The Rural-Urban Division in U.K. Politics

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Classical Marxism and later social-democratic and Communist practice in most of the western countries focussed on the urban industrial working class as the key agency for social transformation. Consequently, questions about rural economy and society have become marginalized in the thinking and practice of the main traditions on the Left.

In recent decades, however, a whole complex of issues has re-directed attention to rural society and to the key linkages between rural and urban politics in industrial societies. This has been especially noticeable in the United Kingdom with the emergence of a new issue-agenda promoted by a range of social movement organizations. One of these, the Countryside Alliance, is a puzzling amalgam of social forces. The new rural agenda reflects a series of concerns deeply felt throughout much of the wider society. Ethical and aesthetic concerns centering on the industrialized food system are one important strand: a moral panic about obesity, fear and mistrust in the wake of a series of food safety issues (salmonella, "mad cow disease," also known as BSE, pesticide contamination, bird "flu"), the rise of animal welfare and rights agitation provoked by growing public awareness of the cruelty entailed in the intensive rearing systems, concern about the wider environmental impact of new agricultural technologies, resistance to the domination of the human "food chain" by agribusiness, food processing and giant retail monopolies. Intersecting with these issues have been other cleavages: rights of leisure access to the countryside, the degradation of landscape values by agricultural intensification, habitat destruction and extinction of wild species, and the persistence of what some see as cruel "blood sports" and others as "the rural way of life." Finally, rural class issues such as the decline of rural employment, the lack of affordable housing, the decline of rural services (transport, schools, medical services, the demise of the village shop) continue and intensify.

In what follows I'll sketch the historical background to these developments, try to make sense of the increasing salience of "rural" issues, as well as the mobilizing power of the Countryside Alliance, and pose the question of an appropriate alternative red-green response to the issues raised.

Class Struggles and the Rural Idyll

One of the great founding figures of green socialism was William Morris. His utopian novel, *News from Nowhere,* envisaged a future in which the opposition between urban and rural life and settlement would be abolished. Much of East London would be given over to orchards and gardens, and the divisions in culture and physical well-being between urban and rural dwellers would be overcome. More recent writers have referred to the thesis of a "metabolic rift" in Marx's later analysis of urban/rural relationships: loss of soil fertility with the development of capitalist agriculture, combined with a growing problem of waste dispersal in dense human urban settlements. This and Morris's writing point to a socialist project of overcoming the rural/urban divide: greening the cities and "developing" the countryside. A rather different, anarchist and decentralist tradition influenced by the writings of Kropotkin also leads in a similar direction. The more "mainstream" garden cities and suburbs movements also sought to combine the best in both rural and urban life.

In sharp contrast to this is a long tradition in the U.K. of valorizing the qualities of rural life in opposition to the squalor, overcrowding, moral and physical degeneracy and poverty of the urban industrial centers. The "rural idyll" has been a powerful presence, especially in English culture, and has been a strong influence in the shaping of rural/urban relations, as well as fuelling a long history of struggles to protect and preserve the countryside from urbanization. For some commentators,

however, this environmentalist defense of the countryside amounts to a defense of privileged lifestyles, depriving the rural poor of the potential benefits of urban industrial development:

> One rapid glance at the composition of the official bodies which can prevent any plans for change by their edicts, the unofficial pressure groups which back them, the leading individual writers who monopolize the subject in the press, will show us who they are: the ever-present ancient establishment, the landed aristocracy, the products of Oxford and Cambridge, the landowners, the officer class, and, behind them, their hangers-on: the trendy academics with less pretensions to gentility who prove their club-worthiness by espousing these élitist views… They loathe an extension of [their] privileges to the majority of the people.

Tension between those in the environmental movement who have actively defended the values of the countryside and the urban-based, anti-elitist mainstream Left has a long history. One way to move beyond it is to realize that by far the greatest threats to the countryside have come, and still come, not directly from urban expansion, but from socio-economic and political dynamics rooted in the countryside itself. Militant struggles and uprisings have punctuated the history of rural Britain since the re-allocation of land ownership that took place after the Norman Conquest in the 11th century. The great peasant revolt of the 14th century, the Digger and Leveller movements that formed part of the popular base for the English revolution of the 17th century, and the 19th century Chartist land campaign are some of the most frequently cited episodes. Enclosure of the common land by big landowners who were increasingly oriented to commercial agriculture and "improvement" provoked recurrent rural class struggles on the part of peasant farmers and rural workers. These conflicts were at their most intense during the 18th century, but continued through the 19th. In England, the turn to commercial agriculture dictated enclosure of the commons, grubbing out of woodlands, draining of the marshes, and, in all, driving both wild nature and the poorer classes of humans from their ancient homes. Direct loss of their land, combined with exclusion from heath, woods and common grazing land forced the rural poor to seek work in the towns as wage-laborers for a growing urban manufacturing industry, which was itself significantly financed by the increasingly capitalist agrarian sector.

These struggles were, of course, class struggles over access to the most basic means of existence, not the "élite" defense of privilege caricatured by Eversley. The English "peasant poet" John Clare began his working life as a rural laborer—a ploughboy, reaper and thresher and jobbing gardener. The intensity of his love of nature is grounded in this practical and sensory dwelling within it, as is the intensity of his hatred of its economically motivated destruction:

> Now this sweet vision of my boyish hours
> Free as spring clouds and wild as summer flowers
> Is faded all—a hope that blossomed free,
> And hath been once, no more shall ever be
> Inclosure came and trampled on the grave
> Of labour's rights and left the poor a slave

But Clare's sympathy is not solely with the rural laborer. It is shared with the plight of the non-human denizens of the woods and heaths:

> Each little tyrant with his little sign
> Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine
> But paths to freedom and to childhood dear
> A board sticks up to notice "no road here"
> And on the tree with ivy overhung
> The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung
> As tho' the very birds should learn to know
> When they go there they must no further go
> Thus, with the poor, scared freedom bade goodbye

> And much they feel it in the smothered sigh
> And birds and trees and flowers without a name
> All sighed when lawless law's enclosure came.
>
> (from *The Mores*)

But enclosures continued through the 19th century, and the class struggles against them came also from urban workers. A classic case was the fight to save Epping Forest, a vast tract of ancient forest bordering the east end of London. The sale by the crown of parts of the Forest to local landowners from 1851 sparked a prolonged battle that was finally won in 1878. The new owners of parts of the Forest had caused outrage by fencing off their properties and cutting down the trees. In 1865 Willingale, a local laborer, broke down some of the fences and was imprisoned. This was the beginning of a campaign that culminated in a mass meeting in 1871 at which it was declared:

> It is not enough that 3,000 acres should have been filched….to make rich men richer and for the benefit of a few capitalists, but now… a slice is being taken off the most accessible portion of open ground in the neighborhood, the playground of hundreds of children and the recreation ground of thousands of smoke dried toilers in our parish….

