

# Locating the “Country” in Town and Country Planning: the Urban Bias in English Planning<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper documents the development of English planning legislation and the fallacy that reliance on agriculture would successfully replace proactive planning policies in rural England. It discusses the effect of affluent urban tourists and migrants into rural locations, seeking to perpetuate the traditional perception of the rural idyll, without recognising the intrinsic needs of those who rely on local-based employment and development.

The paper argues that planning as a formal practice of government in England has perpetuated an urban bias and a prejudice against the socio-economic needs of the rural population. Prejudice and bias is exhibited through the goals of planners, the policies they create, and the modes of operation and implementation they undertake. Yet, although these elements provide useful reference points from which to trace an urban bias in planning, this paper delves deeper, to the root causes of urban bias, and its evolution from attitudinal and cultural prejudices, to form structural frameworks which, in ignorance of the economic and physical developmental needs of the countryside population, perpetuate the original cultural and attitudinal prejudices.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been produced with the financial support of the FIG Foundation.

# Locating the “Country” in Town and Country Planning: the Urban Bias in English Planning

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*“Planning is constantly seeking to assess the merits of development against the demands of conservation. However, in making such assessments it is not neutral: it has its own goals, policies and modes of operation.” (Murdoch & Abram 2002, p.3)*

The currency and necessity of this debate cannot be denied. House-building in England has fallen to historic lows, with reports of a “yawning gap” between supply and demand, especially in the south east of England (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2002). This has led to rising pressure on house prices, so that “in 46 of the 87 unitary councils outside London an income of more than £30,000 is required to buy a home with a 95% mortgage,” (Weaver 2002) a figure that is out of reach to those on an “average” household income of £24,960. What is becoming increasingly clear is that more housing is needed. However, it is the location of the house-building that is at issue. When the Royal Town Planning Institute proposed, in 2002, a review of green belt policy (that peri-urban region which divides the urban from the rural), its proposal for a more proactive, modernised and less crude form of urban management was met with vociferous and polemical opposition.

This is only one example of many factors contributing to the growing “rural question”. Add to it the recent bout of food scares, such as BSE and Foot & Mouth Disease, and it appears that British rural areas are in a state of urgent crisis. However, it is important to note that this sense of urgency is in reaction to relatively recent threats against *urbanism*, and to the UK urban economy - in the shape of an overheated housing market and threats to consumer health - and not direct threats to the rural economy. Although currently presented as a rural crisis by the media, the rural economy has in fact been gradually eroded by fifty-five years of dogmatic adherence to protectionist, centrist and agricultural fundamentalist ideologies. Through an improved understanding of how urban bias exists and operates, both structurally and attitudinally, in UK planning, this paper seeks to explain the core reasons why rural problems have gone unchecked for so long.

### 1.1 The Theoretical Context of “Urban Bias”

The theory of urban bias is not a new one, however its application within the context of British planning is limited. The post-war *Annales* school of French historiography noted that “an unconscious urban bias has been one of the persistent defects of both liberalism and Marxism”. (Goldfrank 2000 p.162) A number of theorists have since taken the urban bias theory forward, in an effort to understand better the complex interrelations that exist between urban and rural populations and their economic activity.

Urban bias theory was first applied in this way in relation to developing countries by Lipton in 1977, who deduced that vulnerability to famine was often due to biased government policies, which favoured urban elites and consequently discriminated against those living in rural areas.

*“The rural sector contains most of the poverty, and most of the low-cost sources of potential advance; but the urban sector contains most of the articulateness, organisation and power. So the urban classes have been able to “win” most of the rounds of struggle with the countryside.” (ibid., p.13)*

Lipton (*ibid.*) identified how a structural imbalance of power, away from peripheral, predominantly rural areas, towards urban political and commercial centres led to an explicit imbalance in resource allocation, and drove an implicit deficit in the field of policy making.

*“Many governments have . . . tended to look at rural and urban development as separate issues rather than as closely related issues.” (UN Economic & Social Council 2001, p.2)*

Another theorist, Chambers (1983, 1993, 1997), developed the theory of urban bias in a second, tangential, but related route. His findings reveal that, prior to becoming structural, the root of much urban bias was primarily attitudinal, and influenced by the cultural background and experience of the individual. In his view, policy-makers, academic researchers, economic and political representatives are overwhelmingly educated within urban-based educational establishments, where “prolonged professional conditioning has built biases of perception deep into many of those concerned with rural development.” (Chambers 1983, p.6) These professionals also operate within a marketplace in which they are inclined to “respond to the pulls of central location, convenience, opportunities for promotion, money and power,” (*ibid.*, p.171) all of which imply urban employment. This leads to a situation where theoretical frameworks are established in and for urban areas, many of which are alien to and discordant with rural contexts.

As Lassey remarks of rural planning in North America:

*“The rural regions have not (at least until very recently) been overtly recognised as having distinctively different characteristics and planning requirements. The consequence of this urban bias has been a serious neglect of professional preparation for planning in rural regions.” (Lassey 1977, p.9)*

In analysing the structural and attitudinal components of urban bias in UK planning, this paper therefore expands on the work of these early studies.

