

A CHARTER FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE

GEORGE MONBIOT

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Abstract

As the government's White Paper on Rural Activities approaches, this report identifies the causes of rural economic and cultural decline. It presents concrete proposals for planning reform and participatory development in the countryside. Previous proposals for rural reform have advocated transferring the urban economy to the countryside. If local distinctiveness and regional economies are to survive, agriculture must be allowed to thrive alongside software and insurance companies. But the sector must be radically reformed. Subsidies must treat the entire country as an environmentally- and employment-sensitive area. This report identifies crippling market distortions which discriminate against local produce; and sees "box schemes" and "low impact development" as two means of re-establishing links between local consumers and producers. It shows how a minor modification of planning law could allow low impact development to proceed. Pressures on remaining landscape features will, it anticipates, intensify once more, with or without the reform of incentives. The only effective means of protection is definitive mapping, and then only if the public is involved in monitoring breaches of the law. This necessitates a right to roam. Without such changes in rural policy, the erosion of our sense of place will proceed until we lose an essential component of nationhood.

For the people of Dorchester-on-Thames in Oxfordshire, life revolves around the watermeadows. The pastures surrounding the River Thames are seldom empty. Families picnic here, children ride their bikes, fly their kites or fish in the river and elderly couples walk their dogs. In the willows and bullrushes along the banks live kingfishers, herons and reed buntings. When floodwaters scour the gravel away, they reveal potsherds and the bones of ancient cattle.

But the meadows are in no sense remarkable; nothing qualifies them for listing as a Site of Special Scientific Interest or a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Visitors to Dorchester, whose interest concentrates on the village's tea-rooms, Abbey and the busier banks of the River Thames, do not even know they are there. Last year their owner went bankrupt. The people of Dorchester realized that a new landlord could plough the pastures and plant barley or rape, without even informing them of his intentions, and they would lose the link with their surroundings that makes the village such a desirable place to live. Horrified, they clubbed together. Within nine days they raised the money required to buy the land for themselves.

Yet this is not a happy story but a sad one. Dorchester is a wealthy village and the meadows are likely to be cheap. Most of the communities in Britain have no prospect of purchasing the informal spaces that help to make life bearable. Yet they have no other legal means of defending them. Though the quality of our surroundings is one of the determinants of the quality of our lives, our active interest in them is not protected by significant rights.

Few would now deny that one of the causes of our most persistent social problems is anomie: the lack of meaning and purpose which results from the loss of a sense of belonging. One of the major components of belonging is our ability to identify with a place. This identification requires, above all else, a stake in our surroundings.

In the city, people's alienation from the physical environment has been exacerbated by distortions in the planning process. Developers have a right of appeal while local people do not, so many locals have come to feel they have less control over their surroundings than do property speculators from the other side of the country. Local authorities still dip their hands into the illegal riches of planning gain, getting public amenities or a straight cash payment in return for approving unpopular developments.

Alienation from the countryside, however, is just as consequential. When asked to think of Britain, many people - among them those who seldom leave the city - think of the countryside. Our ancient, closely managed rural landscape remains the unofficial coat of arms. The extent to which we see the nation and its totems as ours, rather than someone else's, determines the extent to which we are prepared to exert ourselves for it.

The government's forthcoming White Paper on Rural Activities is a great opportunity to renew our sense of belonging, while meeting the new demands made of the countryside by British people. If it fails to meet this challenge, we will progressively lose an essential component of nationhood. This paper presents concrete proposals for the planning reform and participatory development so urgently required in the countryside.

Much has been said, not least in the White Paper's terms of reference, about the need to revitalize the rural economy, and this need is great. Britain now has fewer people employed in farming than any other Western nation. In the city state of Hong Kong, twice the percentage of the population works in agriculture as in the green garden of Britain. Yet, though farmers' incomes are rising, we continue to shed farm labour at the rate of 20,000 a year. There is a massive and widening disparity of wealth between surviving rural labourers and those who live in the countryside but work somewhere else. As urban areas become the sources of wealth, commerce and entertainment for rural people, the countryside shifts its gaze to the towns. Life, for many of its inhabitants, is elsewhere.