Later in the same year (and under the explicit influence of the Paris Commune—the model for Marx's vision of proletarian democracy), thousands of workers turned out from the East End of London to a protest meeting addressed by various gentlemen, including the MP for South Essex. Despite calls for order, hundreds joined in with the tearing down of the enclosure fences later that evening. It took a further seven years of combined militant struggle and legal action to secure the Forest for the public—by whom it continues to be enjoyed.

However, the countryside that served to define specifically English identity rarely hinted at these bitter struggles. The great landscape painters of the 18th and 19th centuries depicted a harmonious and domesticated rural scene—sometimes the rolling estates of a proud country gentleman and his family, sometimes a working landscape, in which rural workers appear as picturesque figures, content with their lot. But there was also a very different aesthetic in the Romantic depictions of the wild, remote and sublime upland landscapes of northern Britain—the Lake District and the Scottish Highlands. Here, the poet would wander "lonely as a cloud"—inspired by the solitary experience of oneness with unspoiled "nature." As we shall see, these two sorts of countryside would fare very differently as the competing demands of urbanization, leisure, conservation and agriculture came to be fought out in the 20th century.

Urban Expansion and the Rural Reaction

Nostalgic recollection of the more domesticated but still unregimented English countryside was central to popular representations of English identity at the turn of the 20th century. But this imagined identity was already in sharp contrast to the real human geography of England in the first decades of the 20th century:

> Britain at that time was the most urbanized country in the world. Under a quarter of its people lived in rural districts and a mere seven per cent of its workforce was engaged in agriculture. The great wave of rural immigration into the towns was near its end……..Left to the mercies of the market, unprotected by state subsidies, the Edwardian countryside was economically and socially moribund…

But the very process of urbanization and the new forms of class division it engendered had profound consequences for the countryside. Apart from a brief period after the First World War, agriculture remained in recession, and rural land values fell. Large country estates were broken up, and agricultural land was sold off to builders and speculative developers as never before. Meanwhile,

a rapidly expanding urban middle class together with some of the better paid and economically secure workers realized the aspiration for home ownership and something approaching the rural idyll in the shape of rings of suburban housing that spread out from the edges of the towns and cities in the early decades of the 20th century. During the same period, and increasing in intensity between the two world wars, the relative affluence of this sector of the urban population, the growth of car ownership (one million by 1931), and the gradual spread of the right to an annual holiday brought leisure trips and holidays to coastal resorts and the countryside within their reach.

But many of the poor urban working-class families shared something of the same aspirations. Many were able to move into rented public housing from the 1920s onwards. However, many others took advantage of the continuing agricultural recession and general lack of effective planning controls to stake their own claims to plots of marginal, uncultivated land in the countryside or along the coasts. Land could be bought very cheaply, and in some cases local public authorities themselves bought up land to be divided into smallholdings, but often marginal land was simply occupied without legal title. The "plotlanders" built sizable settlements, especially in southeastern England. These were often ramshackle collections of converted railway carriages, old army huts, wood or asbestos shacks, and more permanent, brick buildings. Some of these settlements were used for leisure visits, but many were permanent residences. It was this proliferation of unregulated settlements that fuelled a growing rural "preservationist" movement in the 1930s.

Under pressure from an alliance of the remnants of the landowning class, local planners, amenity societies, and parliamentary socialists together with influential voluntary organizations, the inter-war years saw the piecemeal spread of local government planning powers over developments in the countryside and along the coastline. The National Trust (originally formed in 1895) played an important role in purchasing "prime" sites of historic or landscape value, while from the mid-1920s the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, or CPRE, (of which the leading *urban* planner Patrick Abercrombie was a leading light) did much to promote the need to defend the beauty of the countryside from urban sprawl. By the late 1930s there was a growing consensus on the need for legal controls over encroachments into the countryside, the idea of "green belts" around urban centers was already being put into practice, and proposals for a network of national parks were on the agenda.

The Mid-20th Century: Planning, Agriculture and the Countryside

In 1937 a government commission was set up to address the whole complex of issues surrounding the geographical distribution of industry and employment, unregulated development in the countryside, urban expansion and agriculture. Its report (the Barlow Report, 1940) was shaped by two themes that had become established through the 1920s and '30s: an inherited deference to the arcadian vision of rural society as harmoniously ordered under traditional relations of dependency and obligation; and a perception, actively promoted by a broad alliance of very disparate forces, that the precious beauty and tranquillity of the English countryside was under unprecedented threat from urbanization, unregulated development, and the escalating demand for leisure access by the urban hordes.

The Barlow Report proposed rigid containment of the major conurbations, especially London, both to preserve the natural, unspoiled character of the countryside in the southeast and to encourage re-location of industry and population to the northern areas where there was high unemployment. The Scott Report (1942) endorsed these recommendations with a strong emphasis on the need (understandable in war time) to prevent further loss of productive agricultural land. Prior to World War II, Britain had imported some 70 percent of its food, especially from Canada,

the USA, Latin America and the Caribbean. The threat to these sources of supply focussed policy on the need for food security and self-sufficiency during the war.

Three major pieces of legislation enacted these perceptions into law soon after the war ended, and they broadly remain in force today as the main legal framework for subsequent economic and social developments in the countryside. The Agriculture Act of 1947 aimed to increase domestic food production by giving economic security and profitability to British agriculture via a tax-financed price-support system. The central purpose of the Town and Country Planning Act, also of 1947, was preservation of the countryside. This Act empowered local authorities to control non-agricultural development in the countryside by the use of local plans. The twin aims of preserving the countryside in the face of urban expansion and fostering agricultural production were to be assured by handing stewardship of the countryside to its traditional occupants: the farmers. The war time acknowledgement of the significance of food security had enabled the main farming organizations—the National Farmers Union (NFU) and Country Landowners Association (CLA)—to acquire an unprecedented role in policy formation. Together with the key department of state with responsibility for rural affairs, MAFF (the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food—memorably referred to by London *Guardian* columnist George Monbiot as the Ministry for Amalgamation of Fact and Fiction) they formed a tight and exclusive policy community, at least until the ministerial reorganization of 2001.