## **2. CONTEXT OF A STRUCTURAL URBAN BIAS - THE LEGACY OF 1947**

### **2.1 The Urban Image of “Rural”**

“From ancient times to the present day, attitudes to the countryside have been shaped by a response which we can term the pastoral.” (Short 1991, p.8). This tendency to colour rural

areas with near mythological features of "goodness" and "virtue" is especially prevalent in England.

*"The contrasting image of the evil city dominated by the love of money, a moral cesspit [is] to be contrasted with the fresh air, moral purity and good life of the country... The myth has increased in potency as urbanization and modernization have continued apace." (ibid., p.31)*

British planning has its roots in the late-nineteenth century, yet it formally emerged in the mid twentieth century, following on closely from two world wars - a period of enormous social upheaval in the UK. Throughout the conflict, rurality became "the scene of national harmony, peace and stability, to be contrasted with the conflict, strife and change of the present; it [became] the container of national identity and the measure of social change." (*ibid.*, p.34). However:

*". . . the tendency of the English to idealize rural life is not new. It is connected with a literary tradition of pastoral poetry and art that has an almost uninterrupted history of over two thousand years in Western European culture. It is rooted in the Arcadian ideal of the identity between nature and civilisation, but its precondition is, above all, a latent conflict between town and country". (Newby 1979, p.15)*

It was perhaps inevitable then that when the revered rural became challenged by unrestrained urban growth the impulsive reaction would be to restrict urbanism and protect rural areas.

Centrism, urban containment and rural protectionism have therefore a long heritage within the English psyche. Although these concepts were once deemed supportive of rural well-being, and institutionalised as such, they have since proved economically and socially destructive, and prejudicing against the potentially beneficent aspects of development and decentrism. Newby (1979, p. 19) notes how the strongest adherents of protectionist concepts, "the English middle class", has concentrated "on rural aesthetics rather than rural economics". Meades (2002, p. 1) provides a similar perspective:

*"The supreme importance of the picturesque is a national bane. It has us all in its thrall. It militates against an understanding of the rurality."*

This overwhelming concern with rural aesthetics and ignorance of rural economics is central to urban bias, which prejudices rural policy to the aspirations of an urban class.

As a result, for the past fifty-five years, the countryside has been protected "for its own sake" (DoE 1998), "because it defined and reflected Englishness" (Murdoch 1996, p.141), even when evidence has been mounting that protectionist and conservationist policies are contributing to the stagnation of an increasingly destabilised rural economy. An investigation revealed that:

*". . . nine in ten people agree that society has a moral duty to protect the countryside for the future and the same number agree that the countryside should be protected at all costs. . . . people benefit from "just knowing it is there", even if they have little or no physical contact with the countryside." (Countryside Agency 1997, p.3)*

The danger is that the ambitions of urban voters for a preserved landscape, which is generally experienced in a superficial, visual manner, displaces the deeper socio-economic requirements made of the land by the resident rural population. (Cullingworth & Nadin 2002, p.273) As Lubbock puts it:

*“The countryside is sacrosanct: Nature has become our God, ecology our religion, and a new theocracy of platonic guardians is stealthily preparing to take over political control from our imperfect democratic institutions by scaring us with an environmental doomsday.”* (Lubbock 2002, p.3)

Hewison portrays:

*“a country obsessed with its past and unable to face its future... Hypnotised by images of the past, we risk losing all the capacity for creative change.”* (Hewison, 1987, p.43)

In many ways, it is these “ideological hang-ups which will end up doing us grievous economic and social harm” (Hall, 2002), and preclude more pragmatic approaches to the management of land resources in the UK. However, the original framework of the current Town and Country Planning system, based almost entirely on the unquestioning belief in the benefits of rural protectionism and the primacy of agricultural fundamentalism, continues to persist.

## **2.2 Moves towards Planning**

Planning was established as a reaction to the industrial processes associated with urbanism - increased migration, escalating urban populations and rationalised production (Rydin 1993). New centripetal forces were driving unprecedented growth of urban areas, which were in turn challenging the classical connotations of English ruralism. Some form of management was needed to resolve the ideological challenges that urbanism posed on the ingrained rural ideal. As a result, the rise of planning became concordant with the rise of urbanism.

Urbanism was generally thought to be unnatural and antithetical to the “goodness” of ruralism, partly because planning at government level developed from radical public health and housing policies. For example, the 1845 Royal Commission on the State of Large Towns equated urbanism with disease and danger, and prescribed large-scale demolition of slums, and the subsequent displacement of large numbers of people. The question as to where these people were to be housed informed the new theories of urban management, distinguished by the Garden City work of Ebenezer Howard. From the early days of planning, a great emphasis was therefore placed “on raising the standards of *new* development.” (Cullingworth & Nadin 2002, p.15)

However, the principle of planning legislation was not simply driven by the need for improved built environments. Secondary, but no less importantly, was the axiom that the countryside must be preserved from urban encroachment. There were three separate strands to this principle: the preservation of rural land for urban amenity; the preservation of “rural

character” on behalf of the rural community; and the protection of rural agricultural production for the benefit of the whole nation.

*“By the late 19th Century, . . . public concern with the countryside was evidenced in the number of societies formed around these issues.” (Rydin 1993, p.21)*

These include the Commons, Footpaths and Open Space Society of 1865, the 1889 Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty of 1895.

