on two grounds: 'the delay it causes, and the quality of its results.' As the planning system has bogged itself down, the rate of change in society has accelerated, with the result that it is plodding behind trying to keep up with reality: planning has lost its vision. I will give you three examples.

Shopping: The batch of plans approved around 1979 allocated a quantity of retail floorspace to be taken up by developments through to 1991. Changing patterns of retailing have seen to it that the whole of this ration of floorspace had been built by last year. Its planned-for disposition has also changed. In 1973 there were just 26 hypermarkets and superstores in this country; by 1979 there were 125 and by 1985, 260.

Those plans were out of date and out of touch. As a result the planning system has lost its grip on major retail development and the Secretary of State has issued a moratorium on all schemes over quarter of a million square feet which he will now have to decide on an ad-hoc basis. Neither developers nor planning authorities have any basis for predicting the outcome in a particular case.

Consultants hired by 7 West Midlands district councils have reported that 2 schemes already granted permission account for more than three times the amount of space which can be justified without damage to existing shopping centres. Meanwhile there are 6 proposals in the pipeline for out-of-town centres larger than

half a million square feet in the area, each of which will have to go through a laborious public inquiry.

Workspace: Rapid changes in the pattern of work in the economy have been widely discussed. The new Use Classes Order belatedly recognises some of these by merging offices, high-technology, studios and light industrial into one business use class. Again, planning in the sense of vision and opportunity is noticeable by its absence. Policy is merely recognising established market forces, neither anticipating nor effectively controlling them.

Agriculture: The continued exclusion of any reference to agriculture in the Order underlines its retrospective nature. Town and Country planning legislation is still resisting the industrial revolution while paying lip-service to the post-industrial revolution which is upon us. Even though recent Government pronouncements acknowledge the changed strategic role of agricultural production, and the farming 'Neddy' predicts that three quarters of a million hectares of arable land may come out of production over the next decade, agricultural development continues uncontrolled regardless of its impact on environment or amenity. Farmers remain the only developers who are offered compensation not to carry out undesirable development of their land!

The need for flexibility

There is clearly a need for a new flexibility, and more. Whilst any planning system is bound to act as a brake on market forces to some extent, it should justify its cost by facilitating the main thrust of development in a climate of certainty which makes effective and efficient use of resources.

The planning system has shown itself masterful at controlling the most precious and sensitive parts of our environment -- conservation areas, historic buildings, national parks -- and has shown itself capable of implementing bold strategic projects -- the new town and urban development corporations. The Government has recognised the need to try out less controlling regimes such as enterprise zones and (soon) simplified planning zones. I would hope we would agree that, appropriately applied, both these ends of the spectrum have their place.

It is significant that it is not just the regulations but also the 'democratic' procedures of the planning system which have to be relaxed at the laissez-faire end of the spectrum. This suggests the need for a similar treatment in the middle ground where the main bulk of development takes place. The Americans can be as careful to protect the status quo on sensitive sites, with as many as four levels of approval needed for a single house design. But for the run of the mill development the zoning will be clear and the principle of development clearly established. Compliance in terms of building codes is the only residual control. The plans are firm and simple and not subject to the whim of either local officers or politicians, so allowing

investors and entrepreneurs to know where they are and to get on with the job. Strategic planning also has its place in the land of free enterprise. In renewal schemes like Baltimore Harbour, master planning is central to the initiative and design standards do matter. A quality environment is part of the sales pitch.

There is an important role for planning in this country but we can no longer afford a blanket of suffocating control and consultation. We need a spectrum of planning regimes which can enable as well as control development and which are selectively and appropriately targetted. We also need forward strategic planning but the mechanism has to be drastically overhauled to inject vision rather than responding to historic circumstances. Above all, the planning system has to create a climate of certainty to replace the present complexity and uncertainty which diminishes the very resources which it is supposed to help allocate for the benefit of our society.

HOUSING AND THE LABOUR MOBILITY CRISIS

Andy Bennett
Consortium Developments

When I was invited by the Adam Smith Institute to do this speech some weeks ago, I treated it with obvious joy and expectation. I was slightly concerned, however, like some of you if you were watching Spitting Image, before the election results, to see that a consortium of private house builders were proposing a new town in the green belt called Milton Friedman. I can assure you that is not Consortium Developments project.

I should tell you a little bit about Consortium Developments. We have been going some four years now, following some research by our consultants who approached nearly all of the planning authorities in the South East of England with the question: where is major growth to be accommodated in the South East during the end 1980s and 1990s?

Various other considerations were looked at: for example, the M25 completion, major infrastructure projects, expansion at Stanstead airport, Gatwick, Heathrow, the possibility of a Channel Tunnel and the like. That was then coupled with the experience of our consortium members (the major house builders in the country) as to where the market was, where our consumers' choice was to be met, where the jobs were.

If we were to meet the ongoing infrastructure costs at our expense and carry the cost in the early years of the development, then we had to be assured that the market was ripe and that we had a good selling rate from day one. Therefore we couldn't start out in the middle of Lincolnshire or the North of Scotland, where some of the conservationists may or may not have wanted us to go: we had to go in the areas of high demand around London.

Problems

Inevitably, we came up against the historic restraint policies surrounding the capital, notably the metropolitan green belt, some million and quarter acres. It was not the objective of this company to take head on the green belt policy. That said, green belt policy in the South East is a major constraint to meeting demand and, I suspected that we would have to take it on sooner or later. As luck would have it the first site we managed to achieve under option was in Essex, in the green belt, in the South of Essex in Thurrock. We took heart from what were rather strange utterances coming from government at that stage, as to

their wish to shift the economic vitality of the motorway corridor to the West of London and move it to the East of London -- the lower Thames estuary. We took heart by that, believing that a new country town campus environment would improve the image of that part of Essex -- which if you know around Grays-Thurrock isn't on every employer's hit-list of locations to site their new company -- could raise expectations in the development industry. Since then we have seen the development industries waking up to the fact that the M25 goes through that part of Essex and we now have major regional shopping centres and housing schemes coming through by the score.

I am not going to dwell at length on our Tillingham Hall application and subsequent eight-week appeal, apart from saying we were disappointed it went down. We took heart in the decision letter from the Secretary of State, who said that well conceived projects of this type in suitable locations could meet demand in the South East. We looked for a suitable location outside the green belt and we went to Hampshire. We found a derelict sand gravel pit of some seven hundred acres, surrounded by coniferous screen. We thought it a perfect site for a new country town. So did the planning authorities. The county council, in their draft plan, actually had marked our site as a new settlement option in the North East Hampshire structure plan.

We then got caught up in the Berkshire syndrome. You think of a number, you go out and ask the locals: 'How does that grab you chaps?' And they say: 'We don't like that because we don't want any more houses, thank you. We have got a house, we have got a job, we don't want any more of that.' So they chop your figure and in Hampshire they chopped it from eighteen thousand to eleven thousand in a year. I think Adam Smith would turn in his grave if he thought that was the way that planning in this country was conducted in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. No justification, apart from the fact that less houses means less greenfield take, and that pleases all people in all parties.

So, to bring you totally up to date with the position on our site: we have christened it Foxley Wood, it is in the North East Hampshire area, well outside the metropolitan green belt. It was originally a growth area in what was once the regional strategy for the South East. Now the local council is proceeding with a 'surrogate' green belt policy, which means they are subjecting every bit of countryside in that area of Hampshire to what they call 'conservation' -- which in effect is the same as a metropolitan green belt policy, and no development will take place.

The policy muddle

That leads us on to consider what policy context the government and local authorities should seek to achieve and strive for so that our schemes, which we hope make sense in terms of meeting pressures for development in the South East, can be accommodated.

I think it is useful to reflect on a letter that the Prime Minister, back in July, 1985, wrote to Gerry Wiggin MP regarding the Government's policy to new developments in a demand led economy. She said:

'It is no part of our policy to direct where people shall live or where firms set up or expand. If we try to discourage development and economic growth in large parts of the South of England in the hope that it will happen in the large cities or in the North, we risk losing them altogether. Ministers have, therefore, said in the 1984 circular Land for Housing, that the planning system, including structure and local plans, must continue to identify, bring forward and permit the development of sufficient new land for housing, taking account of market demand and other housing requirements. The needs of modern industry and of the expanding service sector, and the demand for home ownership, cannot be met wholly within existing levels, nor can those requirements be redirected in ways that bear no relation to the demands of the market and a healthy competitive economy. To pretend otherwise is unrealistic and contrary to the interest of the country as a whole.'

This compares interestingly to the recent utterances from the Secretary of State, Nicholas Ridley, on the need to control development in the South East in the hope that these pressure will miraculously direct themselves to the Midlands and the North. To quote a speech in November 1987, Nicholas Ridley said:

'There is a price to be paid for our determination to resist major development in the South East. The cost of land is high, the cost of housing is high. People wishing to move from the North and children of people already in the South East who wish to start a household, are finding it difficult to find affordable accommodation. Many firms in the South East are finding it difficult to get employees. We are developing policies designed to reduce these pressures. We are putting money into the regeneration of the industrial North: for example, enterprise zones and urban development corporations. Our proposed unified business rate will relieve businesses in hard pressed inner cities of excessive rate bills. The pressures in the South East mean that employers and employees will look further afield for opportunities to locate in other regions to reap the benefits of the lower cost of land, lower cost of living and availability of labour.'

Interesting? Remarkable? What do the employers think about this? In a paper produced by the Eastern Region of the CBI, can be found several quotes from employers regarding the housing problem as they see it in that part of the South East. I will give you the flavour of what people are saying.

'A regional plan to identify any available land for houses

is required. We will not get out of the price upward spiral until supply is brought nearer to demand. The regional authority should have sufficient authority to overcome narrow vested interest.'

'... Almost no opportunity to successfully recruit people living north of Peterborough in low cost housing areas, purely because of price differentials.'

'On several occasions we have endeavoured to move skilled staff from other areas of the country, particularly the North East; and on each occasion, after a trial period in the area, they have moved back with the main comment that it would be impossible for them to adapt to the living cost in the Cambridge area. On each occasion, those people would have filled positions that we were unable to fill locally. Skilled engineers and welders, particularly, are available in other parts of the country but are unable to move to the South East.'

'...it is also difficult for us to offer promotion within our own company, even when we offer realistic re-location packages, because of the higher cost of living in the Cambridge area.'

Just an aside on Cambridge: although some people in industry thought Consortium Developments was mad when we put forward this programme of new villages/country towns in the South, there are now twelve proposals for new villages around Cambridge, so other people seem to think that is a good idea.'

The South East challenge

What are the South East's economic strengths and why is the planning argument centred around it?

1. The South East offers an industrial climate which is favourable to enterprise. A recent study of VAT registrations shows that the South East has the highest rate of business formations of any region.
2. South-Eastern firms have the most favourable rate of innovation, particularly product innovation. The Department of Trade and Industry demonstrates that the South East is the innovative core with an infrastructure which facilitates both industrial innovation and its rapid diffusion for all sizes of companies. An analysis of applications made for DTI support for innovation schemes shows that the South East secures 44.7% of the grants available under that scheme.
3. The South East has the highest concentration of business services, with over 70% of employees in the service sector by comparison with an average for Great Britain of 63.9%. Moreover, 47% of all research establishments in Great Britain are in the South East.

4. The South East has the highest concentration of invisible export earners whose growth is of increasing importance. These include the City of London and the after-effect of the Big Bang. Professional services fan throughout the region, so do transport services and tourism.

5. The region has the highest concentration of multinational and company headquarters and proximity to these decision making centres is of crucial importance in company growth. History has shown us that although since the war, we have put billions of pounds of taxpayers money into the northern regions, the moment there is a blip on the horizon and a recession comes, companies withdraw back to the heartland -- and that is the South East and London. That is an experience not only shared in this country but in every other western economy in the world. This North/South syndrome is not purely a British problem.