It was this powerful concentration of interests that ensured the exemption of farming itself from the provisions of the 1947 Planning Act. Symptomatic of the power of the farming interest was the subtle distinction in the Act between "land use" and "land management": a change of *use*—e.g. from agriculture to manufacturing, or housing—was within the terms of the planning authorities. However, grubbing out woodland or hedgerows, ploughing up flower-meadows, and draining marshes was a land *management* change, and not subject to planning law. As one commentator has observed: "…farmers were granted a freedom from planning restrictions enjoyed by no other industrial activity."

But the 1947 legislation failed to address either the Romantic aspiration to protect the most sublime and revered parts of the British countryside or the (partially conflicting) requirement to provide for and regulate the escalating demand for leisure use of the countryside from urban populations. The Dower Report (1947) had proposed the designation of a selection of extensive areas of "beautiful and relatively wild country" of national significance as national parks, with the combined purposes of strictly preserving their landscape, wildlife, architectural and historical value, and amply providing for "public open-air enjoyment." Parliament took both aims seriously in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949, which mandated that the provision of open-air recreation should take into account "position in relation to centers of population." Despite this, of the ten national parks actually set up in the wake of the 1949 Act, only two (the Peak District and Yorkshire Dales) were close to large urban populations, and all were located in the northern and western uplands—reflecting the pre-eminence of the Romantic preference for wild, remote and open country (following the U.S. model), rather than providing opportunities for urban workers to benefit from access to "open-air enjoyment." Interestingly, the Act did provide for the "effective maintenance" of farming within the national parks. The upland farming communities were among the most economically marginal in Britain, and their activities in maintaining dry-stone walls and upland pastures were widely seen as essential to retaining the character of the preserved landscapes.

But the 1949 Act offered very little for the lowland landscapes—the ones most accessible to Londoners and the other large urban centers of south and southeast England and the Midlands. Countryside access beyond the very few areas of open, uncultivated countryside was limited to a network of footpaths, to be way-marked and linked, in some cases, into long-distance walking routes

and to be enforced by local authorities. The Act proposed to preserve some of the lowland areas of landscape beauty and historical significance by means of a secondary designation: "Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty" (AONB). The AONBs were to be subject to local authority planning powers but would be given neither the added protection afforded by special legal and administrative provisions nor the national funding allocated to the national parks. Finally, the preservation of wildlife and wildlife habitat as well as research for ecological conservation was the remit of a newly established quango, the Nature Conservancy (subsequently English Nature), alongside the National Parks Commission, which had special responsibility for the national parks. The Nature Conservancy was set up to advise government on issues affecting nature conservation (including what would today be called biodiversity), as well as being empowered to establish National Nature Reserves and designate "Sites of Special Scientific Interest" (SSSIs). These latter were supposed to protect a selection of sites with outstandingly rich or uncommon assemblages of species from unwarranted changes in management. However, this limited encroachment on the property rights of the landowners was somewhat offset by the lack of any legal right on the part of the Nature Conservancy to access the land to establish its "scientific interest," and by the very limited availability of either resources to monitor or powers of enforcement.

Thus, for most of the easily accessible lowland countryside, access was limited, in the main, to following linear routes through the farmed landscape. The 1949 legislation made wildlife and its conservation a matter of "scientific" rather than public interest, and sequestered it from the common gaze in SSSIs and nature reserves. Meanwhile the lowland AONBs, several of which were designated as a "fallback" after the resistance of local farming interests to proposed national park designation, were afforded no more public access than the general farmed countryside.

The Industrialization of Agriculture

This was the legal and policy context within which a "second agricultural revolution" took place, intensifying from the 1960s. For successive governments, an "efficient" and productive agriculture was a central policy objective, partly as a legacy of the powerful agricultural coalition formed during the Second World War, and partly argued on the grounds of continuing (real or imagined) risks of interrupted supplies of imported foods, rising food prices on the world market, or the supposed benefits of expanded food exports for the balance of payments. This policy priority entailed massive public funding for enhancing farm profitability at the same time as introducing a radical technological transformation of agriculture—a technological transformation that, in turn, had profound social, economic and ecological consequences for the countryside.

In addition to the system of generous price supports for agricultural products, up to 75 percent of the costs of agricultural "improvements" were paid for by direct grants and subsidies. These grants were allocated on the basis of their expected efficacy and contribution to farm profitability, without regard to wider economic, social or ecological implications. Farmers also benefited from a wide range of tax concessions. In the context of the exemption of changes in "land management" from planning control, this system of financial incentives drove forward an unprecedented technological transformation.

It became technically feasible and profitable to bring into production large areas of marginal land—steep downland slopes, wetlands, copses, heath and moorland. These were oten the very landscape features that provided important wildlife refuges or were valued by local people as places for picnics, country walks, collecting wild fruits, dog-walking or informal play. Efficient use of agricultural machinery required larger fields and even, regular surfaces. Landscape features were eliminated, hedgerows and woodlands grubbed out, and wet areas drained. At the same time, efficiency was seen to entail greater specialization. Mixed farming went into steep decline, to be

replaced in some areas by intensive and continuous arable (grain) production involving mechanization and high levels of chemical inputs to maintain soil nutrients and to control pest organisms. Elsewhere, intensive regimes of animal "husbandry," also involving high levels of artificial inputs (growth hormones, antibiotics and processed feedstuffs) and scientific-technical expertise replaced the older farming practices.

The success of this drive to agricultural modernization exceeded all expectations: aided by massive subsidies, protection from lower-cost imports, and new, high-yield crop varieties and animal breeds, the productivity of agricultural land and labor rose dramatically. However, it is important to recognize that these changes in the practice of agriculture constitute only the most obvious signs of a wider transformation: the emergence of a newly integrated system of food production, processing and distribution in which farming remains a crucial, but, in economic terms, only a small part. The shift to increasingly capital intensive and specialized farm production entails increased dependence of the farm unit on externally supplied inputs—seed, agricultural machinery, agro-chemicals and animal feed, as well as specialist expertise and techno-scientific knowledge. At the same time farm produce is increasingly subject to contract agreements with large-scale food processing and distribution companies, which, in turn, supply a retail sector increasingly dominated by a small number of supermarket chains.