Just as these organisations continue to garner their membership from the burgeoning middle-class, so they originally espoused urban middle-class aspirations and fears. Their fundamental concern was with an audio-visual, picturesque rural experience; open fields to look at, birds to listen to, buildings to visit. Concerns over possible threats to the rural economy were notably absent. Rural amenity, experienced audio-visually, was deemed a healthy antidote to the alienating urban experience, and, in a precursor to formal green belt policy, meant that proximate rural areas adjoining towns and cities should be preserved for the benefit of urbanites.

Another driver for a preserved rural ”character”, was again orchestrated largely by urban interests. According to Hall *et al.*, (1973 p. 49)

*“Patrick Abercrombie and a few others set up the Council for the Preservation of Rural England [CPRE] in 1925... [they] immediately began to wage a ceaseless war, under Abercrombie’s chairmanship, against the invasion of the countryside by speculative building, and quickly built up a position as a force to be respected.”*

Once again, the war against the city was not being fought on socio-economic grounds, by rural inhabitants themselves, but by self-elected urban representatives “primarily concerned to protect the countryside on more explicitly aesthetic grounds.” (Murdoch 1996, p.141). In a neat articulation of middle class idealisation of the British countryside, which the CPRE continues to pursue: “the town should indeed be frankly artificial, urban; the country natural, rural.” (Abercrombie quoted *ibid.*, p.141)

It was assumed that agriculture was somehow symbiotic with ruralism, and that it would, by its very nature, continue to provide the essential pastoral service of land husbandry, while also physically limiting urban growth and providing a central core for the rural economy. This assumption was backed up by a powerful farming lobby, a “. . . dominant force in the coalition for urban planning controls.” (*ibid.*, p.19)

This “unholy alliance” between farmers and the middle class invoked the “fateful fallacy . . . that the ”traditional rural way of life” was beneficial to all rural inhabitants.” (Newby 1979, p.239) As a result, the improvement of agriculture as the sole *raison d’etre* of the countryside” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, p.199) informed the architects of the Town and Country Planning Act five years later, and

*“ . . . in a classic example of regulatory capture, agricultural uses such as farm buildings, fences and hedgerow grubbing were exempt from the planning permissions which were standard for other developments.” (Pennington 1996, p.19)*

### **2.3 The Legacy of the 1947 Legislation**

This assumptiveness of the 1947 legislation has contributed to a number of lasting legacies. Primarily, it revealed a lack of understanding and degree of shortsightedness concerning rural needs that was to become characteristic of rural planning. By 1947, agricultural intensification and industrialisation was already evident, yet it was assumed that the sector was immune to the full extent of modernisation and industrialisation advancing through every other sector. For example, the single dissenting, yet ignored, voice of the 1942 Scott Committee, the economist Professor S R Dennison, argued “that a prosperous agriculture did not necessarily mean a large traditional agriculture.” (Hall *et al.* 1973, p.51) In fact, as Newby (1979, p. 239) states:

*“ . . . the rural poor had little to gain from the crucial committees which evolved the planning system from the late 1940s onwards. Consequently the 1947 Act framed the objectives of rural planning in terms of the protection of an inherently changeless countryside and a consensual ”rural way of life” that overlooked important social differences within the rural population.”*

Thereby the reality of change, and a flexibility to cater for it, was denied from the outset.

One of the greatest failures of the legislation was that it provided no contingency should “the disastrous consequences of a subsidised, mechanised agriculture” become a reality. (Pennington 1996, p.20) Instead it established a self-perpetuating conceptual framework and rationale that has proved inflexible in its adherence to protectionism and centrism through agricultural primacy. Even as agriculture has rescinded its central role in many rural areas, leaving a vacuum at the heart of rural planning, the framework has proved both unable and unwilling to respond with proactive measures to fill the void.

The chief legacy of 1947 is therefore that rural planning has become “. . . primarily about containing the spread of the urban, in order to maintain a national treasure (the countryside for the preservationists) and a national resource (agricultural land for food production)” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, p.198). Thus,

*“protection of the countryside has . . . been institutionalised and become part of the rationale of the State.” (Murdoch 1996, p.142)*

Furthermore, by establishing agricultural primacy, the architects of the 1947 legislation effectively abdicated planning responsibility for more than 50% of the UK land mass. Thereafter planners would be precluded from the direct management of rural areas, and instead find their focus irrevocably trained on urban issues. The removal of this ”white land” from the development landscape also led to the creation of a perpetual, artificial land crisis,

“a figment of the imagination”, (Lubbock 2001, p.3) that “we must save land” (Hall, 2001, p.101) which continues to distort effective land-use thinking to this day. (Newby 1979)

Twenty four years have passed since Newby wrote these words, and rural issues have become ever more complicated, yet the ageing framework of rural planning has remained as crude and unresponsive as ever. As the following section illustrates, the reason that the planning system has failed to respond is that it is fundamentally prejudiced against rural needs.

#### **2.4 The Divorce of Agriculture from the Rural Economy**

Prior to the globalisation of markets, agricultural self-sufficiency was a central component to any self-respecting national policy. (Buckwell 1997).