6. The South East's role within the economy and its position within the EEC's Golden Triangle have meant that it is an attractive location for inward investment where the alternative may be a continental mainland site. Again, this is very important. I know that the DTI are very concerned that with the demise of the new towns and the winding-up of Development Corporations in Milton Keynes, Peterborough and the like, that the likes of Japanese companies will no longer be able to be accommodated in areas where they wish to go -- the South East of this country. We will not have the infrastructure, or the housing stock, the shopping facilities, ready for inward investment. So they will happily go to France, Germany and Belgium who are nurturing their growth areas and ensuring that any new jobs and investment will be accommodated. That is a big problem for the UK, and one which government has got to address. It is very serious indeed.

All of these factors are reinforced by the growth of Heathrow, Gatwick, and Stanstead Airports, the M25 linking the regions motorways network and the Channel Tunnel. The region has the most favourable industrial structure of any of the regions with a higher proportion of service sector employment and the strongest growth prospects. The DTI view is that the South East has a vital and central role to play in the nation's economy and the development of that role is the key economic issue for the region.

Is it time, therefore, to assert that the South East is full up, already covered in concrete or in danger of being overwhelmed? Again, the statistics show otherwise. Some 19% of the South East region is included in areas of outstanding natural beauty. Another 24% of the region is Grade I or Grade II agricultural land. Some 84% of the South East land in area is non-urbanized. So let's get rid of the myth of existing over-development.

What are the proposed house building rates for the rest of this century? Between 1971 and 1981, 886,000 homes were built in the

South East region. Between 1981 and 1991, it is estimated that 638,000 homes will be built. For between 1991 and 2001, the end of the century, the government have endorsed a figure of 460,000 houses.

Brian Walden, on Tomorrow Land, a TV documentary shown on 17 October 1986, revealed that the South East's local authorities pursue their interests at the expense of the region as a whole. Peter Hall, of Reading University, criticised the 'unholy alliance between mainly left-wing councils in London, wanting to keep as many people in their own areas particularly by building more and more public housing, and on the other hand the shire counties and the shire districts and home counties who have been anti-development'. Professor Hall thinks the result has been unrealistic estimates of future housing need. I certainly concur with that comment.

What does 460,000 for the 1990s actually mean? A reduction of nearly 50% of housebuilding rates in the South East since the 1970s. One hundred and fifty thousand of these are allocated to Greater London. It remains to be seen whether fifteen thousand units per annum in London in the 1990s is a realistic rate to expect when one has to recognise that the contribution from the London Docklands Development Corporation will be rapidly drying up. Further, out of the hundred thousand acres of derelict land in England, only four and half thousand are in Greater London, a large proportion being with the LDDC.

So the Secretary of State has endorsed a figure, proposed by vested interests, which does not include any allowances for increased migration into the South East from the rest of the country or elsewhere. It is apparently assumed that the government would not wish to see such movements positively encouraged or present allowances made for them. So much for moving people to where the jobs are! As Panorama recently graphically pointed out, the imbalance between North/South house prices is becoming a national scandal and a real block to the mobility of labour.

Will the South East region be able to meet its additional housing requirements anyway? Our consultants have estimated that there will be a shortage of between 100,000 and 350,000 homes in the South East by the late 1980s. This shortage will go through into the 1990s. The problem is exacerbated by the almost total lack of regional planning in the South East which frustrates my company in bringing forward our proposals for new country towns.

The grim prospect

In conclusion, does the proposed reduction in house building make sense for the country's premier economic growth area? The underlying assumptions and implications are remarkable.

1. That the South East will be a net exporter of people by the end of this century.

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2. There is already an adequate supply of decent housing in the South East.

3. Net outmigration from London to the rest of the South East will cease. In the future more households in the Shire counties will move to London than will move out of London.

4. New employment located near the M25, Stanstead and all the routes to the Channel Tunnel will not attract additional net immigration.

5. New residential development in London should be at densities at much higher than those which prevail there at the present time.

6. London's physical infrastructure can accommodate current and future demands being placed on it.

All these assumptions generally run contrary to both available evidence about actual behaviour and aspirations.

1. Many unemployed in the North are prepared to 'get on their bikes' searching for jobs if they can find an affordable house. But can they?

2. Prior to abolition, the GLC demonstrated that a severe shortage of housing existed in London.

3. Net outmigration from London to the rest of the South East is continuing, and you have only to look at the census data to confirm that.

4. New regional infrastructure improvements do attract substantial net immigration and the local labour market overheats.

5. All studies of housing aspirations indicate that a house with a garden is a prime requirement.

6. No evidence exists that London's road network, the M25 in particular, will efficiently accommodate even current -- not to mention future -- levels of traffic.

The consequences

With less housebuilding, London itself will become increasingly a city of extremes, the rich and the poor. Land and house prices in London will continue to increase rapidly. One developer recently paid the equivalent of three million pounds for an acre of housing land in Kensington. On the Isle of Dogs, in Docklands, housing land was available six years ago for fifty thousand pounds an acre, where today we have the privilege of paying over one million pounds an acre. London's infrastructure will continue to deteriorate rapidly, becoming less and less able to cope with demands placed on it. London will become more and

more urbanised, as pressure to build on every scrap of undeveloped land becomes intense and redeveloped sites hit high densities to meet ever increasing demand, again putting immense pressure on the social infrastructure.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Brian Waters: What are your positive thoughts about how, at a strategic level, you feel the planning system, the policy system or the government should grasp the nettle that you obviously would like it to?

Andy Bennett: I don't think it is beyond the wit of intelligent men to sit down and separate out the local forces which conspire to inhibit development in the country's premier economic growth area. If government wishes to pursue a demand led economy, then they have to bite the bullet and recognise where the market wishes to go: the South East. My board are not philanthropists, we will get into the cities if there is a profit to be made. We will build in the North if there is a demand. But the demand is in the South and that is where it has to be met.

That obviously creates pressures with the existing planning system and those pressures can only be resolved within government. It must be government that gives firm guidance: not only that the green belt is sacrosanct (which will please our friends within the Conservation movement), but a similar commitment to where growth should be accommodated.

The problem has been that the demise of the new towns, which were devised within a specific planning policy context, occurred at the same time as the formation of the green belt. People who dreamed up the green belt would be appalled if they thought there were no safety valves within the South East to accommodate growth. What we have now is more and more restraint policies, based on the predominant belief that the only alternatives are either no growth, or full growth. Therefore, the private sector has no context to work within and has to take on a monolithic system wherever it sees a chink. That doesn't make sense from the private sector's point of view. It doesn't make sense from the public sector's point of view. It means people play the odds, which is a waste of resources. I think that the multitudes of overlapping proposals for new regional shopping centres around the M25, around Essex, the fact we have a dozen new village proposals around Cambridge, shows that the system isn't working.

The private sector asks not that we should always have it our way, but that we should have a little bit more sensible climate within which to bring forward our proposals.

Linda Whetstone: There are no planning problems for farmers for agricultural buildings and indeed farmers have been subsidised enormously to put them up when they don't need them. Of course, if you are going to stop subsidising and reduce the food

mountains, there is a huge problem for farmers because they are not allowed to do anything else with their land.

We have always had a lot of buildings on our farm and I haven't known what to do with them. One day I advertised an old garage for use as a workshop. I was besieged by thirty-six people who wanted to set up their business in it. Yet such uses are totally against the planning regulations. It does demonstrate that there is an enormous need in the South East.

Brian Waters: This pursues a point I touched upon and I think you are absolutely right. It is extraordinary that despite green papers discussing the issues of what we do with what is likely to be a large surplus of largely marginal agricultural land which will emerge over the next ten years down the centre of Britain, and despite the discussion in government papers about employment in rural areas, current policy fails completely to deal with agriculture.

In framing the Use Classes Order, had the authorities simply introduced a category 'agriculture' it would have had two effects. It would bring the development of agricultural land for agriculture within the control system and would have had the enormous benefit to farmers (which they are going to need increasingly in certain areas) that they would find themselves able to use existing buildings for equivalent non-agricultural business activities. At the moment there are very nasty, smelly, unpleasant activities which can take place within agricultural buildings without any kind of control. The most harmless and environmentally acceptable substitute use would not only require planning permission but, very often, wouldn't get it. That is harmful because it means you have got to confront the system every time you want to bring in something which is seen officially as chipping away the regulations. If the planning system were planning with vision, it would have anticipated such needs and would be resilient enough to deal with them.

Anthony Fyson: I think it would help inform our discussions if we drew a distinction between the problems associated with the planning mechanism and the particular policies which that mechanism is being used to pursue at any one time. I notice Linda said she had a planning problem. She didn't, she had a policy problem. If the policy were changed, the planning system would be there to help that new policy to be pursued.

There are certainly quite a lot of people in the planning world who would entirely endorse what Andy said about the way in which green belt policy has, in recent years, been pursued -- the London green belts especially.

The London green belt has been allowed to grow under the influence of conservation and pressures, and at the same time the growth points, which were indeed as Andy said, always supposed to be put in place as the counter-balance to these policies of restraint, have been allowed to, or encouraged -- indeed forced

-- to wither away.

The problem, I would submit, is not one of planning but of policy and it would be quite wrong for planners to assume that all the policies being pursued are entirely the correct ones. It is precisely because this particular government seems to be entirely opposed to the development of public strategy, that we have this uncertainty about where growth is going to be allowed and what balance is going to be struck between in-city and out-of-city development and to what extent we are going to balance conservation interests against the demands of the market. We seem to be going into reverse at the moment. For purely ideological reasons, that element of strategic planning which is available to us, the county development plan, is going to be downgraded to the point of absence in the near future. Because we are attacking mechanisms instead of looking seriously at problems, we are going to get into a worse mess rather than get ourselves out of it.

Eamonn Butler: I think the object here really is to look at policy rather than the intricate details of how its executed at any particular time. That obviously does take you into the strategic problem. The government's policy, as I understand it, stems from a belief that the future is impossible to predict. We can't really predict the way that the economy is going to unfold, where people will want to go, what new industries will develop and so on.

So that does leave you with a problem in planning. You are not planning for a specific development, what you are trying to do is work out an envelope within which you think things are likely to go and say: 'We are not going to stray on either side of that envelope but we don't know exactly where development is going to happen or what particular new enterprises are going to emerge within that; so we cannot plan for a specific outcome.'

Brian Waters: I think sometimes with the green policies that surround us in this country, we assume that we are alone and that we are the only country that has this problem. I was in California in the autumn at a conference, in Orange County, probably the richest per capita income in the world. It was almost like we were in the middle of a South East planning conference and the people from the floor were opposing any more development. Private developers were saying exactly what private developers are saying in this country: 'There is no planning framework, no-one is building highways anymore, we can't get development land through the system because of the conservationist movement.'

This thing is bigger than just Britain. It is becoming almost a worldwide phenomenon: where you have growth and wealth creation, people feel that they can then stop others from sharing in it. The West Midlands, however, is probably a little bit more sanguine about the release of green belt around the International Conference Centre, for jobs are essential when you have got an

unemployment level of over 20%, much more so than in Surrey, where the unemployment level is less than 10%.

Ken Irvine: I wonder how many Conservative MPs tell their councillors not to give planning permission for any dwellings under five bedrooms, because they might knock away the majority, and how many Labour MPs urge the opposite course? I have known this from personal experience, and is the sort of thing which we are up against. Alf Dobbs, when he lost his seat in Battersea, blamed his defeat on the yuppification of Battersea. So we have this prejudice of politicians of all parties against development, because of their own interest and their own majority. I wonder to what extent this shapes government policy?

Brian Waters: You are making a very good point. I can recall a county planning officer in the South East who informed me (and I can believe this is correct) that his was a green belt county, and that the ward councillors were there to stop development, whatever political colour they were. If, for any reason, they said that they welcomed developments, they would be replaced by an Independent councillor whose sole objective was to stop it. Now that might be an exaggerated case but I think it rather endorses what you are saying.