The state-financed and driven intensification of agriculture is just one element (though a highly visible one) within a wider shift to an agribusiness-dominated system of food production, processing, distribution, and marketing. Within this system, economic power is secured by both horizontal and vertical integration and diversification; a decreasing number of large corporations predominate at each stage in the process, from provision of farm inputs through to product marketing. And these corporations are increasingly transnational. Already by the late 1960s the five largest enterprises controlled 80 percent of the meal and flour market, 70 percent of the market for biscuits, over 90 percent for condensed and evaporated milk, 75 percent of marmalade and jams, and so on. By 1973 Kellogg, Weetabix and National Biscuit Company (Nabisco) between them had acquired 87 percent of the market, and similarly high levels of integration were evident in frozen fish, frozen vegetables, bread, and sugar. By the mid-1980s, vertical integration through the food chain was well established. The Co-operative Wholesale Society, Rank Hovis MacDougall, Union International, Imperial Foods, Spillers, and Booker McConnell were among the major corporations with interests in three or more sectors including agricultural production, animal feeds, wholesaling and retail.

Several features of this emergent agro-industrial sector are worth noting. Although the focus of policy was the transformation of farming, the long-term consequences have been a severe weakening of the economic power of farmers themselves. In the U.K., unlike parts of the U.S., the presence of an already well organized and commercially oriented agricultural sector made the direct agribusiness capture of farming itself unnecessary. In any case, the prospects for increased profitability lay in the provision of inputs and the processing and marketing of farm produce. Increasingly the farmers provided land and labor for a large industrial and commercial sector which took the lion's share of profit.

Commentators on parallel changes in U.S. food production even refer to the "proletarianization" of the farmer, though for reasons just indicated, the general situation in Britain falls far short of this. However, it is important to recognize that it was in the economic interest of the agribusiness corporations to establish commercial and contractual relationships with those farms most able and willing to grow the right crops on the appropriate scale and adopt the methods of cultivation required by the companies. These were the farmers/landowners with large land holdings, particularly in the most climatically and geologically favored parts of lowland Britain: especially East

Anglia, the Southeast and the Midlands. It was these relatively wealthy farmers whose interests predominated in the farming unions and, therefore, in the shaping of MAFF policy. The northern and western uplands had differently structured land ownership, climatic and geological conditions, as well as in some areas rather different policy and economic constraints and opportunities. This was particularly true of small-holding upland sheep farmers, especially those operating in the national parks designated following the 1949 Act.

Several postwar trends that both went alongside and enabled these changes in food production continue to this day. Women were increasingly drawn into waged work, and with it came new patterns of organization of both domestic labor and consumption. In particular, less time is spent in preparing food in the domestic sphere, and basic shopping for food and other routine consumables is carried out by bulk purchases at supermarkets and consumption of processed foods, instead of the more time-consuming practice of visits to a series of more specialist retail outlets. These shifts are, of course, greatly aided by the use of domestic consumer durables such as fridges and freezers.

Also during this long period, large numbers of urbanites inspired by the cultural heritage of the "rural idyll" were able to move from the suburbs to settle in the villages—especially those within relatively easy commuting distance to a nearby urban center or commuter rail link. This process had been in train since the early decades of the 20th century, but it spread rapidly in geographical scope and sheer numbers after WWII in line with the decline of the agricultural labor force and other occupations closely tied to farming. One consequence was a radical change in the social structure of many villages. Previously this was characterized (especially in eastern and southern Britain) by the class division between farmers and farmworkers, but with a strong sense of community among the latter. Now the prime division, socio-culturally, is often between the traditional occupational community of farming and the ex-urban middle-class newcomers and second homeowners. The influx of newcomers held some benefits for the indigenous rural population, but these are generally outweighed by the negative consequences. The rise in house prices excludes many of the indigenous workers from home ownership, while the domination of local planning authorities by landowners and incomers restricts both provision of new public sector housing for rent and rural industrial development. The outcome is that a low-wage rural economy persists, along with pockets of rural poverty, increasing dependence on tied accommodation, and loss of rural services—notably primary health care, local schools, village shops, and public transport.

Public Alarm and the Response of Civil Society

As bearers of the arcadian vision of the countryside, the newcomers also brought with them expectations—close and harmonious rural communities, rural tranquility, and reconnection with "nature": country walks, picnics, beautiful landscapes, wildlife. They were soon to be disappointed: the idyllic rural community was in any case largely mythical, and the "nature" they longed to rediscover was in process of destruction by the grant-aided intensification of agriculture already discussed above. Many of these ex-urbanites played a significant role in the environmental movement that burgeoned from the late 1960s onwards, important sections of which focussed on the socio-ecological consequences of the transformation of agriculture and the food system. Between 1971 and 1990, the Royal Society for Nature Conservation (the umbrella body for the county wildlife trusts) grew from 64,000 members to 250,000; Friends of the Earth from 1,000 to 110,000; the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds from 98,000 to 844,000; Greenpeace U.K. from none to 372,000, the National Trust from 278,000 to 2,032,000…. and so on. Over the same period the membership of the (re-named) Campaign to Protect Rural England doubled from 21,000 to 44,000.

A significant element in this resurgence of civil society activism is a possibly unique element in British culture: the long tradition of intense popular interest in wildlife. Exceeded only by the trade union movement (approximately 7 million members), the environmental movement has become the second largest sector of organized civil society—with an estimated 4 million plus membership by 1990, and still continuing to grow. Environmental campaigners protested at the loss of woods, hedgerows and other landscape features, while ramblers came into sharp conflict with farming interests, partly as a result of the physical obstacles encountered by walkers in the new industrialized landscape, and partly as a result of the aesthetic loss involved in tramping through miles of featureless monoculture. The massive loss of wildlife habitat—flower-rich chalk downland, lowland heath, ancient woodland and wetlands—to industrialized agriculture and urbanization was actively monitored and publicized by Britain's huge reservoir of amateur expertise and enthusiasm, and resulted in widespread popular awareness and concern.

Public disquiet was also mobilized by many other developments. The seeping of agricultural fertilizers into watercourses and groundwater raised concerns about the quality of drinking water and the off-loading of clean-up costs to consumers. Consumers' organizations were alarmed by evidence of the potential toxicity of pesticide residues in foods and even in human mothers' milk. There were the beginnings of opposition to the dietary distortions and excessive control of the agribusiness complex on the food system. Related issues of food safety were propelled into the public limelight by the precipitate acknowledgement by Conservative cabinet minister, Edwina Curry, that most eggs were contaminated by *Salmonella*. Finally, the strong popular British tradition of sympathy for animal welfare was mobilized both by activist exposure of the extreme cruelty of the new intensive animal-rearing regimes and by consumer concerns about the health implications of meat produced by the new "factory" systems. Animal rights and welfare campaigns addressed vivisection labs, zoos, the fur trade and other targets, but their most publicized actions were a series of blockades that they mounted at British ports in the mid-1990s, attempting to stop the export of live farm animals, and a resurgence of opposition to fox-hunting in the shape of direct action "hunt saboteur" militancy.