Not only would a prioritised agriculture produce the raw materials to feed the population, but it would also provide essential material for industrial production and manufacturing. Thus, the Agriculture Act of 1947 could readily commit to a: “. . . stable and efficient [agricultural] industry capable of producing such part of the nation’s food and other agricultural produce as in the national interest it is desirable to produce in the United Kingdom.” (Allanson & Whitby 1996, p.3)

However, agriculture had an implicit secondary role - it formed the organic core of the rural economy. Agriculture has always exhibited “important multiplier effects on the total level of economic activity within the local economy” (Hodge 1997, p.192), especially through employment, which, prior to the twentieth century, accounted for 21.4% of workforce employment. Thereafter, numbers in agricultural employment have fallen steadily, with the 1991 census revealing a meagre 1.8% share. (Allanson & Whitby 1996) A combination of “farm rationalisation, mechanisation, intensification and specialisation” meant that new techniques could provide for larger economies of scale, at the expense of human resources. (*ibid.*, p.5) As agricultural employment fell, agricultural activity became increasingly decoupled from the rural economy. Also, agricultural produce was no longer bound by spatially constricted markets, but instead became available within a global marketplace. (Hodge 1997)

Agriculture has gradually re-orientated its focus to centralised, and by implication, urbanised markets, and the profits emerging from those commercial centres are rarely reinvested in rural areas through employment. As a result, agriculture has become increasingly directed by urban interests at the same time as it has become further detached from the interests of the rural economy.

This decoupling of agriculture from traditional agrarianism is compounded by mounting evidence of farming’s environmentally detrimental impacts. Economic rationalisation has replaced the mythical smallholder, the “husband of the land” farmer, with environmentally scarring “agri-businesses”, utilising intensive and mechanised processes (Robinson 1990). Between 1945 and 1970, changes in agricultural activity have led to the removal of one percent, or 8,000 km. of hedgerows annually, and the cumulative destruction of 80% of chalk grassland, 60% of heathland and 50% of wetlands (Pennington 1996). The result has been the



creation of an “arable desert” of catastrophic proportions, singularly lacking in the biodiversity so cherished in mythologised images of rurality. (*ibid.*) Gradually, “people have got wise” to the dangers inherent in agricultural primacy and systematic subsidy, but “there’s still this notion that farmers are the stewards of the land.” (Hall 2002)

Although the divorce of agriculture from its traditional seat at the centre of the rural economy has driven a number of rural inhabitants into urban-based work, relative rural population numbers have not dropped, with many simply choosing to accommodate changing occupational opportunities and staying on to find new work. (Allanson & Whitby 1996) Planning policy has failed to provide for these individuals and the changing economic demands being placed upon them. “By effectively constraining the extent of non-agricultural development in rural areas” planning policy has offered “limited alternative employment opportunities for the rural working.” (*ibid.*, p.5) A loosening of blanket rural protection policies has not occurred, and the rural working class continue to be denied economic opportunity.

The overall picture is therefore one in which agriculture is distanced from the rural economy, becoming more a consumer (and even destroyer) of rural resources, rather than a producer of them. Corporate agribusinesses no longer have a vested interest in the rural economy, but are instead directed by urban interests. (Newby 1979) Farmers have not acted alone in this gradual reorientation of rural areas to urban interests. Pennington notes that the administration of agricultural subsidy has necessitated a burgeoning government bureaucracy, which perpetuates the existence of agricultural primacy within planning. It is claimed that these bureaucrats, based in Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) offices in Whitehall, have vested

*“ . . . budgetary interests . . . firmly linked to the expansion of the subsidised sector. If more land was taken for non-agricultural development, the power of the farmers and the size of the agricultural budget would decrease and thus the discretionary grant-giving of MAFF bureaucrats.” (Pennington 1996, p.19)*

Such was their concern for continued subsidy that, in 1984, MAFF undertook direct administration of any local authority planning application that proposed removing more than two hectares of land from agriculture. (*ibid.*)

The activities of the farm lobby and MAFF bureaucrats echo components of Lipton’s structural bias (Lipton 1977). Agricultural interests, now largely dislocated from the rural economy, articulate their influence through centralised, urban mechanisms of government, such as planning, that effectively marginalise the needs of the rural economy and environment. However, shifts in the rural-agrarian power base provides for only half the story: “the power of the urban elite . . . is determined, not by its economic power alone, but by its capacity to organise, centralise and control.” (Lipton 1982, p.66). However agriculture provides only one dimension to the problem. This leads into a second field of study, of perhaps even greater significance - the urbanisation of rural space.

### 3. "URBS IN RURE" - THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC URBANISATION OF RURAL SPACE

Pahl, in 1964, was amongst the first to bear witness to the enormous upheaval of traditional ways of life. His analysis of the migration of "urbs to rure" revealed how migration of urban classes into rural communities was blurring the sacrosanct distinction between "town" and "country". (Pahl, 1970)

Over three decades later and rural commentators were still tracing the change: "As has been the case for over a century, rural England (in particular) is being colonized by urban interests". (Cherry & Rogers 1996, p.195)

The counter-urbanisation trends of the late twentieth-century have rendered the "urbs in rure" an increasingly commonplace occurrence. Whereas much of the formative 1947 ideology was articulated by middle-class urban interests looking outward from the city, upon their cherished rural amenities, those urban interests have now found the means to both access and accommodate rural areas. This has fundamentally altered the fault-lines of power, away from Lipton's simplified model of centre and periphery, towards one that is more disparate, dislocated and diffuse, yet no less influential.