Andy Bennett: Interestingly, Harvey Proctor, who was the MP for the area around Tillingham Hall, actually said to me during the enquiry that the local Conservative Party were in a quandary over Tillingham Hall because they knew full well that an injection of some twelve thousand new owner-occupiers into that part of the constituency would obviously increase the majority. So, there is an element of schizophrenia within the political system as to whether or not new growth, new development, is a good or a bad thing. The yuppification of Battersea is happening in other areas -- Docklands -- and if you wish to be very cynical about this, it is obviously within the interest of the Conservative Party to keep their bastions happy in Bucks, Surrey and Hertfordshire but not to allow their sons and daughters to move out of London, forcing them to buy into traditionally working class areas, and break into Labour strongholds.

Eamonn Butler: Brian, you have talked about systems which are not subject to the whim of local officers and politicians, do you think that is a practical proposition in this country? How would you do it?

Brian Waters: I think clearly we have to recognise the need for the democratic process to bite upon the system. What I was suggesting was that there should be a clearer spectrum of different planning regimes applied appropriately in different ways.

The New Town Development Authority is a model which I have always rather admired because it was accepted in the end by both ends of the political spectrum as well. I admired it for two reasons:

one, it established at a high level through the democratic process that there was the need for a strategic project without being dictatorial; and two, I also admire it because of the way the mechanism for the bureaucracy was established. It was established from day one on the premise that it be wound down within a relatively short period. New towns were established for something like a maximum of twenty-five years, and then disbanded.

In my view, that is a very healthy way of establishing, where you need it, a government body for planning: they have enormous impetus, they were bringing in public money to pump-prime private money, and their bureaucracy was dynamic because of the nature of its objectives and because it wasn't a place to sit waiting for your pension.

For all those reasons, I think that they are quite an interesting and successful model. I remember discussing with Peter Walker in 1971 the idea of a New Town Development Corporation for London Docklands. It took some while longer for various reasons and it is called an Urban Development Corporation but it is effectively the same thing, and it works.

The model has to be applied appropriately; the democratic approvals for it have to come in at a higher level rather than the local level. It has got to override the local level and Docklands is a marvellous example of all the reasons why.

The same could apply to certain kinds of policies where the policy itself is approved. Then you need much less local democratic consultation on a case by case, or planning application, by planning application basis. At the moment we have the worst of both worlds because we have an incredibly laborious public hearing procedure for the local plan. Its very duration almost guarantees that the plan has missed the point by the time it is actually implemented. Then every planning application, within the broad principles of the published policy, is still subject to an enormous amount of intervention and uncertainty because of that system. Uncertainty in terms of how long it takes, let alone in terms of what the outcome is.

I think the system needs sharpening up so that you accept one or the other, but you don't duplicate applications through a process which allows plans to be established and then to roll. I took the view after seeing the process at work that there was no good planning policy that couldn't be put together in eight weeks. The rest is necessary work but it's actually not the inspired work.

When you have established a policy for an area, it is essential to keep it up-to-date, keep it rolling, keep it ahead of the game: but this must be done in a way which keeps it certain and free from delays while changes are being made.

How do we overcome the whim of politicians? At the moment you

have got politicians playing the planning game extremely deviously in ways which is almost in a political sense corrupt. I have known local authorities demand what amounts to ask outright bribes for planning permission. They approve a policy of constraint and they trade on it. I don't think that is a healthy way for the system to be going.

Eamonn Butler: Are you suggesting something like a Green Belt Development Corporation?

Brian Waters: I'm suggesting a national strategy. Our difficulty at the moment, given the current political climate at national level, is the very principle of any kind of strategic thinking or planning. Yet that foresight is increasingly needed because otherwise you are reduced to ad-hocery as with the shopping centres. No shopping centre developer knows where to go so they all go everywhere.

What you are suggesting has some sense, if you could define and target it. There is a need for growth points in the South East but these should be a part of a strategic policy.

Andy Bennett: I think a fundamental shift is that the prime movers now are the private sector. It is no longer public-sector inspired, primed and resourced. Therefore, it's the private sector that locks in to existing commitments from infrastructure, like the M25, the motorway corridors, and the airports and chooses sites to optimise those particular locations. Whereas in the new town days it was public sector prompted you could go to North Buckinghamshire into an area of agricultural land and call it Milton Keynes, and pump billions of pounds in to make it a success. Now, of course, from the private sector point of view, if we were told to develop within Milton Keynes we would be delighted because it is now on the motorway and well resourced and employers are flocking to be there. If the private sector had suggested ripping up farm land to build Milton Keynes, they would have been looked at as if they mad.

On agricultural land, I think the confusion we saw between the Department of the Environment and the Secretary of State for Agriculture, over agricultural land policy, just in advance of the Tillingham Hall decision -- which I understand was held back just in case they made a mess of it -- shows that we actually do need a land policy in this country. Only government can give it and they have got to get MAFF, DTI, DOE, and other government departments together and crack heads, like the Prime Minister is doing in the inner cities. It is no answer to the farmer who has been subsidised for many years, to suggest that his wife and his sons should switch to growing trees for the next thirty years. That isn't a solution; we need some brave decisions for very real problems.

URBAN OR RURAL DEVELOPMENT?

Professor Alan Evans
University of Reading

I have been interested in green belts for some years; in fact I think my first published remarks on this go back to a book on the economics of residential vocation in 1973, which indicated the costs and effects of the green belt.

More recently, I was involved in a correspondence in The Guardian, about a year or so ago, on the cost of the green belt. One of the cases which was put up was that the green belt and the prevention of rural development were necessary in order to stimulate development within urban areas and to divert development towards the inner city. This caused me to try to think through the way in which this is supposed to work, whether or not it does, and whether it is an effective policy.

In effect it actually seems to me it is a 'block of development' fallacy: that there is a certain block of development which, if you stop it going to one place, will occur in some other place. So if you stop it in the rural areas, the outer areas of the South East, it will occur within the inner city; and if it doesn't occur in the inner city, where land is available, it will occur in the North.

That seems to me to be a planner's point of view. As an economist interested in land and planning, I believe that the way in which this policy is going to have to work is through the property market. Planning policy will have to be mediated through the market.

Planning and industrial decline

The question then is: 'How does it actually work? How is it supposed to work?' We have a situation in which manufacturing industry and other sorts of jobs are moving out from the inner cities. This is to a large extent because inner cities have become an unsatisfactory location for manufacturing jobs.

A recent study of American cities, a very major econometric study, found that 'an increase in the aggregate demand for lower cost land and labour inputs, along with declining urban economies, is the primary substitutive relation responsible for the urban/rural manufacturing shift.' Put into simple words, that is saying that firms no longer find advantages in locating within the cities and that what they want, is large amounts of

space.

So firms are moving away from the inner cities. At least 30% of the movement in respect of the London manufacturing industry is actual movement of firms. The other 70% of it comes from the decline or death of firms in the inner city and the birth and the growth of firms in the outer areas. The view that firms want to move around and that all we have to do to keep them in the cities is to stop them moving, is in a sense fallacious because the change is occurring for economic reasons. They are just dying in the cities.

In these decaying areas there is a lack of space, and a high cost of development. There may be a lack of infrastructure, there may be polluted sites. The result may be low, or even negative land values -- in the Docklands particularly, it was the case in the 1970s that the land values were in fact negative. The cost of putting the site into a state where it could be redeveloped was greater than what the site would have been worth once it was in that state.

Having prevented the development outside the urban areas, the argument, it seems to me, is that the restraint will cause a rise in land values because there will be an unmet demand. For this policy to work to help the inner city, the rise in land values has to be great enough to make these sites have a positive enough land value in order for development to occur.

EVALUATING THE POLICY

Is this an efficient policy? It can work, but do the benefits exceed the costs? The main problem is the shotgun effect. That is, it is not targetted at a particular site, at a particular area (as the enterprise zones are a fairly targetted policy for encouraging new development of particular sites), but the demand is increased everywhere. If you are increasing the demand for unfavourable sites to make their value positive, there are more favourable sites whose value is going to increase by as much or possibly more. So demand is diverted inwards to the cities, but to everywhere in the cities, not just to the target areas. Land values rise everywhere; users in the existing urban areas attempt to economise on land. There is a false price signal being sent that land is very scarce indeed, a high cost input which has to be economised on to a very great extent.

Housing

What are the costs which then result from responding to this false pricing? Housing is the most obvious one. The effect is that the cost of land for housing rises, so that housing which uses a lot of land becomes much more expensive than housing which uses less. In the most recent period for which we have respectable data, which was in 1969-1985, we find that the proportion of dwellings mortgaged by the building societies which were bungalows was 26% in 1969. The proportion which were flats

was 3%. By 1985, the proportion of bungalows had fallen to 12%, while flats had risen to 13%. Similar shifts occurred with semi-detached, detached houses and terraced homes.

There is a shift towards land intensive uses with respect to housing. People are in a sense being forced, by economic pressures, to avoid land-intensive sites.

There is also a greater use of unsuitable sites. Commuters today see plenty of new developments on sites which were simply left when the urban areas expanded in the 1930s, because they were thought to be unsuitable sites. Their value was then in effect close to zero for housing so they were not developed. Now, of course, they are being developed -- in other words, housing in unsuitable sites, in poor environmental conditions, is being developed for people to live in.

Likewise, we see the demolition of existing houses and their replacement by blocks of flats. We find people selling off parts of gardens as they realise that it is a very valuable site. When the house was built, land might have been worth a few hundred pounds an acre, making it worthwhile having a large garden. Now if you sell off the end of your garden you might make forty thousand pounds, so it is worth selling it off and finishing up with a rather small patch.

Outside the cities, the preservation of open fields in rural areas produces wide tracts which are largely unseen by the population and inaccessible, since they are privately owned by farmers. Space, in the areas in which people do live, is becoming less and less accessible, less public, and less visible.

I happen to live in Harrow on the Hill, most of which is a conservation area, and I am on the Planning Sub-Committee of the local Harrow Hill Trust, from which we write letters off to the local authority objecting to many new developments. You may wonder, if I am pro-development, how do I square these two activities? I square them very well. The saving of rural areas is being done at the cost of the pressure on conservation areas such as my own. The pressure which I can see for the building over of every square inch, if possible, in the conservation area leads to the demolition of existing houses and the construction of blocks of flats. This economic pressure is the market working to respond to the limitations of development in other areas.

Shopping

Moving on to shopping, the cost of land for shopping is even higher than that for housing. My colleague at the University of Reading, Paul Cheshire, has done a study of the costs of the planning system. One of the things he did was to look at land values in a similar city in the United States: Stockton, California, and Reading. The value of land in Stockton, California, for shopping was about one hundred thousand pounds

per acre. In Reading it was two and half million pounds up to thirteen million. Because it is very expensive, that land has to be used intensively. So what happens? Shopowners need a high turnover per square foot. The result of that is that you have more crowded shops, narrower aisles in the supermarkets, less of a range in the supermarkets, longer queues at the tills, less parking space. If there isn't a high turnover for other reasons, the prices of the goods sold have to be higher.

With respect to offices, the same thing happens; higher land cost means higher rents per square foot. It is no accident the the City of London has the highest rents in the world, or about the highest rents in the world, just as the turnover per square foot in London shops is the highest in the world, apart from Hong Kong.

Industry

With respect to manufacturing, it is much more difficult to form a judgement because it is a much more heterogeneous activity to see precisely what is happening. However, higher land cost means, in general, that the land has to be used more intensively and some products will be produced less efficiently.

The bottom line

My colleague's finding at the end of his study was that the people of Reading were about 10% worse off because of the planning system, due to the various costs which were imposed on them in terms of higher prices and so on.

If one relaxed planning constraints completely with respect to Reading, the expansion in the land area, allowing for no immigration, would be about 30%. It doesn't result completely in the South East being tarmacked over, although there is an expansion.