By the mid-1980s, cracks were beginning to appear in the tight policy community formed by the intimate NFU/CLA/MAFF linkages. The key dynamic of change was the contradictory consequence of the success of the postwar system of agricultural support itself. Agricultural production in Britain and the rest of the EU far outstripped market demand, yielding massive surpluses. These added the extra costs of storage and disposal to the already enormous costs of agricultural grant aid and price support. The dumping of parts of these surpluses on developing countries also came in for justified criticism for undermining those countries' fragile local agricultural sectors. The scandal of surpluses and the escalating costs of the agricultural support system—up to 70 percent of the total EU budget by the mid-1980s—produced an opening in which alternative visions of agriculture and rural life could gain some limited access to the U.K. policy community. The continued existence of small farmers and horticultural producers largely operating outside the new agricultural framework was also significant, and the organic movement, headed by the Soil Association, continued to campaign for a radically alternative approach to the provision of food. Tentative and very limited shifts in EU and U.K. policy in favor of shifting agricultural support from productivism towards environmental stewardship followed, alongside a payments scheme to take land out of cultivation ("set aside"). However, change was slow, the key powerful alliances remained in place, and the "set aside" schemes were designed primarily to address the problem of agricultural surpluses, with little if any consideration for environmental objectives.

A Turning Point?

The election, by a landslide, of a “new” Labour government in 1997 promised to be a potential turning point in agricultural, rural and environmental policy—though, as we shall see, it was also seen as a threat by some interest groups. New Labour was committed to allowing a free vote in the Commons on the long-standing issue of blood sports, notably hunting with dogs. It was (correctly) thought that, given a free vote, members of parliament would ban the sport. New Labour also promised to address the long-standing issue of access to the countryside, with forthcoming “right to roam” legislation. However, there was no challenge to the central dynamic that had transformed the countryside; the commitment to “efficient” agriculture and Britain’s proclaimed international leadership in the field of biotechnology research remained in place.

Alarmed by the prospect of a new government with a large majority and “known to be hostile to the countryside,” an alliance of landowners, rural business and field sports interests was rapidly put together. This “Countryside Alliance” (CA) was able to mobilize 120,000 for a rally in favor of hunting within two months of the Labour victory, and 285,000 (their figures) in early 1998. The CA waged a very effective media campaign, linking fox-hunting with the preservation of “the rural way of life,” estimating the economic importance of the sport in terms of rural employment and pest-control, and even playing the animal welfare lobby at its own game by pleading the welfare interests of the fox-hounds!

However, the dominant motif of the campaign was an image of a rural way of life neither understood nor valued by an urban political elite bent on an illiberal act of suppression. At once, the appeal was to liberal principle and a residual urban nostalgia for rural arcadia. Overlaying the animal welfare concerns of the anti-hunting majority was a perception of hunting as an upper-class pastime—a perception the Countryside Alliance countered by emphasizing the threat to jobs associated with hunting and by linking defense of hunting with support for more working-class rural pursuits, such as angling (which was implausibly held up as the next target of the ignorant urbanites). As a result, opinion poll evidence showed some significant shift of opinion away from the original massive anti-hunting majority in favor of tolerance of an activity that the majority still considered unsavory but not immoral.

Eventually, despite continuing large-scale mobilizations by the Countryside Alliance and efforts on the part of government to avoid confrontation, the great majority of anti-hunting MPs had their way, and hunting with dogs was banned in 2004. In practice, hunting continues much as before, exploiting loop-holes in the law and feeble attempts at enforcement.

Explaining the Countryside Alliance

This episode poses two difficult questions. First, why did such a powerful alliance of landowners and rural elites feel the need to mobilize as an extra-parliamentary oppositional movement? And second, given the long list of rural issues and grievances, how was it possible for a small coterie of rural elites to hegemonize a mass social movement across social classes around the single issue of hunting foxes?

Farmers on the defensive

The first question first—why launch a campaign of public mobilization? Most plausibly, this is a reaction to the weakening political and economic position of farmers in the face of the growth in power of the agribusiness complex and the increasingly globalized character of food production, processing, and distribution. A privileged “insider” position that had been artificially prolonged by the agricultural subsidy regime was increasingly discredited in public eyes both by the recurrent crises of overproduction and by the manifest failure of the system to ensure public health. Public

trust, and with it tolerance of the continued "feather-bedding" of farmers, was further undermined by the now-hegemonic status of the project of neoliberal globalization.

Already on the defensive, it is not surprising that rural elites, the mainstay of rural Conservative Party branches, and the rural English constituencies, greeted the return of a Labour government with alarm. The Labour Party was seen—with some justice—as mainly urban in its popular base, with little understanding of rural issues. The presence within the Party of significant environmental, animal welfare and countryside access pressure groups with widespread popular support seemed to threaten still further inroads into the prerogatives of rural landowners.

Despite the New Labour government's evident unwillingness to mount any serious challenge to ruling-class interests, its election did mark a significant shift in public expectations. What followed was an explosion of public debate, a culmination of concerns steadily mounting throughout the previous period of Conservative rule, about a complex nexus of issues linked in various ways to rural transformation: food safety, diet, the power of agribusiness, new agricultural technologies, the environmental degradation of the countryside, animal welfare and leisure access to the countryside. These were largely the concerns of diverse consumer and environmental movements, predominantly middle-class, and mainly urban in occupation, if not residence.

Public alarm over the risk of *Salmonella* poisoning from genetically uniform and intensively reared poultry was soon to be amplified by a new revelation. The pursuit of "efficiency" in livestock rearing had led to the recycling of inedible waste from cow and sheep products. Rendered and baked, this material re-entered the food-chain as a high-protein animal feed. By late 1986, concern was growing about a new, fatal disease affecting cattle, "mad cow disease," or bovine spongiform encephalopathy. This closely resembled the sheep disease, "scrapie," and brains of deceased cattle showed similar lesions. Animal feed containing processed animal byproducts was soon identified as the source of infection, and it seemed likely that the rogue prion proteins suspected as the causal agents had acquired the ability to jump from sheep to cattle. The government responded with a ban on the suspect animal feed, but the disease continued to show up on farms throughout the country. Meanwhile, the government's medical officer of health reassured the public that there was negligible risk to human health, and agriculture minister John Selwyn Gummer staged a publicity stunt happily feeding a beefburger to his young daughter.