Increased access to rural areas, by way of temporary visits and complete migration, has been concomitant with an urbanisation of rural policy. In an extension of the nineteenth century public amenity debate, rural areas are increasingly identified as public amenity, a "common" and "shared" resource, with implied rights to roam. The influential 1947 Hobbouse Report "argued for a public right of access to all open countryside . . . freedom to ramble across the wilder parts of the country." (Cullingworth & Nadin 2002, p.273) This campaign for public access is now an unquestioned component of rural policy. Rightly or wrongly, this idyllic view of the countryside, marked as it is by the audio-visual experience of the tourist, is characteristic of the ascendant, popular assumption that, in place of reduced agricultural use, rural areas are there to serve the recreational and tourist needs of a prevailing urban population (*ibid.*). Although tourism has overtaken agriculture as the largest employer in many rural areas, providing for an essential economic boost, other non-agricultural uses, arguably of more sustainable value, have been largely excluded from debate.

However, beyond the influence of urban tourism on rural planning policy, perhaps the greatest articulation of urban interest is taking place from within rural areas. Counter-urbanisation trends have been recognised for many years. Between 1991 and 1997, 122 rural areas made a net gain of 540,000 people, an average of 90,000 people per year. (Countryside Agency 1999, p.10). Furthermore, the greatest migration losses both for 1981-91 and also 1991-95 were from Greater London and the six metropolitan counties (*ibid.*, p.11) This evidence provides the latest illustration of the long-running move of "urbs to rure", and the introduction of a polar "class" division (with its undertones of conflict) on a local social status hierarchy similar to that first witnessed by Pahl in 1964.

These incomers - retirees, commuters and second-home owners - tend to arrive with an embedded urban awareness of rurality, that finds comfort in the pastoral vision of a "slower"

and more "tranquil" environment. In effect, rural areas are expected to provide an experience that is antithetical to the urban one left behind, even though similar urban pressures play an increasingly important role across urban and rural regions alike. As a result, the incomers are inevitably predisposed to the protection and preservation of the rural environment, in which they have invested their aspirations and their savings.

Furthermore, the economic role of these in-migrants is rarely one of integration. Few take on directly productive functions, and even fewer "support local service provision or employment opportunities." (Hodge 1997, p.197). Incomers tend to "... have their own private transport and retain strong social and economic links with a wider, urban society" and thus fail to provide any significant economic role other than consumption. (*ibid.*, p.198)

*"An in-migration of people on relatively high incomes raises the average standard of living but does not necessarily improve the lot of those living on low incomes. Indeed there are grounds for believing that at least in some circumstances and ways the position of the worst off may actually be worsened. In-migration tends to stimulate higher house prices and so access to the housing market becomes more difficult for those on a given income level."* (*ibid.*, p.197)

The result is that "the "rural disadvantaged" become trapped within a world of mobility and affluence, as local economic, infrastructure and administrative networks are restructured around the needs of the mobile and affluent." (Cabinet Office 1999, p.23) However, this process does not occur passively. On the contrary:

*"the counterurbanisation trends and the invasion of the countryside by the service class have inevitably impacted upon local government. The dominance of farmers and landowners on local councils has undoubtedly been waning since the middle of the 1960s as newcomers have moved to rural areas and have been elected at all levels of local government."* (Cherry & Rogers 1996, p.173)

Through these positions, politically active middle class newcomers can exercise a "moratorium on most types of development except those that fit in with the local "aesthetic". Preservationism will rule." (Murdoch 1996, p.145)

Although once the traditional locus of rural power in the UK, farming can no longer claim to be the dominant interest group. Instead its position has been usurped by conservation groups such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) and Friends of the Earth. (Pennington 1996)

The influence of these groups, and the individuals they represent, has become so pervasive as to warrant new monikers: NIMBY ("Not In My BackYard") and BANANA ("Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anybody"). Both have evolved as appropriate definitions for an urban class that seeks to preserve rural areas, "not in aspic but in vinegar." (Monbiot 2002, p13) Hall (2002) summed up the situation thus:

*“Most of the people involved [with nimbyism] are ex-urbanites and often quite recent arrivals in the countryside. They have relatively little interest in the rural economy. The people who are losing out are the lower income rural people, whose children can no longer afford housing. That’s the tragedy in all this.”*

This urban prejudice has been effectively articulated.