Curiously, nearly all the proposals for revitalizing the rural economy discuss only the urban economy, and how to move it into the countryside. There have been numerous calls for a relaxation of planning constraints in order to facilitate telecottaging or the movement of insurance and software companies from towns to villages. While these initiatives may be welcomed in many rural areas, and afford people otherwise condemned to commuting a more sustainable pattern of life, they fail to reflect the special characteristics of the place itself. This interaction is essential if rural areas are to be locations in their own right, rather than simply nodes on the Internet. If life in the countryside is to be distinguishable from life everywhere else - and if opportunities are to be provided for people whose skills are best employed out of doors - then the rural economy must be allowed to thrive alongside the transposed urban economy.

A rural economy is necessarily land-based: reflective of and responsive to an area's resources. It is, moreover, a fundamentally local one, in which producers, market centres and consumers are closely linked. Much of this must involve agriculture. Farming and farm employment, for all the perversions that disfigure the industry, cannot be allowed to die.

The farm economy is distorted all over the world. This is something we may regret - especially in view of the profligacy of the Common Agricultural Policy - but that, for the time being, we have to live with. The trick is to ensure that the distortion - subsidies and grants in our case - delivers social goods rather than social ills. This it manifestly fails to do. Subsidies have accelerated the shedding of labour. They have encouraged the neglect and destruction of landscape quality, archaeology and wildlife which, for most people in Britain, makes the countryside a place to be valued.

There are now few people who would dispute that farm subsidies need to stop favouring land uses which

have a high environmental impact yet employ next to no one, and start assisting low impact, high employment practices. Yet, while £71 million is spent each year in Britain on Environmentally Sensitive Area, Nitrate Sensitive Area, Habitat, Countryside Stewardship, Moorland and Organic Aid schemes, over £2 billion is spent on policies which achieve the opposite. No subsidy of any kind reflects the number of people employed on the land. Were this misspent money to be redirected towards treating all of our farmland as an environmentally- and employment-sensitive area, subsidies would rapidly deliver the social goods we have cause to expect of them.

Subsidies may help make the body of the countryside whole again, but they cannot breathe life into it. This can happen only when consumers, as well as producers, feel they have a stake in it. Some of the off-licences in Somerset cider villages now supply only a brand of cider grown in Herefordshire, bottled in Northamptonshire then driven to Somerset. The local brew has doubtless all been trucked to Herefordshire. Such bedlam ergonomics become still more salient when we are encouraged to buy out-of-season apples from New Zealand during our own growing season and beans from Kenya while our own farmers are ploughing theirs back in. These exchanges threaten not only our reason (and the endangered livelihoods of our horticulturalists) but also our sense that rural land in Britain is in any way connected to us.

There are several reasons for the shift in supply from local farmers to producers in distant parts of Britain and the rest of the world. As research commissioned by the SAFE Alliance has shown, supermarket chains have longer supply lines than street markets. They tend to buy and distribute regionally or nationally rather than locally. Moreover, both road freight in Britain and air freight around the world have become extremely cheap.

The rise of the supermarket is interesting, for produce on sale in street markets is significantly cheaper. There are two ways in which grocery economics are distorted to allow the supermarkets a greater share. By using their capital reserves to invest in loss leaders and by advertising nationally as well as locally they have advantages which local traders do not share. Perhaps more importantly, local authorities - motivated at least in part by planning gain - look more favourably on applications by supermarkets than by street markets, even though the street markets employ more people.

Road freight, as most transport consultants now acknowledge, is underpriced. Neither tax discs nor fuel costs account the damage done by trucks to roads, houses, human health and environmental quality. Were these costs to be included in the cost of freight, Somerset cider would be cheaper in Somerset than cider from Herefordshire. Aviation fuel is anomalously tax free - indeed by various subtle means it is subsidized by the taxpayer - so the cost of flying in Kenyan beans in order to undercut the British bean farmer is inordinately low. It is a problem that needs to be addressed internationally, but so far no government has approached it.