Despite its public reassurances, the government introduced a ban on the entry of sheep and cattle offal into the human food chain as a precaution, though it later turned out that this ban was largely ignored. Widespread skepticism about official reassurances both in Britain and abroad was already having a significant effect on meat sales when, on March 20, 1996 the Conservative health minister made the fateful announcement that ten cases of a new form of fatal and incurable human brain disease, vCJD, had been diagnosed. The government, with virtually complete compliance from the media, framed the issue as one of protecting the interests of the British livestock industry from a German-led conspiracy to ban U.K. exports. However, there could be no disguising the scale of the risk, not only from infected meat already released into the human food chain, but also from the great range of non-meat products containing traces of potentially infected material, from children's sweets through to medical serum and blood for transfusions.

Just five years later, in early 2001, recollections of the BSE crisis were re-awakened by a new rural trauma. In late February, the disease "foot-and-mouth" (FMD) was diagnosed in a sheep flock in Essex. Emergency measures were very rapidly applied, with a ban on movement of farm animals, and very soon afterwards, a near total ban on visitors to the countryside. Simultaneously, a draconian policy of mass slaughter of livestock was enforced. Night after night television screens showed images reminiscent of holocaust, as over 4 million animals were slaughtered, incinerated, or, when

the capacity of the incinerators was exceeded, consigned to mass burial. Already, by March 2001, the government was beginning to recognize the impact of its policy of exclusion on rural non-farming businesses, but even when the policy was relaxed, the horrific images of mass slaughter and pyres dissuaded many potential visitors from returning to the countryside. A "Rural Task Force" set up by government on March 14, 2001discovered the scale of the impact of the anti-FMD measures on the non-farming rural economy. The loss to non-farming businesses far outstripped that suffered by farmers, bringing into the open a new recognition of the importance to the rural economy of tourism, rambling and other leisure activities. The continuing power of the established policy community was shown in the contrast between the full compensation paid to the farmers, and the provision of a limited "rural recovery fund" for non-farming businesses However, the implications were clear: the mutual identification of farming and the countryside was no longer viable. One outcome of this recognition was the disbandment of MAFF and its replacement by a new, more broadly based, rural affairs ministry after the 2001 general election.

Meanwhile, the combination of popular and scientific dismay at growing evidence of the catastrophic effects of agricultural intensification on wildlife habitat gained new institutional support in the shape of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity, one of the key outcomes of the Rio "Earth Summit" in 1992. Despite the well-rehearsed shortcomings of this agreement, it did enable conservation organizations in Britain to construct and publicize a national biodiversity action plan, subsequently devolved so that each county now has its own variant of the plan. These plans have provided a focus for amateur organizations, sometimes working alongside the government's own advisory bodies, to identify species and habitats at risk, mobilize opposition to adverse planning proposals, and agitate for designation of important sites for conservation. Dramatic declines in populations of familiar farm and garden birds and butterflies, in particular, have been evidenced by regular surveys carried out by many thousands of members of the public (for example, 400,000 participants in a recent garden bird survey), and given extensive publicity by the national media. Again, the finger has been pointed at the role of industrialized agriculture, as well as development pressures.

Relatedly, the agitation for countryside access has continued, with local government now having a positive role in rural planning (as against the more negative one of simply preventing urban expansion and the loss of agricultural land). Increasingly, local authorities have sought to both encourage and regulate countryside access by enforcing public rights-of-way and setting up country parks, usually within reach of urban populations. While encouraging countryside access, these measures also seek to constrain it, directing it away from agricultural land, while, within the country parks, providing visitor centers, marked trails and the like to protect ecologically sensitive habitats. These provisions have certainly offered some benefits, but they fall far short of the aims of the long labor movement rambling traditions symbolized by the mass trespasses on the upland moors of the 1930s and actions like the conquest of Epping Forest, mentioned above. The issue had become still more acute as a result of the Conservative privatization of the water authorities and the selling off of some 600,000 acres of Forestry Commission land to private owners. These privatizations had led to hotly disputed exclusions of public access over huge areas of open land and woodland that had previously been positively encouraged.

Once in office, New Labour found itself in the embarrassing position of having a manifesto commitment to legislate in favor of public access to uncultivated open land. Despite government foot-dragging (as with hunting), this time after some three years of prevarication, back-bench pressure led eventually to legislation, in the year 2000. Of course, the Act could be understood as regulating and controlling access as much as offering new rights, but a key feature was the formal acknowledgement of public uses of large areas of land formerly under the exclusive control of the landowners.

So, an initial weakening of the economic and political power of farmers resulted from transformations in the food system that they had themselves played an important part in promoting. This, in turn, provided both the impetus and opportunity (occasioned by the change of government) for a series of pre-existing concerns, campaigns and pressures to coalesce, both claiming, and in some cases winning, a stake in the formation of rural policy. The formation of the Countryside Alliance can be understood in this context, then, as a rearguard action in the face of an accurate perception of this situation of multiple threats to the economically and politically privileged position of the wealthier farmers.

Why was support for fox-hunting such an effective rallying cry?

But how was a small élite in the Countryside Alliance capable of constructing and hegemonizing a distinct "rural identity" around support for blood sports? On the face of it, this is not what the CA is about. Its policy commitments are broad, and predictably include support for farmers and defense of "country pursuits." But their policy objectives also include support for new business enterprises in the countryside, provision of housing and jobs for local people, support for "vital rural services," environmental sustainability, local democracy, and preservation of the beauty and wildlife of the countryside. Although the CA's formulation of these objectives emphasizes the traditional claims of the existing landowners as stewards of what is taken to be a still beautiful and wildlife-rich countryside, there is at the same time a clear acknowledgement of the persistence of rural poverty and unemployment, shortage of affordable housing, and the loss of services.

In seeming to address these class issues, the CA is at least attempting to incorporate and enlist the support of increasingly neglected, marginalized and resentful sections of the rural population: the remnants of the indigenous rural working class and other sectors disadvantaged by agricultural change and the social transformation of the village. While there is certainly evidence of the use of economic and political power by landowners in mobilizing employees and other subordinates for the big public demonstrations, the hegemonic strategy clearly won the "active consent" of many more. Above all, decades of neglect of rural class issues on the part of the Labour Party had left a political vacuum which the CA could now seek to fill.

But in practice the CA barely related to these broader issues at all. Its website offers an interesting record. Of the items that mention a particular issue, 81 concern hunting with dogs, six shooting (including advocacy of game as food), five angling, one countryside access, and three for all other issues combined (two of these refer to a competition for rural retailers and one mentions advice on avian "flu"). Not a word about housing, rural services, wildlife conservation, landscape or jobs (except of the jobs of the workers employed by the hunt). The contradiction between the professed policy concerns of the CA and its campaigning activity could not be clearer. Indeed, it was the power of the landowners in the rural local authorities that had been mostly to blame for obstructing development in the countryside in the first place! But the absence of active campaigning not only on rural class issues but also on the core economic demands of the farming community itself is interesting.