So is the preservation of a hectare of agricultural land worth approximately one million pounds? That land is in effect costing society one million pounds to preserve as it is. (Perhaps it would be worthwhile for Consortium Developments to fill in The Wash, which would probably cost about three hundred thousand pounds per acre, then they would have created more agricultural land which they could swop for land that would be worth a million pounds an acre in the South East! We would then have exactly the same amount of agricultural land and rural and open land, but room for development. I don't know whether that is a possible deal -- I present it free as a suggestion!)

When industry is diverted away from favoured rural area sites into less favoured urban sites, some development will be prevented altogether. The block of development fallacy assumes that it is just going to move elsewhere. In fact, of course, the rising costs, rising land prices, and unsuitability of alternative locations result in some development not being

worthwhile. If it's not possible in the South East it is not necessarily going to be worthwhile anywhere else. It will not necessarily occur in the urban areas or the North. If it is diverted anywhere it may actually go across the Channel to France, which is, of course, one of the problems with Nicholas Ridley's argument.

Having a planning constraint in the South East, and then getting rid of all the other restrictions, may actually make you worse off. For example, a planning constraint in the South East, plus a more effective regional policy, may actually be better. Two constraints may actually be better than one constraint.

Finally, are there not costs involved in bottling people up in large towns and preventing them moving to small towns or villages, even new ones in more open spaces? Is it that the British people actually like living in large cities and large housing estates and they don't really like living in small towns and villages in rural areas? You know the answer. The whole of the history of the planning system, from Letchworth Garden City on, was to get people out of the large cities, to open them up, to have lower densities so they could have houses with gardens. The system now is operating to force them into large cities and into small flats. The planning system is clearly failing in its duty.

THE OUT OF TOWN ALTERNATIVE

John Ardill
The Guardian

I am not an economist; that is going to become very rapidly apparent with everything I say. Dr Butler has asked me to talk about development opportunities in the countryside and in particular in the green belt. For an environment correspondent that almost amounts to an invitation to cut my throat. I accepted not just out of a perverse desire to snap at the green hand that feeds me, but because the confusion and passion that surrounds the subject are fascinating and irresistible.

The appeal of permanence

'Green belts have become a status symbol in the environment policies of all the main political parties,' said the introduction to a recent article by Dick Bate, Senior Planner, CPRE, a determined defender of the green belt.

A status symbol, yes, but the green belt is also a shibboleth, a myth, a tool and an excuse. The green belt's original, and I believe its essential and I hope its enduring purpose in land use planning, is to prevent the endless spread and convergence of towns and cities. It has served that purpose reasonably well but not by preventing all development in the designated areas. As Martin Elson has so clearly shown in his book, green belt policy has been persistently used to regulate the release of development land on urban fringes. The inner boundaries have been kept fluid and gradually rolled back, even as the outer boundaries have been rolled forward. Many inner boundaries are still not determined and the government continues to warn against making them too tight.

It is my belief that we would be better served if inner boundaries were drawn tight, drawn firm and drawn as quickly as possible. I say that with all the passionate conviction of someone who lives right up against a green belt boundary. I hope I can justify it on less selfish grounds.

In spite of all this manipulation, green belts have attracted the label of sacrosanct, and the notion of permanence. Indeed the 1984 circular describes permanence as their essential characteristic, albeit with the equally characteristic governmental caveat that their protection must be maintained as far ahead as can be seen.

Official caveats aside, the notion has led to popular confusion

about the permanence of the protection afforded by interim green belt status and beyond that there is an idea, possibly widespread, that all open countryside is green belt. There is also a growing feeling that it all should be green belt or treated very much like it. Fixity, permanence, absolute protection, these are the myths. The green belt has become as the Dick Bate article suggests, a vital test of political commitment to green policies. It is also an issue which people seem to be able easily to identify with, perhaps because of its supposed permanence. Permanence is important in a changing world, partly because of vested interests like my own. For these reasons, and allowing for some continued manipulation in the time honoured way, I don't believe the government is about to go soft on green belt development.

There is some suspicion, I know, that the strong adherence to green belt principles in the pre-election circular on redundant hospital sites was vote catching and it will be abandoned on the grounds that some, at least, of the sites cannot be beneficially sold without more development than the circular allows. It may be that exceptional circumstances will be proved in some instances, but my guess is that the policy will be more often followed to the letter, and certainly I gather that some potential developers seem to be working to, rather than against, the circular at the moment.

The move by some planning authorities to exclude certain areas from the current approved green belt, whether as hospital sites or to take advantage of the M25 and other motorways, as in the Kent Structure Plan Review currently under consultation, will of course, be a crucial test, and for that reason will be fiercely resisted by pressure groups.

Slogans breed slackness

The unfortunate result of this easy identification of the green belt with political greenness, is that it allows the government to get away with a slacker attitude toward other environmental issues. In particular, it diverts attention from the absence of positive complementary policies for the countryside at large.

That seems especially to be the case in the draft circular on development affecting agricultural land which concentrates on protecting green belts, national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty and other areas of fine countryside. If I recall the eminently vague phrase correctly, the idea of 'protecting the countryside for its own sake', which was forced on the government by the CPRE, is equally doubtful. Which pieces of countryside, judged by what criteria, and how, for that matter, should they be protected?

Such guidance gives powerful backing to those who want to see all the countryside green belted. There are indications that exactly that kind of interpretation is being put upon it. Yet, even the CPRE, when pressed, will admit that much housing and industrial

development is taking place and must continue to take place on green fields. It is happening on a much smaller scale than in previous decades. The pressure for it to accelerate can only grow, not only because of the demands of housebuilders, but also because of the economic success of smaller communities, the growing desire to live and work in rural surroundings, enhanced by the opportunity to do so, is conferred by the infotech revolution and the growing pressure to conserve and increase green habitats in cities.

Even the CPRE is beginning to acknowledge the pressure for greening cities, although it insists the trend is perfectly compatible with maximizing development within the urban envelope and protecting the countryside from developers' incursions.

Logic of the argument

That is a position which must give way, I think, before the logic of the argument. More positively, the president of the RTPI, in a statement on urban regeneration, said:

'Large urban areas should be subject of policies aimed at creating more open space, reducing the amount of developed land, reducing the pressure on infrastructure and making urban life better and more wholesome. In many sub-regions there will inevitably be considerable areas of new development on green field sites.' Such a strategy was (he argued) compatible with resisting sporadic ad hoc development on unwanted farm land.'

The Commission on Inner City Housebuilding, set up by the House Builders Federation, make similar points about maintaining green spaces in cities and linking urban regeneration to dispersal policies in its recent report. I might take issue with the RTPI over resistance to sporadic development if that means no relaxation of the rule against isolated houses and small clusters of buildings in urban countryside. The present exception which relates to agriculture and forestry will need amending in the light of new rural land uses emerging to replace farming.

Looming agricultural retrenchment and the (probably more critical) biotechnology revolution which is just dawning, provide both the opportunity and the necessity for change in rural land use. This applies equally, although perhaps in different ways, to the wider countryside and the green belt; where after all it was always assumed that farming would look after the land.

That has already been recognised by the government, if only to the extent that the policy of converting redundant farm buildings to other uses now applies to green belt. It would be interesting to see the response to Kent's proposal to extend the green belt definition of institutions in large grounds to prestige business uses.

The mechanism of change

Resistance to development in the green belt will continue to be strong, both by pressure groups and by a government which is manifestly anxious to keep controversial green issues at bay. It will be prudent, I think, to look first for opportunities in the countryside beyond, while bearing in mind that even there the gate will not swing wide open.

Change in policy will come relatively slowly, first through the traditional means of planning applications and public inquiry, and later, I trust, by the development of new land use and settlement strategies. But attitudes must change before the policies can be successfully changed. In this, I think, the behaviour of developers, the example they set, is at least as important as propaganda in friendly newspapers.

What approach should be adopted by those who want to be in the forefront of change? Fundamentally, it is the same approach that is being adopted in the best examples of urban regeneration. It is now beyond question that new development, or refurbishment of existing structures, should seek to improve the environment by landscaping, better layout, where possible the conservation of existing, or creation of new natural or semi-natural, habitats of wildlife interest.

Local planning authorities, in spite of some equivocation about planning in the government, are increasingly looking for that sort of bargain. Developers are increasingly offering it. Accommodations are being achieved by these means between developers and conservationists. This is therefore, a necessary part of the approach but is it sufficient? I think the answer must be negative. There is more to environment than landscape and habitat. There are issues of pollution, of traffic generation, disturbance and the multiplier effect of additional demand for space generated by development. For the most part, these are traditional planning concerns, and will be duly taken into account by planners, but they should also be taken on board by any developer who wants to show he is environmentally friendly.

The environmental impact assessment should, I think, be an essential part of any significant development. Indeed, it looks as if the EEC's Directive on EIAs, which the government hope to confine to such rare occurrences as steel plants and petrochemical complexes, will indeed have a much wider statutory application.

Environmentalism, with many successes under its belt and growing public support, is on a curve of rising expectation. Every concession by the developer will be greeted not with cheers, but with demands for more. That is irksome to developers, and if unintelligently applied, as it sometimes is, it can be counter-productive.

While universal, these are matters of particular moment for the green belt. It can be persuasively argued, for instance, that development of, say, derelict gravel pits, into biomotor interchanges with retail shopping, sport facilities, and extensive landscaping, bestows a benefit and makes use of an opportunity in ways that should override traditional restraint policies.

That might be the case in some instances, but it is easy to see, apart from the dangers of over-provision that we have been hearing about, that a rash of development along the M25 corridor could quite easily so overload that already bulging motorway, that further lanes, a whole new orbital system, would be needed. That would mean taking more green belt and the developmental pressures will be played out all over again.

The more extreme and simplistic arguments that the metropolitan green belt should be abandoned to make space for the South East's inheritant growth potential, carries the seeds of its own refutation. High-tech industry, and house owners, don't simply want space in the right geographical location. They want the pleasure and the prestige of leafy surroundings. They want to be in the green belt, not in a concreted-over ex-green belt.

Greening the cities

I suspect that as the pressure for greening the cities grows, and countryside problems and solutions begin to emerge more clearly, there is likely to be some relaxation on green belt land. It will be sensible for that to happen in the outer green belt areas, preserving the essential strategic function of separation.

It will be sensible if green spaces, created within the urban mass, were traded off against appropriate development in the outer areas of the green belt. Its strategic function would be enhanced and not undermined by such a course.

What we all want are green cities surrounded by green belts. I know of people who are horrified at the thought of cows at the bottom of the garden, and the owls are pretty irksome sometimes as well. But by and large the desire to be girdled in green holds for those who live in cities as well as those who live on the fringes, but the square mile can't be encircled without something giving way.

With mass retailing no longer characterised by city centre locations, and commerce and industry no longer dominated by large single spot employers or the close proximity of related trades, a case for breaking up the urban mass becomes more cogent. There is now a powerful body of opinion which recognises the inevitability of dispersal, but wants to see it planned by rational new land use strategies. Such strategies should, I believe, involve forms of development which enhance existing man-made, or man-marred, landscapes and which pay proper regard to environmental and social objectives -- including measures to

reduce pollution and the wasteful use of resources, to revive economically threatened rural communities and to create opportunities for the development of new lifestyles.

Above all, as the HBF Commission recognises in relation to urban regeneration, they should be routed in meeting the needs and aspirations of the local population. If that is done in a partnership between local people, local authorities, public agencies and entrepreneurs, then other needs can be accommodated and perhaps achieved with less resistance.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Victor Serebriakoff: I can't say that I am actually against the green belt but I don't think there would be much harm if, for instance, we released great blocks of it, we allowed permission to build in it, and that money we then spent in doing away with the dereliction in the centre of the city.

It seems to me that the money that would flow in from letting the market work would be very beneficial. If the planners were working within a market situation, not stopping development entirely, but putting a price on it, then much of the urban problem could be solved.