In the absence of any real vision on the part of either government or local authorities, some producers have started cutting out conventional retailers and making direct approaches to the consumer. Schemes such as Community Support for Agriculture supply mixed boxes of local organic fruit and vegetables at set prices. They have proved to be far more popular than anticipated, and are growing so fast that supermarkets are said to be showing the first signs of alarm. One reason for their popularity is that people know exactly where the produce comes from, who grew it and how the land was treated.

A small but potentially important component of the revival of both local distinctiveness and local engagement is settlement of the kind now known as "low impact development." Tinkers' Bubble, near Yeovil in Somerset, is an example. Here ten people have built a hamlet of six shacks in the middle of their 40 acres of woodland, pasture and orchard. They have begun a woodland restoration project and started to produce organic apples, honey, lamb, vegetables and herbs, and craft goods such as walking sticks and

wooden tiles. They have banned all internal combustion engines from the site. Labour is supplied by hand or by shire horse and energy by firewood and solar panels. The houses - made of timber, canvas and wattle and daub - are entirely hidden in the woods.

Tinkers' Bubble breaks the most basic planning laws. The settlement lies beyond the fringes of the nearest village, on the affordable land zoned for agriculture, rather than the prohibitively expensive land zoned for human habitation. When its planning application went to appeal, the Secretary of State for the Environment called it in, and in August overruled the inspector's recommendations that the settlement be allowed to survive.

Yet it seems clear that Tinkers' Bubble has been delivering social goods, not social ills. Its net environmental impact has been positive: the inhabitants have started clearing out invasive laurel and sycamore and replacing them with home-grown oak and ash. They have restored footpaths and a pond and removed several tons of junk accumulated by previous farmers. Their revival of craftsmanship based on the use of local resources is helping to shore up the local distinctiveness that is rapidly slipping away in South Somerset. The project has brought young people back into an area now dominated by the newly retired. Most importantly, it has reintegrated people into the landscape. Intensive agriculture's inhospitability to the human presence has done even more to compromise rural values than its inhospitability to wildlife. With one or two such projects in every district - and there are several thousand people in Britain who are keen to participate - low impact development could bring back some of the local involvement now missing from regions whose internal economy has all but died.

A general relaxation of zoning to allow such settlements to exist would be disastrous, as low impact development would be used by unscrupulous developers to prize open the countryside for executive housing estates. Paradoxically a tightening, not a loosening, of planning laws is required. But the legal means of enabling such projects to take place while filtering out intrusive developments already exist. Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act allows local authorities to strike a sort of non-proliferation treaty with developers. Agreements made under the act could, for example, determine that a small low-cost house will not mushroom into a large expensive one, or that a solar powered development will not, at a later date, be connected to the national grid. But planning officers claim that this provision is "totally worthless", principally because a developer can worm out of any agreements he reaches with the local authority by appealing to the Secretary of State. This unnecessary right of appeal needs to be revoked.

By themselves, however, incentives such as new subsidies and more flexible planning arrangements are insufficient to guarantee both landscape conservation and local character. Even more importantly, they fail to deliver public accountability. Only 21 per cent of the land in Environmentally Sensitive Areas, for example, is covered by management agreements. On the remainder, the features that make the land distinctive remain at risk.

Pressures on landscape features are widely expected to decrease as subsidies cease to reward continued intensification. But this view is optimistic. Earlier this year, researchers announced that they had inserted new genes into rape to produce lauric acid, thereby increasing the uses and the value of the crop. The production of a wide range of high-value pharmaceuticals and industrial chemicals from genetically engineered plants is only a matter of time. Subsidies guide agriculture only when the value of the production types they favour is higher than that of competing land uses. These new developments will lead inevitably to new pressures to destroy our remaining landscape features.