It may be that the hunting issue had a symbolic role as somehow evoking a universally shared nostalgia for the rural idyll, but the shift of focus on the part of at least some landowners, many of whom are not themselves directly engaged in farming but derive their income from leasing the land to tenant farmers, may indicate a growing recognition that the decline of national consensus on food security and "agricultural fundamentalism" in relation to the countryside has opened the way to a new policy agenda and field of political contestation. This is suggested by the fact that a significant reconstruction of the government ministries with responsibility for rural matters—the

setting up of the Food Standards Agency independent of MAFF, and then the abolition of MAFF itself, and its replacement with a new Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)—was strongly supported by the CA despite the implied opening up of the rural development and land use policy community. There is also some evidence that rural support for the CA itself is very uneven geographically—strong where farm-related employment remains dominant, but much more limited in lowland areas where newcomers comprize a larger proportion of the rural population.

Red-Green Possibilities?

At present questions about land use planning, food production and consumption, wildlife protection, countryside access and rural/urban relations are open to public contestation to an extent not experienced since the Second World War. The situation is therefore very fluid, with some opportunities, but also considerable risks, for advancing some of the objectives of a red-green vision of rural/urban relationships.

There are some grounds for limited optimism: widespread public skepticism about the consequences of agricultural intensification and official reassurances about new agricultural biotechnologies; growing public pressure for access to open land and evidence of the economic significance of rural tourism; and the popular interest in wildlife alongside shifts in the legal and regulatory provisions for biodiversity conservation.

Public confidence in the safety of high-tech food production systems and in official reassurances was already at a low ebb when, in the late 1990s, pressure on government to allow the commercial release of genetically modified crop plants became a public issue. In the face of international pressure from the WTO, the U.S. and other countries, both the EU and U.K. decided on temporary moratoria on the commercial release of GMOs pending the outcome of scientific trials, designed with the direct involvement of some environmental organizations. But in the event, more radical environmental groups and local populations were unwilling to await the outcome of the "scientific" trials, and as the location of trial plots was revealed, local coalitions took to direct action to destroy them. One *cause celebre* was the trial of Greenpeace activists (including the large landowner and then head of U.K. Greenpeace, Lord Melchet), who admitted damaging the crop but succeeded in convincing the jury that their actions were motivated by concern for the public interest.

Just before the release of the final report on the trials, in 2003, the government (whose successive manifestos have expressed strong commitment to the biotech industry) launched a program of public debate, involving local public meetings at which both sides of the argument were to be heard. In fact, this badly backfired, and the meetings were overwhelmingly opposed to GM, mirroring national opinion surveys. The evidence was that the more people were familiarized with the issues, the more opposed they became. The national print media took up the issue, with predictably strong opposition to GM from the middle-of-the road *Independent* newspaper, but also an intense campaign against "Frankenstein foods" being sustained by the virulently reactionary *Daily Mail,* partly in terms of its opposition to domination of the food chain by the multinationals! With opposition from right, left and green, and opinion polls showing 80 to 90 percent opposition, the big retailers declared themselves GM-free. This was highly significant, as it undermined the commercial case for GM food. In the event, the outcome of the field trials was that cultivation of two of the GM crops did show damage to biodiversity, while the third (GMH maize) was more favorable: but only because the conventional comparator crop was treated with a pesticide so toxic that it was soon to be banned!

Despite all this, the government (having sacked its reputedly anti-GM environment minister, Michael Meacher) decided to allow the commercial release of GM maize. Soon afterwards, with clear evidence of the unmarketability of its product, the manufacturer withdrew the application. Of course, this success story represents only one limited, short-term victory, and attempts both to introduce GM organisms and to shift public opinion on the related issues continue. Nevertheless, a deeper public understanding of the contradictions of intensive agriculture and of the attempts to find "technological fixes" for them has been gained through these campaigns. Continued public skepticism one is reason for thinking that determined advocacy for radical change in the food system could find wide public support.

Although the GM crop trials addressed the issue of the environmental implications of GM technology, in fact the greater public concern was with food safety. Consumers' organizations and the food retailers were clearly a very powerful force throughout the campaign. Following the animal welfare agitations of the 1990s, there has been a significant shift in the direction of vegetarianism, and generalized disquiet about intensive agriculture and "factory farming" has had two important effects. One has been the very rapid growth in demand for organic produce. This has been aided by the advocacy of the Soil Association, which obtained an increased public profile through its opposition to GM. However, government funding for conversion to organic is very limited, and escalating demand for organic produce is now being met largely by imports as well as being increasingly colonized by the corporate sector. The second effect has been in favor of the very rapid spread of farmers' markets, linking producers directly to consumers and eliminating the environmental costs of long-distance transportation.

In the European academic debate, some have enthusiastically proclaimed these initiatives as the emergence of a "new paradigm" (AAFNs—Alternative Agro-food Networks), challenging the dominant model of agricultural "modernization." This approach notes a shift of consumers away from industrial foods in favor of "quality" and associated shifts of farming towards organic and low-external-input systems, closer links between consumers and producers (SFSCs—Short Food Chain Supplies), and "multi-functional farm enterprises." However, optimism about these trends needs to be qualified, as Goodman argues:

> Case-studies of AAFNs/SFSCs do not systematically engage issues of power within the farm enterprise, as variously configured by social relations of production, domestic labor, gender relations, and patriarchal property structures.

There is also little attention in this literature to how these trends might mitigate wider problems of rural poverty, low wages and social exclusion. Currently, the shift to "quality" is confined to a minority of relatively affluent consumers, and its spread is very uneven geographically. If the AAFNs are to fully challenge the industrialized system, they are likely to face strategic dilemmas as the corporate sector seeks to co-opt them into its own operations, as is already happening with organics. This is clearly an area of policy development where a red-green approach could have much to offer.

Other issues in the increasingly salient "politics of food" include the growth of concern about both the impact of subsidized food exports on food systems of "developing" countries and the converse problem of import restrictions. The rapid take-up of "fair trade" goods is one expression of this, and promotes a desirable consciousness on the part of consumers of the conditions of life of "developing" country producers. However, there are tensions here relating to the environmental cost of international food transfers and the diversion of agricultural production away from local subsistence. Current concerns about the harmful consequences of increased consumption of highly processed food, rising rates of obesity, and "food culture," most notably in the recently publicized issue of school meals, are growing.