*“Local preservation and protection societies, sometimes ad hoc in their origins and operation, sometimes linked federally to national groupings such as the Council for the Protection of Rural England, have been ever-vigilant in safeguarding rural amenity and limiting development. Whilst ostensibly those groups attempt to gain their ends by publicly representing ”local opinion”, it is clear also that they are often quite closely linked with the formal planning process.” (Murdoch 1996, p.174)*

To return to Lipton’s theories; in developing countries, the exploitation of a rural class by an urban class was performed in a far more explicit manner to the situation in the UK, where the process is more implicit, but no less destructive. “”What is at issue is not so much domination and subordination, as a capacity to act and accomplish goals”” (Stone as quoted by Goodwin 1998, p.10). According to Stone, the gentrifying middle-class migrant therefore exercises a form of social and economic ”power to”, generated through ”social production,” rather than the traditional ”power over,” characteristic “of landed elites and paternalistic gentry”. (*ibid.*) Therefore, although diffuse across rural areas, an incoming ”urban class” has exploited the planning system to its own protectionist needs, and thus subordinated the interests of indigenous rural populations.

#### **4. PLANNING FROM THE CENTRE - THE PERPETUATION OF URBAN PREJUDICE**

In their study of European planning systems, Newman and Thornley outline the numerous models used to describe:

*“the relationship between central and local government, one of which is the ”agency model” . . . In this model local authorities are seen as agents carrying out central government policies and so central government regulations, laws and controls are formulated to allow this to happen . . . Britain is moving very close to this agency model. In the last decade the autonomy of local government has been consistently eroded as central government has increased its financial controls.” (Newman & Thornley 1996, p.31)*

Duncan and Goodwin (1988, p. 250) have termed this process, the ”nationalisation” of policy-making; “policy is decided at the centre and regional and local offices exist only as administrative units.” They trace this nationalisation process through the late seventies and early eighties, when, “in the face of... continued political challenges the Government began to tackle the ”representational” role of local councils (i.e. removing their ability to represent local electorates effectively) as well as their ”interpretive” role (i.e. removing their influence on policy content).” (*ibid.*, p.169) As a result, most areas of government policy have lost their localised dimensions. In terms of rural planning, this has had the dramatic effect of divorcing

policy-creation from the area to which policy will be applied. Rural policy is created in the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR), MAFF and Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) offices in Whitehall, central London, for delivery out into rural areas. There is little provision for constructive feedback, and even less allowance for interpretive implementation.

This shift in government structure has effectively disenfranchised rural areas from representing their own, often unique, localised needs, and from applying their own solutions. “Instead, the ”democratic vacuum” has been filled by those who do have a direct interest”, which, in the absence of local representation, is defined through interest group politicking (*ibid.*, p.254).

*“New non-elected agencies were funded from the centre to provide services previously delivered through local government... Some of these quangos [Quasi Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisations] are appointed directly by central government, others are self-governing in the sense that they appoint their own boards... These and others like them are now responsible for over £40 billion of public funds, a figure not far below the sum spent in total by elected local authorities... the institutional map of local government in this country has been transformed beyond recognition.” (Goodwin 1998, p.7)*

This post-Fordist shift from government through public body, to governance through a combination of public and private efforts, introduces a stark problem. Whereas local representation meant that local people had to live with their political choices, the intervention of quangos has blurred the boundary between private and public responsibility and accountability. In effect, policy is now created by “bureaucrats and interest groups [who] do not bear the full opportunity cost of their actions.” (Pennington 1996, p.49)

Planning policy in the UK has therefore not only lost a crucial local, and thus rural dimension, to central, urban government, but it has also seen the democratic vacuum filled by unaccountable quangos, which do not bear the opportunity costs of the decisions they impose ”top down” on rural areas. Rural issues are therefore lost within the planning framework, with very few coherent, ”bottom up” channels through which to reach policy-makers. “Critical questions emerge over who has been involved in new forms of governance and who hasn’t, and why this is the case.” (Goodwin 1998, p.10) In terms of rural policy the new challenge of rural governance is to erase the continued reliance on top-down, “vertical relations”, and “to shift the inherited institutional structure . . . into a richer, more place-focused, more future-oriented and more localised form.” (Vigar *et al.* 2000, p.289). English planning, however, seems to be gravitating the other way.

This section has illustrated how influential institutions are the outcome of a political system that provides undue representation to urban interests. Yet it has also revealed how bleak the prospects for change are. The planning system, dominated as it is by an ”Iron Triangle” of urban, political and economic power, continues to validate protectionism and centrism, and thus preclude proactive change.

*“It is surely not premature to ask whether conservation, as at present practised in the UK, is an effective instrument for protecting and enhancing the visual environment, or whether it has become too introspective in its objectives, too detached from other legitimate concerns of urban planning and the needs of the countryside . . . It is difficult to think of any other area of government activity where the system has remained substantially unchanged for half a century, and where policy has remained essentially immune to questioning, even when it has tended to doctrinaire extremes.” (Delafons 1997, p.112)*

But how can change occur when urban interests have such a grip on rural policy?

## **5. TRACING ATTITUDINAL URBAN BIAS**

*“Historically... rural planning has been virtually a by-product of a system designed to cope with urban growth, partly because the countryside was regarded as a bucolic backdrop to life in urban areas and partly because the idea of a planned countryside was, to influential public opinion, anathema.” (Newby 1979, p.228)*

When the Town and Country Planning Act was established in 1947, planners effectively abdicated responsibility for rural areas to agriculture. Ruralism did not require management in the way urbanism did, and thus planning professionals have failed to develop a full understanding of ruralism’s distinct requirements. But rural planning by default is no longer viable.