If you take the C road south from Wroughton in Wiltshire, after three miles you reach the Ridgeway. Where the two roads converge, the land is a living chronicle of 5000 years of human history. Scarcely a square metre of the downs there is unmarked by a hump or a declivity, a sunken track or an elevated

barrow. There is room here for the living as well as the dead. On summer weekends the downs are thick with people, exploring these features or taking in the view. If, however, you turn right, taking the Ridgeway towards Avebury, after half a mile the character of the land dramatically changes. The colour remains the same, but there is not a single feature to arrest the eye. It is in set-aside, the fashion of the 1970s having been peremptorily replaced by another. For just twenty years of largely pointless production, 5000 years of human history have been obliterated. The land here has no place for us or for our ancestors.

There is an urgent need for new legislation to protect our remaining ponds, peatbogs, moors, meadows and earthworks from the wild vicissitudes of agricultural policy. There is nothing wrong with introducing new crops and new techniques, but they must be confined to the vast areas already effaced by modern intensive agriculture, rather than allowed to obliterate what remains of our ancient management systems.

Landscape protection in Britain is both inadequate in principle and ill-enforced in practice. Only the stupid or the ill-briefed farmer is prosecuted for destroying a Scheduled Ancient Monument or a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Thanks to numerous loopholes; procedures which seem designed to encourage the unscrupulous landowner; and the perennial underfunding of both English Nature and English Heritage, the crafty and well-informed can destroy the nation's cultural fabric without fear of prosecution.

Moreover, SAMs, SSSIs and National Nature Reserves comprise just a tiny proportion of the country's valuable archaeological remains and wildlife habitats. The great majority, though critical to our sense of place, have no legal protection whatsoever. It is hard to see why, when ministers are talking of listing London's Centrepoint and Manchester's Cooperative Insurance building as monuments worthy of protection, that features 200 times their age should be left so exposed.

No one who has witnessed the incremental loss of SSSIs and SAMs needs persuading that their protection procedures must be simplified and tightened up, but the more perplexing question is how to defend the remainder of our landscape features. Trying to legislate on the basis of farm activities would lead only to a bureaucratic cat's cradle. One could try, for instance, to make the ploughing of all pastureland subject to some form of planning procedure. But, quite apart from adding to the farmer's burden of paperwork, and the taxpayer's burden of expenditure, this would hardly address the problem. Many pastures, being seeded with a single ryegrass cultivar, have already lost nearly all their biological and cultural value. The diversity of the remainder is threatened as much by muckspreaders or changes in grazing routines as by ploughs. It is clear that, following this approach, you would soon need a planning committee for every farm in Britain.

The one exception, where activity-based legislation is appropriate, is the construction of farm buildings, as this is a discrete and unitary activity. At the moment farmers can erect any agricultural building without even informing a local authority, let alone applying for planning permission, provided that each unit is within 465 square metres and twelve metres tall. While even small modifications to human housing are rigorously assessed, you can cover your entire farm with concrete without notifying anyone. Battery pig, chicken or mink units within the size limit may need a nominal environmental assessment because of the waste they generate, but, provided they are 400 metres away from human houses, do not require any process which canvasses public opinion. As silos and concrete barns blot the most pristine horizons - National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty designations notwithstanding - the exemption from planning control granted by the General Development Order becomes ever more anomalous.

In the non-built farm environment, however, blanket planning prescriptions would be misplaced not only when applied to activities but also when applied to habitat types. Laws against destroying all heaths, ponds or moorlands, for example, would swiftly run into the sands of definition, as conservationists and landowners fought over whether heath was scrub or old mine workings were ponds. It might also encourage gradual erosion of the type found in many Welsh woods, where farmers let their animals graze beneath the

trees in order slowly to convert protected woodland to pasture.

The only remaining option is the listing of individual features - the documentation of every round barrow, stone wall and watermeadow worthy of protection. The common response to this proposal is that the existing listed landscape features - such as SSSIs and SAMs - cannot be adequately protected, so what hope would there be of looking after many times that number? The task of mapping and defining them, moreover, would be monumental.