Professor Alan Evans: Bad policies have certainly caused the decline of employment in the inner cities but the fact is that over most of the Western world, a decentralisation of industry away from the inner cities has occurred and one can see what the economic causes of this are. If in fact one let the market rip, one might actually have more of an inner city problem.

The original intention of planning was to guide development. Planners were predicting the amount of development which would be required and they were guiding development into certain directions. The situation has changed, it seems to me; there has become a constraint on development not a guide to development and I think one should return to that. One should guide it and preserve the best.

Andy Bennett: I think it is very likely that if the structure plan for Cambridgeshire some fifteen years ago marked it out to be a high-tech city, it would not have happened! We can surely endeavour to plan for growth but it is easy to be drawn into plans to stop growth.

Richard Bate: CPRE is very concerned for the countryside as a whole and obviously green belts are just a small part of that. One of the things we are very keen to see is the revival of economically threatened rural settlements. We do actually want to see a vibrant rural economy; we are very keen to see built development take place in ways which will allow rural

settlements, villages, towns and the rest, to develop in ways which are suitable for them. That means doing it organically -- slowly, gradually and carefully -- and in a reasonably planned sort of way. It is a matter of being careful. I agree that one shouldn't over-emphasise the roll of green belts in deciding the way in which the countryside as a whole is progressing and developing.

Eamonn Butler: What about a strategy for this? Isn't part of the problem that the local authority on the edge of a town only sees its own problem, while perhaps we should be looking wider? Is there a broad institutional framework which would keep everyone happy?

John Ardill: We already have a South East regional framework which doesn't work very well, a collection of local authorities minimising the opportunities. Or full-blown regional government, or a regional development agency, the sort Michael Heseltine has been talking about. But something certainly is needed which takes together the inner city, the city as a whole and the dereliction and decay problems on the outer edges of many of the cities, and relates that to the needs and the opportunities in the countryside beyond.

Stephen Williamson: What is the extent of the problem? Exactly how much development land would it need to satisfy the pressures for change which we are trying to identify? Professor Evans suggested that Reading would need to grow by about 30% to meet the full market needs for realistic land values. How many acres of land in percentage terms in the South East are we talking about?

Alan Evans: The answer was 30% based on an econometric model. It's simply a suggestion based on a model and models can be inaccurate. It also assumed no constraints on development and there presumably would be some constraint at the limit. In a sense it was giving the maximum which would be taken up by the expansion of a particular town. One could then extend that to the whole of the South East and say, if we let urban areas expand, that would be the maximum takeup. Of course, you then have to allow immigration from the North which would cause a further increase in development.

Eamonn Butler: How much do you think the problems in the North of England are actually related to this problem? Is it the case that if we are opening up the South East to more development then it won't happen in Darlington and other places?

Alan Evans: Yes, obviously there is already a diversion of development from the North to the South but partly because regional policy has been wound down by the present government. There is less incentive for firms to move North and the result is that the development pressure is building up in the South. According to Nicholas Ridley, that development pressure is being choked off by allowing land prices to rip and hence increasing

the disincentive for people to move South. In a sense, it is therefore odd to complain of the fact that this is what is happening. The CBI complain about it, but it is part of government policy.

Oliver Smedley: What one wants is green centres. You want greening the cities, because there is a human need, I feel sure, to see green things: to see green trees, to see green parks, to see gardens where you live. You don't want to have to travel miles in order to see them or be aware that there is a green part of the country.

So I think the alternative thought, certainly in the regeneration of the inner cities, should be devoted to greening the inside of cities which means trees, which means squares, which means gardens. If you think what a dreadful place London would be if it were not for the Royal parks on the North side of the river. And South of the river you have got the commons, Clapham, Tooting, Balham, Wandsworth and so on, marvellous bits of green. That is what you want in the cities and if cities go on sprawling, I am not sure that in the end it matters so very much as long as you have a very high proportion of green within the sprawl.

John Ardill: I agree, except that you have got to have the green belt there to make the break before you sprawl any further, if you describe it as sprawl. It is pointless to take it away and just sprawl on and then put a little bit of park in.

You can't get rid of the green belt as an alternative or entirely get rid of it as a boundary to the edge of the development and then just put some green inside. You have got to bring the green inside and open up that mass as much as you possibly can. There are vast areas of West and North-West London which would be very pleasant places to live if you took out every second row of Victorian or Edwardian houses.

SENSITIVITY IN DESIGN

David Woods
Building Design Partnership

Design and the planning decision

Good design alone cannot be a justification for the use of rural land rather than re-using urban land. Yet with irresistible economic pressures and the inaccessibility of inner urban areas which forces shopping into the outer areas, we must now address the issues of how those shopping centres are to be designed and whether the quality of them should count in the decision as to whether they should be approved or not.

People, on hearing that a megastructure is to go up, will commonly say that it is going to be brutal, ugly and driven by commercial considerations -- rather as an architect, if he goes to a cocktail party, is likely to be accosted with: 'What have you got to apologise for?' And yet there are the scruffiest of green belt areas, which all agree have no foreseeable hope of economic improvement and are still thought better left like that than being developed in breach of the green belt principle. This is mainly because of the fear that this will create a precedent which will be irresistible in allowing other uses in the green belt.

The M25 has been put all through the green belt around London. It has opened up pressures on land use which seem to be the equal of putting in the underground lines in the 1930s and the development of the outer parts of London. If it is an equal pressure to that, then is it resistible or not?

New types of shopping are unquestionably in demand around the outer parts of London. Leisure buildings are required and these new centres cannot be located in the central areas where accessibility is quite inadequate and vehicle parking cannot be provided. With the M25 already there, such accessibility is possible.

Given the enormous increase in leisure time, personal transport, and the opportunities people have to enjoy their lives, should they not be allowed to follow their sports and leisure pursuits in the areas which are under-used but which are accessible? If such pressures for the release of land result in new developments in these sensitive areas, what are the design considerations that should be applied?

A great deal of the green belt is under-used at present. To take

a particular case, the gravel pits which surround so much of the M25 and are in the green belt are under-used. As a windsurfer myself, I never see more than half a dozen at any one time. In terms of density of land use and people enjoying themselves, it is great for the windsurfers; but it is under-used land (or water). This is certainly the case on damaged land in a large part of the green belt, particularly by that same gravel extraction and infilling with refuse.

So we have there at Wraysbury, a possibility of a twenty-acre site of development which could stimulate two hundred and forty acres of other land being developed and made much more intensively usable by other people. There is no expectation that that two hundred and forty acres will, in the foreseeable future, be developed for other enjoyable use because there isn't the money to fund it. By allowing some small development on twenty acres, this could be achieved because of the spin-off which would result.

Limited horizons

In other countries -- America, Europe, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia -- many of the most talented designers have been used for the design of their shopping centres. In the UK few of our new shopping centres have any pretensions to architecture at all, looking very poor externally. It is the shop fronts and the insides which, in fact, sell the goods and that is where the money is spent.

As a result the response of people at public meetings is to distrust architects. They don't want the risk that the new developments will be grim and functional, congested with traffic. Even when the landscape architects assure them that the design will be sensitive and attractive, they are still inclined to settle for the existing slum that has no visual or usable attraction to the people in the area.

So those are the horizons which I see too often: the limited and parochial horizons of people when confronted with a possibility of the type of development which could be, as is in many other places, extremely exciting. And has the opportunity of creating a type of architecture which, if sensitively done, can be of a great pleasure to a vast number of people but which, because of its location needs, may well have to be in part of the green belt.

The Wraysbury development we are working on is half gravel pits. What is proposed is about one and half million square feet of shopping and leisure, all in green belt. But the concept which we proposed, which we think is sensitive in its surroundings, is to sink the shopping centre into one of the pits and surround it with water, and then to have things like winter gardens, marinas, areas where people could enjoy the outside as well as the inside. Instead of littering the cars all around the shopping centre, as you find in American shopping centres, we proposed to put parking

tight up against the flanks of the shopping centre in multi-storey car parks, in order to preserve the environment and, we hope, create a concept of a building which could be very exciting in its architectural detail and its impression to the people who go to visit it. We will be able to cover it with a landscaped treatment where planters can be hung on the outside so that the structure won't in fact, be seen much, and it will seem an extension of the green space already there. By such a development, it is possible that the remaining areas can be put to far more intensive use for the enjoyment of visitors.

In my discussions with many people I find that they have no concept of the sort of thing that can be done in designing a shopping centre. They think in terms of Brent Cross. And yet, in addressing the question of how to design for the green belt, as in other areas, it is necessary and quite possible to conceive of the architectural solution in entirely different new ways. At Waverley Market in Edinburgh's Prince's Street, it was required that we could only go up five feet above the existing ground level and so we built a shopping centre entirely below ground in a way which would appear to give enormous pleasure to a great number of people. In the Refuge Assurance Headquarters outside Manchester, an existing country house was extended in a style and character which reflected the rural surroundings, and which gives a great deal of pleasure to the people who are able to work inside, without obtruding into the green belt area.

There are more and more such massive structures which are being proposed around the country and environmental impact studies are essential. In America, of course, EIAs are much more commonplace than here, and they should be applied far more to the UK scene. We have even had to have one for a job we did down in the Falklands, where we produced an environmental analysis of the airfield. The great concern locally was the probable loss of a variety of fern, thought to be found only in one particular location. We sent down an environmentalist who found it was all over the place, but nobody before had actually got down on their hands and knees and looked for it. Often, environmental impact analysis will prove that development will either do no damage or actually improve the area visually and environmentally, and will help clean up pollution.

Appreciating the possibilities

I wonder whether the new towns would now be permitted, given the desire to preserve so much rural land: and yet the new towns were a great success story. On a visit to China I found the thing the Chinese wanted to talk about was how could they have similar new towns? (The way they get a new town, incidentally, is that they get the farmers on the land to do all the digging and work for the infrastructure. They then employ those same people to build the houses and the factories and they in turn then become the people who run the steel works or the factories that are being built!)

The Chinese really do seem to know how to use every blade of grass and every square inch of land. If they had dual carriageways, they would use the central reservation for planting out cabbages. They treat every piece of land as precious and to be utilised to the absolute maximum. We don't and we are leaving so much of the green belt as damaged unused land.

An example: In Chinese tradition, gardens are the way to create the most intense use of land for the greatest appreciation and you can have a thousand people walking around in a Chinese garden and you don't see them because it is so skillfully designed. So intensely is it thought through and developed that you can create, on very small parcels of land, areas which are intensely appreciated by large numbers of people. We haven't yet, in this country, approached to that degree of appreciation of what we could do with our land resources. Until people start to recognise the opportunities, much of our green belt land will remain damaged, underused, inaccessible, and unsightly.

ECOLOGICAL OBJECTIVES AND POSSIBILITIES

Penny Anderson
Ecologist

I am sure most of you are very well aware of how radically the countryside has altered in the last fifty years. We might be producing mountains of grain and whatever else the agriculture surpluses fuel, but we have also lost a great deal of the wildlife habitats in the countryside and in the towns.

Loss of habitat

I would like to emphasise some of the losses that we have had. I think most of you probably have a feeling that the countryside is alive and well and full of plants and animals, particularly if you live in towns. Yet throughout the country there has been a massive loss of wildlife habitats, mostly those that have been established for many hundreds if not thousands of years. For example, 95% of the hay meadows that were full of flowers in 1947 have now disappeared. There are some counties where there are no old hay meadows at all, but a small field in 1947 might have contained seventy or eighty species.

The ancient woodlands have disappeared by something like 50%, some of it to agriculture, some of it to forestry, some of it to development. Some of this woodland was established after the ice age; an ancient landscape, an historic landscape, a landscape containing habitats for species, which find it difficult to disperse from one site to another and tend to get isolated and fragmented.

Some 80% of the chalk grassland has disappeared to contribute to the agricultural surpluses.