Wildlife conservation is another area of policy conflict, in which there are at least three discernable trends with implications favorable to a feasible red-green intervention. First, it is now recognized by many conservationists that the post-WWII strategy of designating selected areas of high biodiversity interest as SSSIs and nature reserves has been of limited value. Hampered by landowners' property rights, these isolated patches of land have also suffered from the intensification of agriculture on surrounding landscapes. Secondly, the main conservation organizations have become politicized, encouraging public access to nature reserves, promoting public education on conservation issues, and popular participation in wildlife monitoring. And, third, there is a much greater understanding of the importance of *urban* open spaces, "waste land," ex-industrial sites, parks and gardens, as crucial wildlife refuges, if we are to prevent further catastrophic loss of plant and animal species. The deeply entrenched cultural association of "nature" with "countryside" is now under challenge as never before, and the significance of urban ecology is increasingly being emphasized by key conservation organizations.

Finally, despite New Labour's attempts at backsliding, the recent countryside access legislation does represent a significant advance in breaching the landowners' monopoly of rights over open land. Moreover, there has been increasing recognition, intensified by the foot-and-mouth episode, of the importance to local rural economies of small-scale services for visitors: rural tourists, ramblers and others seeking rural leisure activities. Not only does this call into further question the "agricultural fundamentalism" that has governed postwar policy-making for the countryside, but it draws attention to the possibility of new sources of profits from rural land ownership other than farming. It seems likely that the key aim of the Countryside Alliance has been to pre-empt growing demand for informal countryside access in defense of the landowners' continued, and potentially profitable, control over non-agricultural uses of the land. Since a large proportion of U.K. farmers are tenants of big landowners, a division of interests between farmers and landowners may be emerging over just this range of issues.

However, there is no guarantee of any progressive outcomes from recent shifts in the economic and political situation of agriculture. In the short term, the transfers of agricultural subsidy to environmental stewardship may lead to some degree of restoration of landscape values and wildlife habitat, but this is likely to coexist with increased intensification of the majority of cultivated land. In the longer term, reduced acreage devoted to industrialized production of food crops is likely to lead to landowners seeking more profitable ways of exploiting the remainder of their land. This has already taken place, with greatly increased acreage devoted to equally unsustainable industrial crops such as oil-seed rape (to supply government sponsored demand for biofuels). But elsewhere we are likely to see an acceleration of current trends such as conversion to golf courses, "heritage" centers, shooting, angling or horseriding, with associated charges for access and use of services. The non-agricultural landscape that may well result is likely to be one in which open, informal access is denied to all but small designated sites, while access to commercially oriented landholdings will be highly regulated and open only to those who can afford admission prices or subscriptions.

Meanwhile the complex and largely ignored issue of rural poverty may be to some extent alleviated by provision of non-agricultural jobs, though many of these are likely to be low-wage, seasonal occupations, while the problems of lack of rural services, affordable housing and transport remain unaddressed. In fact, despite climate-change-inspired rhetoric about the importance of shifts to public transport, New Labour policies encourage ever-higher fares and insufficient investment in services in the privatized system.

Rural housing is perhaps the most difficult and controversial issue of all. Government policy is to stimulate a massive expansion of house-building—some 4 million new homes—concentrated

particularly in the already densely populated Southeast and the Midlands. Their argument is that to address the issue of homelessness and the exclusion of large sectors of the population from home ownership, house prices must come down—hence the policy of expanding production to meet evident demand in the Southeast. Unsurprisingly, where large-scale new building is proposed in open countryside, it has been met with powerful "NIMBY" resistance. One response of government has been to hint at new policies to reverse the postwar planning consensus in favor of protecting greenbelt land. As well as holding great potential for developers, this proposed change of planning designation promises huge windfall profits for affected landowners. Oil giant BP, for example, is set to make an estimated £10 billion from development of 3,700 acres of greenbelt land it bought in the 1970s for £1 million.

Resistance has come from rural local authorities, who are strongly supported by the Campaign to Protect Rural England. However, the issues posed by the housing crisis for a progressive green politics are very complex. Resistance is painted by New Labour as one of elite rural protectionism versus demand for a basic urban-rooted need for access to the housing market. However, this relies on three false assumptions: that lifting the lid off commercial house building is the only way to address the issue of homelessness; that this strategy is likely to resolve the issue of homelessness; and that protection of open spaces close to urban populations is of interest only to rural elites. The current government promotion of private sector housing lacks the concern with the geographical balance of development that motivated the postwar Labour government's planning policy. New Labour's quasi-religious celebration of market forces and hostility to the public sector rules out both effective direction of rural development to areas where it is most needed and the sort of commitment to the provision by local authorities of public sector housing that could guarantee secure and low-priced access to homes.

But there also is a serious problem with the CPRE's constant pressure in favor of so-called "brownfield" development as its main bulwark against development in "greenfield" sites. This is a planning priority that is accepted by government itself, and it is a residue of the arcadian view of the countryside as identical with "nature." As we have seen, large parts of "the countryside" have been deeply aesthetically and ecologically degraded, and there is a new appreciation of the value of urban open spaces. Paradoxically, many of the most species-rich and accessible of these are existing so-called "brownfield" sites, now first on the list for release to the developers. The currently most controversial, and increasingly contested case of this is the government sponsored "Thames Gateway" project to build 250,000 new houses and associated industrial and commercial developments from East London eastwards along the Thames estuary. Formerly perceived as dilapidated and unsightly "waste land," a mosaic of patches of old grassland, worked-out quarries, former oil installations and ex-industrial sites are scattered within and between a series of urban settlements on both banks of the Thames. These sites are, in fact, much appreciated open spaces for unregulated leisure activities such as dog-walking, bike-scrambling, bird-watching and courting as well as providing play areas for children and teenagers. More recently it has been recognized that they contain some of the richest assemblages of wildlife in Britain and northern Europe. Notwithstanding widespread opposition, the unaccountable quango established by New Labour to drive the project forward is continuing to do just that.

A promising way forward for a red-green approach to some of these issues would be the building of coalitions around the defense of public "ownership" of urban and "semi-urban" open spaces, allotments, parks and "waste land" through monitoring of the local planning process, participation in management, and promotion of free access. These are places (so far as much of lowland England is concerned) where ecological and wildlife diversity is concentrated, and where protection of them coincides most closely with the amenity needs and leisure activities of the majority urban population.

For a longer-term vision of a sustainable city, see Bill Hopwood and Mary Mellor's contribution.