*“As the old agricultural order disappears, we have yet to specify clearly the alternative structural objectives that define the types of rural communities that are desired in its place.” (Hodge 1997, p.199)*

It is becoming increasingly clear that planners must fundamentally reappraise their long-standing neglect for rural areas, so that a greater degree of socio-economic parity can be achieved. To support this shift, a rural perspective is required at the level of individual planners.

*“It is important to recognise that people live ”out there”... to ignore them is a colonising attitude. I suspect that city officials and their planners assume that the space outside the city limits is limitless. There is space to expropriate, play in, fish from, build on, and provide a convenient dump for garbage.” (Sim 1993, p.460)*

Planners must recognise that “rural is not another country”. (Lock 2001, p.47) The education, professional training, and overall culture of planning practice in the UK has led to a perpetuation of urban bias within planning.

*“It is true that countryside planning has probably been relatively poorly taught in planning schools. Most of them don’t even have rural experts. Even the Bartlett School of Planning, where I sometimes teach, has no permanent rural expert, although we do get someone in... So yes, there has been a failure, adequately to teach countryside planning in planning schools...” (Hall 2002)*

This remark provides critical evidence of the central failure of rural planning; that the planning curriculum neglects the specificities and uniqueness of rural areas.

*“Britain’s planning system has had a built- in urban orientation... [which] meant that what stood for rural planning was essentially negative, its objectives being to prevent unwelcome forms of urban development in the countryside.” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, p.192)*

Implicit is the assumption that ruralism is the absence of activity; a perpetual state of organic passivity. However, this paper has already revealed how the line between ruralism and urbanism is increasingly blurred, so that such assumptions can no longer stand. Unfortunately rural thinkers and experts have not extended their field of vision to cater for this change.

Anderson and Bell (2000) note how: “...in recent years most of the various disciplines of rural studies have been strangely silent on economic issues”. (*ibid.*, p.269) Similarly, Goodwin remarks how “there has been an increasingly noticeable silence at the centre of contemporary rural studies concerning the ways in which rural areas are governed.” (Goodwin 1998, p.5) Both comments point to a boundedness within academic thought that has excluded a more dynamic sense of rural change, focusing on the secondary, socio-cultural aspects of agricultural change, as opposed to primary political and economic shifts where the contours of rural decay can be readily seen.

*“The concentration of policy-makers on agriculture in rural areas has led to a neglect of broader and more integrated strategies and policies for rural development - even though, given the shift of employment and output away from primary industries, these broader strategies and policies are necessary for effective government action in rural economies”.* (Cabinet Office 1999, p.54)

In a call for change, Anderson and Bell propose that:

*“...consideration of the workings of the rural economy must lead rural scholarship to take its focus off of the exclusively rural... We need work that erases the heavy lines we have often scribbled in between the rural and urban, the economic and the social, and the material and the cultural... Difference exists. But we need to avoid the boundedness that comes from the dichotomization of these differences.” (Anderson & Bell 2000, p.269-270)*

Unfortunately, this drive towards a distinctive rural perspective is not reflected by a concordant drive within the planning profession. A greater “concern for the total fabric of the countryside” is still required (Davidson and Wibberley 1977, p.167 & 169).

A key part of the battle for greater rural representation in planning is improving the traditional, lowly status of rural work within the planning profession. In researching this paper, numerous illustrations of prejudice against rural planning were encountered, invariably characterising the rural focus as the “poor cousin” to urban work. This tendency is also reflected in the literature.

“It has to be said... that relatively few chartered planners expressed much interest in rural matters since urban problems were seen as more pressing. Especially in the public sector, countryside planning was often viewed as at best a tangential interest and at worst a professional backwater.” (Cherry and Rogers 1996, p.205)

In many ways, this is a result of the natural centripetal trends effecting society at large, to which Chambers refers when he notes that development professionals “respond to the pulls of central location, convenience, opportunities for promotion, money and power.” (Chambers 1983, p.171) An article in the RICS Rural Professional magazine of January 2002, provided graphic illustration of this trend in action:

*“Intake at the Royal Agricultural College (RAC), the College of Estate Management and other leading agricultural colleges has fallen significantly. Allegedly, some 85% of RAC graduates have entered commercial property rather than the rural environment.” (RICS 2002, p.17)*

Young, career-minded professionals are becoming increasingly aware of their market value and determining that rural work is less attractive than urban. This is understandable when the average basic rural sector salary begins at £26,310 against £33,077 in the commercial sector, with urban pay scales increasing at rates far beyond those available to rural professionals. (*ibid.*, p.17)

Moreover, not only are professional planners being pulled towards urban commercial work, which lacks any specific rural focus, but those who choose to continue in rural practice find themselves increasingly based in the urban locations from which governance is performed. In this way, policy is created through an external understanding of rural areas, formulating rural policy through a distorted, urban-oriented understanding of rural problems, and tending towards Chambers’ model of the prejudiced “rural development tourist”. (Chambers 1983, p.10)