Something like 86% of the lowland heathland, which spread throughout the Suffolk and Norfolk areas and across Cornwall, has disappeared: some of it changed into gravel pits, a lot for agricultural use or other sorts of development. In some counties, Surrey for example, that loss is around 90%, much from scrubbing up by woodland, as a result of a land use which hasn't got the same economic value as it once had. Our marshes and our wetlands are disappearing at a fantastic rate. There are few nationwide figures on this, but surveys of birds like curlews and snipe, which are wetland breeding species, show high concentration only in the few nature reserves left like the Ouse washes and Somerset levels; they are not found any more in the small wet areas that used to be found within the farmland area.

Most of the loss of these habitats is due to agricultural change. If you add fertilisers to a field full of flowers, the flowers disappear and the more vigorous grasses take over and most of the wildlife value is lost. A field full of rye grass, which is excellent for silage or for hay, has no butterflies in it. It can't support butterflies; anybody who goes out in the countryside looking for butterflies won't find any there. Where do you find them instead? In back gardens, the same as the frogs. London's back gardens are the home for frogs now. There are hardly any left in Huntingdonshire (now part of Cambridgeshire) and some of the other lowland counties.

Protecting the remainder

Where is the wildlife that is left? How is it protected? The Nature Conservancy Council, the government body, is responsible for designating National Nature Reserves of which there are something like two hundred, covering the most important habitats throughout the country. There are also Sites of Special Scientific Interest, which are protected, along with other nature reserves run by other organisations, something like 7% of the countryside of Great Britain. That 7% is very mal-distributed. There are large areas, for example, in the uplands: you need large areas for viable bird populations. There are small areas of woodlands, marshes, fens and so on, in the lowlands. There are very large gaps in between and many of these habitats are becoming totally isolated now. One of the chalk grasslands in Cambridgeshire is the Devil's Dyke, but it is totally surrounded by intensively used arable land.

How does any plant or animal in that piece of chalk grassland get to the nearest other piece of chalk grassland? What happens if one area is destroyed by fire, or something like that? How can animals re-colonise? The answer is that many of them can't.

Although SSSIs are protected under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act, something like 10% of them are damaged or destroyed irretrievably each year. There isn't full protection, and wildlife can't survive in this very small amount of land. If you want to see even common species, such as blackbirds and robins, you have got to provide more habitat for them in other areas beyond just the nature reserves.

What other areas are available? First of all there are remnants of what you might call the encapsulated countryside. Taken within an urban area, these are patches of ancient woodland next to building sites; bits of old hedges; meadows which haven't been ploughed and re-seeded; undrained ground, little bogs, like on Hampstead Heath for example. These are caught up within the urban development of the towns, in the urban fringes in the green belts. They still exist as, David Goode calls it, 'encapsulated countryside' -- small remnants of the historic countryside.

In addition, there is waste ground, often classified as derelict sites. They are also what you might call 'the unofficial

countryside'. Next to new housing estates you may find a funny little bog full of cotton grass, full of orchids, which has never been developed because it was too wet. There are lots of little areas like this in the urban fringe. Railway sidings, old gravel pits, clay pits -- some of which have now developed into very nice wildlife habitats.

The value of wildlife

The importance of wildlife cannot be underestimated. More than two million people now belong to organisations concerned with wildlife. Wildlife is important not just for looking at individual species, but in its totality. It is important for enjoyment; it is important for inspiration; for exploration and for exercise; and for relaxation. There is a great psychological need to go out, not necessarily into the countryside, but into what you might call just green space: open space, where you can feel that you can get away from the burden or noise of whatever other life you are involved in. It is important to note the diversity of these habitats. It is the variation of hedges and meadows, woodlands, and scrub which are important. How many people want to go for a walk on a piece of what you might call 'urban savanna', which has been the standard treatment round the housing estates, particularly in the last twenty or thirty years? A bit of mown grassland with a few lollipop trees on it provides no excitement and no fun. Such standard treatment might make it tidy, but so boring from the wildlife, recreation, and amenity point of view.

Wildlife sites are important for education. The children from schools can go out pond dipping, for example. They get a great deal of enjoyment, learn a great deal about both plants and animals and about the interaction between them, and between human beings and the environment. The effect human beings have on the environment; the effects of pollution; the consequences of pushing a new road development through an ancient woodland: all sorts of things can be studied by the children, and they are the people who are going to be the guardians of our wildlife in the future.

One of the other very important values for wildlife is how it can act as a community focus. People living in large residential housing estates can get the community involved in something, and wildlife is as good a thing to be involved in as anything else, get them policing a site, get them digging out the pond, clearing the rubbish, planting the trees, and that acts as roots to them. It gives community involvement. It helps a lot of social problems -- it has certainly been shown for children that that is the case. It provides people with something which is important to them and which is pleasurable to them and is fun.

Another very important reason for looking after wildlife, and promoting it too, is that it can do a great deal for the image, and even for the economic revival, of an area. Ecology has a part to play in economics. It is unquantifiable, and that makes

it very much more difficult to put it into the equation. But if you improve an environment for wildlife you have got somewhere where your employees are happy to come. You attract the people you want to work in an area. You improve the image of the area. In other words it is all part of an economic renewal of an area, whether it is in Wigan or whether it is round the edge of the green belt or in the middle of London.

The planning challenge

There is a great need to cater for wildlife, and I think more particularly in the planning system than anywhere else. That is where it has got to start because fragmented efforts are ineffective -- they need linking.

You can plan for wildlife in an area, and there are local authorities doing so now and doing it very well, particularly in some of the metropolitan districts -- such as Wigan, some of the London boroughs and St Helens. How does it work?

Survey: First of all you have got to identify the wildlife resources that you have. That really is a local authority job. Where are they? What is in them? How important are they? Are they important nationally, scientifically, or are they just important as a local area where people want to go? Are they important for people? Are they accessible?

Corridors: The second thing you do, having found out where your resources are and planned and mapped them, is to identify your corridors, for these links or corridors are very important to wildlife. Canals, rivers, streams, in whatever condition have potential; if they are full of filth they can be cleaned up. The motorway road verges, road verges in general, or just little bits of derelict land caught between buildings, are also important. Plan them. Map them. Where are they? Do they link those major resources that you have.

Priorities: The next thing to do is to identify your priority conservation action areas. In other words, where in your area is there no wildlife? These areas might just as well be the houses in the middle of a city, or on derelict land. There may be huge areas on the outskirts of a town or perhaps in the middle of the city, and equally they are in the major agricultural areas which have suffered the effects of intensive agriculture -- there is just as little, if not less, in that sort of prairie which you find in East Anglia and Lincolnshire, than there is in a typical suburban or urban area. It might look better, it is green and open and you can breathe, but there is not very much wildlife in it.

Protection: What do you then do? The first thing you have to do as a local authority is to protect the best sites that you have got. Developers who see the maps where important sites for wildlife value are marked, need to respect those areas. They need to recognise that there should be, or there is, some

presumption against development in such areas.

New site creation

Most of the priority habitats are the ones that you cannot easily recreate somewhere else. The art of habitat creation is not such that you can actually recreate an ancient woodland. How dare we think we could recreate something that has developed over five thousand years?

However, we can try to create new corridors or increase the links between the sites that I have just described. And we can try to create new sites and encourage others to do the same. I think this is where the greatest opportunity lies for everybody, not just for local authorities, but for developers of all kinds.

First of all, the local authority can put into practice what they would like to demonstrate to everybody else, to developers, to schools, to anybody. Much is already being done. There are demonstrations for example at the Liverpool Garden Festival and the Stoke Garden Festival of how to create wildlife habitat. Some schemes have survived and work better than others.

The local authorities could redesign the urban savanna and try to create something bright, cheerful, interesting, different and fun in their country parks and their public open spaces. At the least, they could put down flower-rich grassland, making sure to get the right species for the right soil, in the right place.

You could actually create a whole nature reserve of its own. Right next to King's Cross and St Pancras station is the famous Camley Street local nature reserve. The GLC, at some considerable cost, diverted the canal into a pond, creating pond dipping areas. There is an old pavillion at one end, done up as an educational facility for children. It works like magic.

The design challenge

The local authority can do a lot, but there is also a great potential for others as well. I think that most developers should be looking at each site and should be taking everywhere a responsibility for improving and promoting the environment, realising the potential of the environment in which they are trying to develop. That should be a responsibility everywhere, not just to get the planning permission, but because it will help the people who live there. It will help harmonise the development into the environment; it will actually help attract people to it; it will be pleasant for the employees to sit out there. This is where the opportunity to create something far better than mown grassland and lollipop trees is available.

Balancing ponds don't have to look sterile and boring. They can be full of plants and full of birds as well. Not all rivers have to run through concrete channels. What about creating wet areas, meanders, ponds, marshes, rather than a sterile little channel

and a sterile edge bank? What about planting wild flowers instead of a standard grass seed mix? You can take the same approach to the monotonous Department of Transport grass seed mix that you get on every motorway, every road, whatever the soil, whatever the rock type, wherever you are in the countryside. It's boring. You go across to some of the other parts of Europe and you see these fantastic wild flowers in spring. You come back to this country and you think: 'It's green but isn't it awful?'

Many authorities plant trees and shrubs everywhere. They also plant a lot of sycamore, a lot of alien species which are of very little value to wildlife. They plant trees because they think that is woodland. But what constitutes a woodland? About 60% shrubs and 40% trees; think in terms of habitats not just a few trees when you try to plan something. Be more adventurous. What about ponds? What about marshes? What about wetlands of all sorts? What about a heathland? What about a bog? These are all possible to create. You need to know your plant material, your potential, and how to apply it. You need to have expert advice.

The opportunities are enormous. I would hope that you would be able to take on board some of the sorts of things that I have said and will try and apply those to any of the development that you might be undertaking, or that others are coming to you with.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Eamonn Butler: David Woods, what Penny seems to be saying is that she doesn't mind you building all over Cambridgeshire prairies but she would prefer that you don't actually develop gravel pits. Can you do it in some sort of sensitive way where you do actually restore natural habitats at the same time, or create new ones?

David Woods: Many of the gravel pits are to be restored. Most of them are to be left on that particular site which I discussed, and part will be expanded as a nature reserve. We believe the two can go together; more people will be able to enjoy the green belt because because more people will be in the shopping centre. More people can enjoy the observation areas of the nature reserve which are immediately adjacent to it. I think you have got to bring the two together so that more people are able to enjoy more of these sorts of improvements within the green belt.

Penny Anderson: You can have improvements providing you don't destroy the good sites that you have already got and the Wraysbury example that I happen to be working on with David is one of those sites where you are not destroying anything which is ancient, not destroying the ancient countryside. There you can create a lot more. Every case you have to consider separately.

Professor Alan Evans: A comment: when driving across Europe one notices numerous picnic areas and viewpoints off motorways which

allow you to stop and look at the countryside. It seems slightly paradoxical that in Britain we value our countryside so much, there is actually nowhere to stop and look at it. Indeed, you are positively prevented from doing so.

Eamonn Butler: I think the accessibility point is a fair one; David Woods would say that he is actually making nice places more accessible, is that right?

David Woods: Very much so. Go around the M25 from Wisley to Godstone. Superb countryside -- I would have seen very little of that before. Every time I make the journey now I think how fantastic the sweep of those hills are. I am enjoying it. I am sure thousands in the same traffic jams are enjoying it as well. To take another example, there was the argument whether Richmond Park should be closed to traffic. If it was closed to traffic, then very few people would be able to enjoy it. Should green belt, rural land, and open spaces be for the greatest enjoyment of the greatest number of people? Or should they be for an exclusive number of local inhabitants or very specialist people? I am for the greatest enjoyment for the greatest number of people.

Andy Bennett: David, I have sympathy for your logic for your argument. I have sympathy for your scheme because we endeavoured to do the same thing in terms of excellent design at Tillingham Hall. But a word of caution. It isn't a question of improving accessibility into the green belt as a city-dwellers' playground; the green belt is a sacrosanct area that is protected by the vested interests of those people living within it, however much it could stand improvement, restoration, and increased accessibility.