To answer the second point first, the bulk of the job has already been done. Most local authorities have either field-by-field maps of their regions, recording all notable landscape features, or a list of locally important sites. 600,000 archaeological sites have been mapped and documented. All that remains is to fill in the remaining gaps and open negotiations to turn the informal maps into a definitive one, like the definitive map which has largely succeeded in keeping our 120,000 miles of footpaths open. Landowners wishing to alter one of the listed features would then apply for the equivalent of the diversion or extinguishment order they need when altering a footpath.

The major flaw in current protection mechanisms for SSSIs and SAMs is that they rely almost exclusively on an understaffed bureaucracy, and make little use of the huge public enthusiasm for landscape protection. Footpath monitoring, on the other hand, while legally the concern of local authorities, largely relies on ordinary people, who report illegal obstructions to their councils and, especially through the Ramblers' Association, ensure that they are removed. Not only does this work, it also allows ordinary people a role in the countryside - essential if we are to believe that the nation belongs to all of us, and all of us belong to the nation. But this mechanism cannot work for landscape protection without a right to roam.

Shirburn Hill, near Watlington in Oxfordshire, is part of a 2000-acre estate belonging to the Earl of Macclesfield. Covered in springy turf, with a view over the greater part of the middle Thames Valley, the SSSI could scarcely be better suited to recreation, and local people have repeatedly requested a right of access. The earl has refused, arguing that visitors' feet would damage the hill's fragile ecology. The only access to his estate remains a single public footpath. Earlier this year, trespassers entered his land to see what they were missing. They discovered that on the side of the hill which could not be seen from the footpath, the earl's precious chalk grasslands had been overrun and irreparably damaged by sycamore.

Opponents of a right to roam claim that access would destroy the very resources that visitors value. The hidden beauties of the countryside, exposed to the unkempt and ignorant mass of humankind, would rapidly wither away. It is true that there are places, like Derwentwater and Dovedale, where the pressure of numbers does damage the land, and there are others where the fauna or flora is so vulnerable that it can tolerate no intrusion, but these conditions are rare and localized. They fail to justify our exclusion from uncultivated land in the rest of Britain. Indeed, looking at most of the places in which access is allowed, it is hard to escape the conclusion that public participation protects wildlife and archaeological sites, rather than destroying them. If damaging change takes place where people walk, there is a public outcry. But what no one sees, no one grieves - or not, at any rate, until it is too late.

Our physical exclusion from the countryside lies at the heart of our loss of a sense of belonging, and if we do not belong there, we will not fight for it. It is pertinent, therefore, to look at the other reasons given for keeping us out. Landowners often claim that access to their land would represent an intrusion on their privacy. Gamekeepers will confront trespassers with this argument even when they catch them out of sight of the house, or on an estate owned by an absentee landlord. Why some people's privacy should extend across a substantial proportion of Britain, while most of us are content for people to be walking past our front doors, is never adequately explained.

Visitors, it is claimed, do not understand the countryside, and will therefore cause chaos to farming, forestry and field sports. It is true that some visitors do, as landowners suggest, damage hedges or frighten livestock. But restricting these activities (and there are plenty of laws with which to do so) surely does not necessitate excluding the harmless majority, any more than stopping people from spraying graffiti or breaking shop windows means keeping everyone off the pavement. If people are ignorant of the countryside it is surely because they have been so successfully kept out.

We are told, moreover, that we have an adequate network of footpaths, from which there's no need to stray. Regrettably, many of the most charming and intricate corners of Britain are wholly inaccessible by public path. Perhaps more importantly, one visits the countryside to escape the constraints of dedicated space, the narrow regimentation imposed by the pavement, the office or ten square metres of garden. Keeping to the footpath does little to relieve our sense of confinement.

All over the world, the leaders of less democratic nations argue that good political decision-making can take place only when the common mass of the population is excluded. With embarrassing regularity, the opposite proves to be the case. The same, of course, applies to land use policies in Britain. The wider is public involvement in decision making, the better and longer-lasting the emerging decisions are likely to be. Without a role in determining the future of our most fundamental resource, we will continue to suffer from the impression that full citizenship is the preserve of the fortunate few.

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