The attraction to urbanism is not simply career-based but also aesthetic. Over time, a majority of planners have subscribed to the urban vision espoused by the urban designer and architect. Ever since “Modernist Planning” was taken up with near “animal unreason” in the 1920s, the appeal of the grand urban solution has prevailed. (Hughes 1971, p.205 quoted by Breheny 2000, p.18). The persistence of these ideas is clearly illustrated by New Urbanist thought. As Hall notes, “there is nothing new about New Urbanism” (Hall 2002b). “Richard Rogers used to be an ardent supporter of modernist town planning - the old 1947 orthodoxy. Now he champions New Urbanism... the New Orthodoxy... In fact, the overarching connection is strong and is still almost identical to the Old Orthodoxy - the policy of urban containment has if anything intensified.” (Lubbock 2001, p.3)

Although it is entirely sensible to maximise the use of urban space, and to make cities as attractive as possible, what is at issue is a sense of urban myopia within planning thought, which has led to the exclusion of alternative, decentrist planning visions that could “allow for the controlled direction of inevitable decentralisation... [taking] account of the grain of the market, without being subservient to it.” (Breheny 2000, p.32)



*“It has to be said that [the Urban Renaissance] isn’t working. It’s demonstrably plain because it’s delivering perhaps a third of the number of houses we need - that ought to worry everyone.” (Hall 2002)*

However, there has been no evidence of any contingency plans in the event of New Urbanist failure. The problem of continuing migration out of the city has been consistently ignored in favour of the big solution, the contained and compact city, which has captured the attention of planners and architects for the past 55 years. As a result, the impact of unmanaged decentrism on rural areas continues unheeded.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper has traced the root causes and characteristics of a structural and attitudinal urban bias within UK planning policy. The impacts of these prejudices have proved destructive for rural areas, the interests of which are largely misunderstood or under-represented within the planning system. Yet this destructive tendency has also proved self-perpetuating, through belief-systems that are sustained through both policy and practice. But the disparity of this situation is not proceeding completely unheeded, and recent events have given cause for some optimism. The British are committing to early stages of positive reorientation.

However, it is in keeping with the core argument that these drives for change have emerged, not on behalf of rural areas, but in reaction to threats upon urban areas. In a final example of political cynicism and endemic prejudice, it is significant that current planning policy has been seriously challenged as a result of only twelve months of grievances concerning threats to the urban economy (an overheating housing market, BSE and Foot and Mouth food scares), when evidence of rural stagnation has gone unheeded for the past thirty years.

Nevertheless, a key deliverable of the Rural White Paper, 2000, was a Rural Proofing initiative, providing for a “systematic assessment of the rural dimension of all government policies as they are developed and implemented - nationally, regionally and locally.” (DETR 2000) In a direct echo of Chamber’s antidote (Chambers 1983, p.168) to attitudinal bias, “putting the last first” within the rural-urban relationship, Cameron, the government’s newly appointed ”Rural Advocate”, has called upon policy-makers to “think rural.” (Countryside Agency 2002, p.8)

*“In the past, governments have not always been good at thinking about how national policy might affect rural areas. The interests of those living and working in rural areas have been occasionally overlooked or given lower priority than urban interests. Policy makers did not always appreciate that what works in urban areas will not automatically work in the countryside. As a result, some policies have been less effective in rural areas, have failed to target rural needs or have even brought about unintended adverse impacts.” (ibid., p.9)*

So, the Countryside Agency proposes structural changes: “the setting of specific rural targets, and the monitoring and evaluation of rural outcomes”, so as to avoid the tendency to meet

national targets “most easily - and at least cost - by concentrating policy delivery on urban centres.” (*ibid.*, p.17)

Furthermore, the report earmarks the importance of attitudes: “often, where rural proofing occurs, it has more to do with the existing level of awareness of particular individuals or policy teams”; and later “rural proofing and mainstreaming rural thinking within general policy making is, therefore, crucial.” (*ibid.*, p.14 & 23)

So far however, the process has been only relatively successful. In considering twenty-five policy developments initiated by the DTLR, which administer planning, the report concluded that, “there has not been sufficient rural thinking” (*ibid.*, p.49). Cameron concludes that, “on the basis of action so far, rural proofing is unlikely to become widely used and routine.” (*ibid.*, p.12). Nevertheless, the report marks the beginning of a potentially valuable process, at a time when rural issues, if at least peri-urban, remain high on the public agenda.

Questions pertaining to current planning theory and practice are surfacing, yet the prospects for more balanced policy is some way off. Although “top-down” structural initiatives such as Rural Proofing provide a useful starting point, sustained change within planning can only come about through “bottom-up” changes: creating a more balanced planning curriculum, developing a specific framework for rural needs, improving the pay of rural practitioners, and providing planners with the forums needed to cultivate more realistic public attitudes to the countryside.

Urban bias is not unique to the UK. The paper offers insights into the UK experience in order to inform what should be an on-going global debate. Some of the UK problems may not be common to other systems, which may suffer from other issues. However, the fundamental principle remains: rural communities have the same right as urban communities to ensure that they benefit from the socio-economic development of their localities through the country’s planning system. Only with the necessary fundamentals at work can planning abandon its prejudices and go on to provide effective, innovative and proactive responses to rural problems.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This paper has been produced with the financial support of the FIG Foundation. The authors are very grateful to the FIG Foundation for their support.

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