Anthony Fyson: Just a small comment in relation to what Penny said. I wonder if she isn't actually confronting the wrong miscreant in perhaps commenting adversely on what developers do in relation to the environment, and that the primary target in this respect ought to be the farming fraternity.

Penny Anderson: You are right. The agricultural fraternity have destroyed more than anybody else. Developers must share the blame, but obviously the amount of land they use is small compared with agricultural uses. We have even lost the sorts of habitat that I am talking about in the National Parks. There are only about seventeen nice hay meadows left in the Yorkshire Dales, for example.

What I was saying is that the opportunities were greater for developers because there are planning controls that can be deployed to encourage them, and because there are communications between local authorities and potential developers. For agriculture, there is little control, and the only communication body, the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group, is in its early days. We don't know what is going to happen with the excess agricultural land and how it will be used. I would love to see

all sorts of things, including a much less intensive agricultural system so that we get less nitrates going down the drain, and better wetland habitats. But we must be realistic and the opportunities really do lie where at the moment we can see some sort of potential. I would love to get at the agricultural land as well and would hate to see it go on to conifers as an alternative to barley.

Linda Whetstone: Since I was twenty I have been writing against government planning in agriculture. It is government that has done it, egged on by the vested agricultural interests and not being strong enough to resist. We have to reduce the power of government and then we stop these things happening.

Penny Anderson: We all agree about the ravages of intensive agriculture. What is so appalling is the well off farmer who has destroyed so much comes back to FWAG or the Ministry of Agriculture and says: 'I would like to do a bit for conservation'. He could have done that twenty years ago by leaving his piece of chalk grass or ancient woodland. It is too late now, and all he does is a bit of field planting in the corner.

Eamonn Butler: I appreciate your remarks about creation of new habitats. But almost everything that is written says that we must preserve and maintain, we mustn't destroy. Do you think ecology has yet become selective enough, for those who are actually in the design and development professions, to understand how to use it creatively?

Penny Anderson: That is a difficult question. I am not sure that you could expect it to become so that you could use it just as you wouldn't dream of trying to paint a picture when somebody else is a better artist than you.

However, I certainly think that ecology is becoming much more pragmatic, much more communicative, and much more thoughtful. Ecologists who work, like I do, with developers, local authorities and with all sorts of people will actually look at a site and will tell you its potential, tell you its ecological value and try to predict what the implications of the development might be; and then they will suggest strategies which might mitigate your development. There aren't many ecologists who will do that yet, and they have yet to become a recognisable force, positive rather than negative.

There is nothing that you can do about the fact that these habitats have evolved over five to seven thousand years, since the Ice Age. They cannot be changed without losing a lot of species, especially the rarities. We have lost 10% of our dragonflies in the last forty years, and there are lots of other species threatened as well. Have we a right to make things become extinct? Have we a right to destroy and reduce the diversity of the natural world? No, we haven't.

Victor Serebriakoff: All species have been competing with others and species have always been dying out. There are many more species that have died out than those still existant. The simple thought that we must preserve every single species that we have got now, isn't as straightforward a proposition as you suggest. Sometimes we must choose. Who will decide what are the right species to be preserved?

I love wild nature entirely but I must recognise the fact that with fifty million of me around it can't be as it was. It has got to change. We must strike a new balance. We have got to deal with that and it is a much tougher problem than you present. It is not a question of picking out bits we like and preserving them.

Penny Anderson: Yes, species have been evolving and dying out through millions of years but the rate of extinction now is very, very much faster than it ever has been, except for cataclismic things like the ice age and the extinction of the dinosaurs. I don't think that we are in balance with nature. I think we are destroying it and we are destroying part of our own future. We are destroying things that our children and our grandchildren will never see: they won't thank us for it. But there are ways of making it less bad, or even of helping.

POLITICAL OPTIONS

Clive Branson
Chartered Surveyor Weekly

We have reached a watershed in planning policies. There are about sixty proposals for new retail developments round the country now. I don't know how many there are around the M25 and I don't know how many there are in the area between Glasgow and Edinburgh. The pressure is large.

The government has now said it will do something about the inner cities. It doesn't say how it is going to do it and frankly, anyone who has travelled this country and been into the middle of many cities will know that they are appalling. It is clear that the task will be a big one.

I have done a lot of travelling throughout the world and have just got back from the United States and it isn't nearly as bad in many cities in the United States as it is here. At the same time, we have a large part of the country where people want new shopping facilities. Developers want to be able to go to one million square feet with leisure facilities, outside the town.

These two are possibly in conflict. Can you have the renewal of the inner city while building such attractive new facilities outside? I am not sure, it is not for me to judge. It is for the economists and the politicians. But the government has to come up very soon -- within twelve months for sure -- with hard and fast policies on all these matters.

The need for firm direction

I would like the government to look at the country and say: 'Fine, we know the population of each area. We know what the M25 does, we know what is happening in the area around Manchester and Leeds and so on, we will allow two or three round the M25, one in Manchester, two in Scotland.' and so on. Then it is up to the developers to decide on a viable scheme and work it out.

We have seen recent government policies where the government was suddenly coming up with new ideas for farmland, whereby you could allow some economic development in areas suffering a decline in farm production such that they could convert to small scale industry. Here again, we saw the broad outlines of the policies but we didn't see what would be specifically allowed. Will you allow a factory that employs two hundred and fifty people on a farming area that has just fallen out of use?

What the government needs is something it hasn't done before, either at local government level or national government level, and that is to have a policy that allows people to understand what variety of development is possible in a given area.

Avoiding strangulation: I don't want this to be a stranglehold. We do have to allow the market to operate. In the United States, San Francisco has restricted its downtown office building to an annual build of four hundred and fifty thousand square feet. This is in a city which has an annual take-up of 1.5 million square feet. One direct result, of course, is that the value of buildings in San Francisco will rise; the other result, however, is that the financial centre of the West Coast has shifted more rapidly to Los Angeles where they don't have restrictions. That is exactly the thing that happens when you restrict the marketplace.

Forecasting and acting

In Britain I would say that the central part of a government policy must be a nationwide view, one that balances up the problems. At the moment the Department of the Environment has called in everything that local planners don't know what to do with, with the result that there are so many retail schemes being considered we don't know where we stand. The limit is two hundred and fifty thousand square feet, beyond that you don't get planning permission, it gets called in.

Newly available information: The government is in a position now to do the forecast. We have the example of Cameron Hall's Metro Centre in Gateshead which has provided some interesting figures so we can look at that as an example of what is possible. That was built on disused industrial land adjacent to Newcastle; it has taken away business from retailing in the centre of Newcastle but not as much as had been expected, and is probably quite a good use of land.

Sensible land use: We have many schemes for disused gravel pits around the M25. What do you do with a disused gravel pit? It seems to be a good idea that you could allow retailing but we must arrive at a sensible use policy. Governments always back off from a major confrontation with local objectors, and Conservative MPs and councils in the green belt want very little to change in their own area. Even when all the economic arguments have made about the scheme being right, that people actually want it, will the government allow it? Does anyone actually believe that if they allow the sensible schemes, that the area will be overwhelmed by development?

Economic change: We have to accept the fact that there is more mobility and that when economic circumstances change, areas will go up and down. For example, Liverpool, which grew up as the west coast port for trade with the West Indies and North America, has no such logical function whatsoever now, no-one knows what to do with it.

The return to certainty

It would deprive my pages of a lot of stories if the government comes out with a policy that everybody understands. We would not have to run page after page of 'will it get through', 'won't it get through', 'will they build it', 'won't they build it?'

No-one knows where they stand at the moment. Developers spend a fortune on their plans. They produce nice models. They fly me down in helicopters to gravel pits and they say, 'Wouldn't this make a wonderful one million square foot retail development? We will put lakes here for boats and the kids can play...' And so on.

Do such things get built? Usually not, just because the government doesn't know what to do about it. Because it lacks a coherent and intelligible policy.

EDUCATION AND UNDERSTANDING

John Trustram Eve
J R Eve

Planning and democratic choice

Planning is about choice. It doesn't matter how you put it, it is about choice. It is a choice on the use of land. It is ultimately, I would suggest, a democratic process; in this country at least, that choice will ultimately find its way back to the electorate, either through a local council or through the national government. There is no-one else: you can put in all sorts of quangos in between, but they are all ultimately answerable to the electorate.

Public power: If you want real evidence of this, think of the cases where the electorate in fact had no theoretical power whatever. Take the third London airport. The government, which had a substantial majority at the time, actually decided that Stansted should be developed as the third London airport. They effectively started the statutory process, which they could very easily have taken through Parliament to achieve that goal. There was a little local difficulty: it was a Conservative government at the time and there were objections from the Conservative Members of Parliament for that part of Essex and round about. The result was that that decision, which appeared to all of us who were in the field at the time to be reasonably certain, was completely reversed. Then started the immensely long saga which ended up with the same decision some years later.

The point is that it was a public uprising that prevented the choice of Stansted going ahead. There have been other cases: look at the storage of low-level radioactive waste. That has been apparently stopped in the current investigation because of political pressure. Local people do not want it, they have stopped it. I would suggest to you that in the ultimate, planning has to live with the decisions of the people it's planning, the people for whom these choices have been made. What I want to address is the effects of that.

The pace of change: The problem we have in planning is the rate of change. The new towns, and other pre-war innovations, felt fairly alarming at the time but by those standards we are going at an enormous pace.

The theories about concentric rings and sectors and all those sort of things go back quite a long time. They are not new phenomena, they are just the process of change. What I suggest

is new is the political and human effects of that change. If you look closely, certainly in the London context, most of those effects arise from the extraordinary rate at which it is happening rather than the effect itself.

The same in the countryside. The countryside has been changing for a very long time indeed. I have roots in the Brecon Beacons, where farming goes back to the fifteenth century. A lot of it is still very easily tracable but the rate of change now is dramatic. We don't know what happens if you remove subsidies for raising sheep in such an area. What will happen to all those grasslands in South Wales? Once again, it is the enormous rate of change that is causing us difficulty.

Slogans: We then come to the other factor which is becoming increasingly obvious. Because the population don't appear to like what they perceive is going to happen, we have started planning by slogan. 'Green belt', 'ecology', 'inner city', 'out of town shopping'. All nice slogans. And with the slogans go an absence of detailed consideration of what is actually involved.

If we look at what was designated green belt round London in the early 1950s, you will be staggered how much of that is not now green belt. You wouldn't even remember that it had ever been there. There is a huge area of former market gardens in Twickenham which was developed for housing, after the market gardening industry which was supporting it collapsed completely. I don't think we have lost a great deal by it, but it has all come out of the green belt. There are quite substantial chunks that have come out for one reason or another. So the green belt was never a static process; but it is being made out to be so. People do not like the idea of development going into their backyard. Where can they get hold of a handle? Green belt. So green belt is suddenly raised to this higher level of importance. It becomes something to beat change with. It is the pace of change that people are worried about.

National or local choice?

We then move on to the real nub of the problem of the control of planning. It is part, I perceive, of this government's philosophy: the Conservatives have, for a very long time, been pushing decisions on planning to what I would rudely call the parish pump. The Secretary of State does not call in matters for decision if he can help it. He has been pressing it on District Councils. County Councils' powers have been reduced.

Balance: Of course, one has to say tritely that it is nice for the people who are being planned to have a say and if you put the decision down to the local level, isn't that where it ought to be? Well, yes it ought, provided the people at the local level are in a position to make that decision. And they are so only if they get both the benefits and the costs of the development they are considering. No-one was surprised that Parliament was asked to decide about the Channel Tunnel. They may have resented it

but it seemed an issue where the costs and benefits were going to be spread so widely that it could be decided only at a national level. The third London Airport and nuclear power are similar cases.

How can you ask an electorate in the long run to make a decision if they do not encapsulate both the costs and benefits of the things they are deciding? It is absolutely bound to distort their judgement. It seems to me inconceivable that a system can produce the right answer if you select as the people who decide those who only see part of the equation. You are asking the impossible. How can you conceivably ask the residents of the nicer parts of Berkshire to accept more high-tech development which may be in the national interest, and lose their countryside if they don't get the benefit? They have got enough development for their taste (that's why they live there), so they ask why should they have more? On the other side of the coin, Lambeth and Southwark, are being asked to accommodate economic development from the city, which is probably very important indeed in the national interest. But there isn't going to be a resident of Lambeth that is going to benefit much from it.

Dangers: So this pressure to put planning decisions down to the local level has significant dangers. One might think that the odd housing development of a little estate round the edge of some town must be a local issue. Of course it must be a local issue, but who is actually suffering by those houses not being built there? The losers are the children of the local residents and the people who would like to move in; but they don't have votes. I remember in the late 1950s the doctor of a New Forest village going to the Hampshire planners in high dudgeon saying, 'Do you realise we have not had a baby born in our village for ten years?' I don't think the planners in the county had actually looked at this village from that point of view. They had just rejected all new development in the village, and therefore there were no houses for the young.

So it seems to me our planning system must encapsulate those who benefit as well as those who pay the cost. If you don't have both you are bound to get a distorted decision. In the short run you can get some extremely statesmanlike decisions from the most astonishing authorities; but in the long run, it seems to me, it is absolutely impossible for that system to work.

Ending the distortion

So what do we do? One answer is to make Members of Parliament and local councillors aware that they have not taken on board their duty. Their duty is to explain to their electorate the real 'ifs and buts' about whether we develop or not. They don't. They talk in slogans because that is the easy way talk to the electorate.

The professionals, if they thought that they could remain happily outside this, are equally to blame. We are not honest enough

about how little we know. We don't know what will happen in the future. We don't know how to make the inner city work. We don't know how many houses should be or could be built. To make any serious progress, we actually have to admit our own deficiencies. And we need to start educating those who ultimately are going to pay the cost for the bad decisions we are making.

We do cost-benefit analysis occasionally. We have done a bit on the Channel Tunnel, we have done a bit on airports. But not on mundane things, like where are people going to live, what are we going to do about shopping, where are we going to put serious rebuilding of our retail space when there is simply no way of getting the shoppers in to our urban centres. The technique must be used far more generally.

We are not really looking at the real problem. If you want a prediction, the next problem will actually be: How do we keep our offices in our town centres? We need them there, in order to keep the people there, in order to keep the activity there. That is to say, you have got to create the climate in which activity wants to happen. We have got to create town centres that people want to be in, to have offices in, to shop in, or to visit for recreation, and planning has got to come round to that need.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Andy Smith: It may be sensible to have a global policy that allows only a limited number of developments in the green belt. But such restrictions inevitably raise the benefits for the fortunate few who are selected, and this economic rent element must be addressed.

It strikes me that one way to get at the economic rent that is locked up in these disused gravel pits to the advantage of government and the inner cities, is to apply some sort of regional development land tax. Announce that, say, four or five sites will be allowed in the London green belt, and then there will be a moratorium for fifty years, honoured by all governments. Select a limited number of sites for developers to build on. Either have those sites compulsorily purchased and put out to auction, or tax the developer's profit on those sites. Earmark that profit for inner city redevelopment, the Robin Hood-type approach. This way you have protected the green belt far better than we have succeeded in doing over the last forty years. Developers still make good profits (as opposed to absolutely fantastic profits), so they are quite happy. And inner cities or other deprived areas will quite enjoy the windfall of tax revenue.

John Hibbs: I remember my boss when I was in British Rail saying that an industrial development certificate should have a price tag. If you wanted to site your factory in the South East, then you paid. Then there would be an incentive to take yourself to an area where you were needed. This still strikes me as being a

very logical way of doing it, but I think it is probably best done as crudely as that.

Kenneth Irvine: I would like to ask the panel whether it is a suspicion of service industries that is mitigating against the development of the green belt? The government seem to be very much in favour of the development of the inner cities and even of subsidising manufacturing industry in the North.

Clive Branson: The government has changed its mind. Originally its idea was that it would allow manufacturing to decline because that was a natural process and that the service industries, particularly in the City of London, would be where you would find employment.

As unemployment mounted to over three million, the government started to feel that there weren't sufficient jobs in services and also that the pressure groups, CBI etc, got to work and complained that it was disgraceful to have such an anti-manufacturing policy and that we need industry. So the pendulum may have swung back a little bit. There was certainly a bias against service industries in the 1950s and 1960s but is no longer true.

Teresa Gorman MP: I would ask this question of the developers: aren't they pressing to build in the green belt because they are precluded from doing anything in the cities? Because we have made such a hash of them through all the planning controls of what you can do in the cities? Basically, the poor old developer is looking to make his money from somewhere where he can develop. The inner cities are a mess and are largely precluded so he is naturally pushing out into the rural areas.

Eamonn Butler: Perhaps a more serious pressure, though, is that people are more mobile and the nature of retailing has changed. People want to shop in large, covered malls, with convenient parking, near to leisure facilities for themselves and their children. We can't rip up the centres of our historic market towns to provide the space and the access needed for such centres.

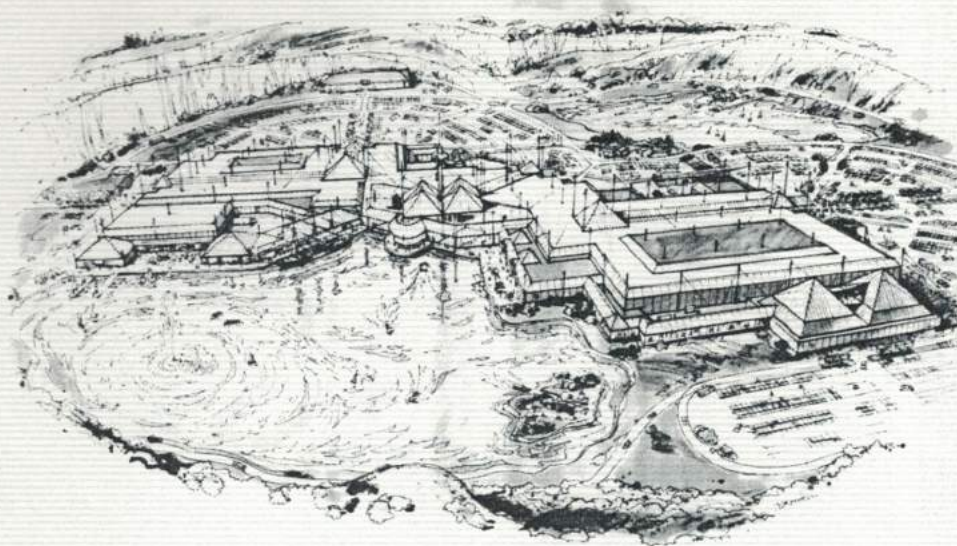
John Ardill: Yes; it is no benefit whatever for a consumer if some developer is persuaded by some out-of-touch government to put a shopping centre in a place to which they can't get. That is what is likely to happen if we talk about developing the inner city rather than looking at the very much more complex and difficult question about who is going to use the inner city. The problems of space and access are why there is pressure to build in the green belt, not because the green belt has some fantastic attraction to developers. It just is an area in which there are sites that will meet the criteria of modern shopping requirements.

John Hibbs: One that should be remembered in any discussion of this kind, that is the extent to which continental cities, which

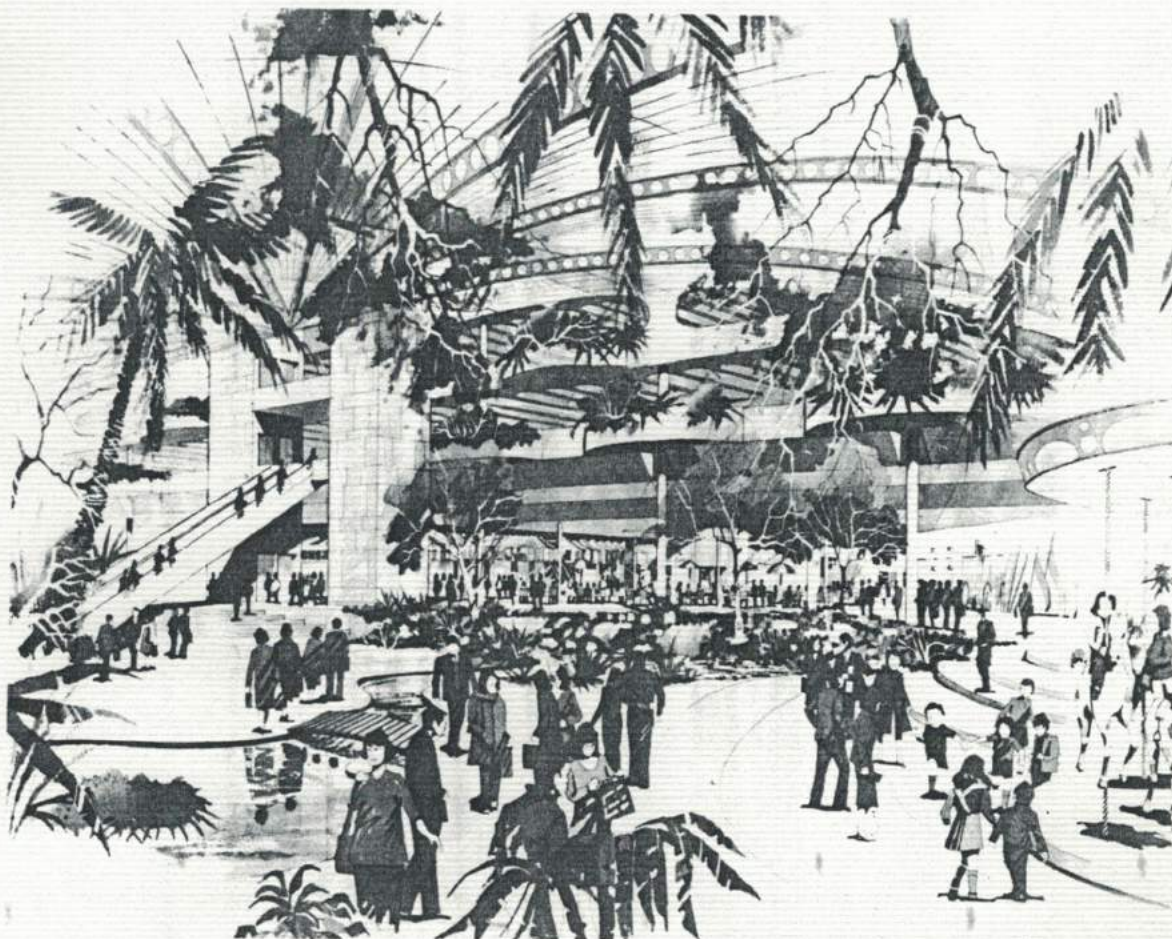
have thriving hypermarkets, also have thriving city centres.

Anthony Fyson: I had hoped we had gone past the stage where we regarded inner city development as an alternative to out of city development. Every study that has ever been done of this question of land supply has indicated that there is not sufficient land within the inner city to house the people at the sort of standards of space which they have every right to expect in this day and age. By and large, people with families want houses with gardens built at probably not more than fourteen or fifteen to the acre. So we cannot adequately solve the sort of problem we face in housing the South East by simply and only using inner city land. That isn't to say we should not use inner city land; of course we should use it, but we have got to recognise there is going to be considerable out-of-city development as well.

Blue Water Park: a novel retail and leisure use for old quarry workings



The intergarden of ARC Properties' proposed Runnymede centre, which includes shopping and leisure facilities on damaged land near to Heathrow airport



A view of the wintergarden in ARC Properties Runny-