

## The future of our national parks.

I have just had a vision of the future of England – a vision unfolding from the consultation paper, ‘Greater flexibilities for change of use’, published by the Department for Communities and Local Government. In short, our national parks and our Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are about to have a price tag slapped on them – and it is a price that no one but housebuilders can afford to pay.

The consultation paper asks: ‘do you agree there should be permitted development rights, as proposed, for existing buildings used for agricultural purposes to change to a dwelling house (C3) and to carry out building work connected with the change of use?’ It is proposed that up to three buildings on every farmstead could be converted to houses of 150m<sup>2</sup> each, with the possibility of demolishing a barn to build a house on the same footprint, without planning permission.

The government really has not thought this one through. The practical difficulties include such things as every farmstead being potentially a hamlet of three or four houses, no matter how remote it is. Rural places are not ideal for building new homes: there would be four times the car movements and van deliveries up narrow lanes. The school run from such places would clog up country lanes and the lanes would need to be rebuilt. Greater infrastructure to preserve communities would entail further expenditure – you can’t encourage people to live on remote farmsteads and then suggest they travel by public transport. Think of how much further people will have to drive just to do a shopping trip. The UK’s carbon footprint would grow much heavier and darker.

The practical difficulties are bad enough but three other aspects are even more disturbing. The first is the damage to the aesthetic value of such places. Every unlisted agricultural building could be knocked down and rebuilt as a house, even if it dated from the eighteenth century. Every field shelter could be converted to residential use, and if it is to be 150m<sup>2</sup> the field shelter of 30m<sup>2</sup> could be rebuilt five storeys high, without planning permission. Our national parks – the most highly protected landscapes in the country – would see tens of thousands of new houses placed almost randomly and very obviously in the countryside, without even the design controls that would apply in an ordinary city centre or suburb. Such regions depend on tourism: the damage permanently inflicted on local businesses would be substantial.

The second disturbing aspect is to do with the use of land. We currently depend on farmers to maintain the countryside. Offer every single one of them the chance to make a million pounds by converting or replacing their farm buildings with three family houses, and a very great number will take you up on it. Farms would instantly be worth more if they were *not* farmed than if they were. In some areas farming will cease altogether. The land will probably be sold so that the farms that do continue are larger and larger holdings, concentrated on centres surrounded by industrial-scale farm buildings. The small-scale hill-farming way of life, which tax payers have paid millions to support in recent decades, will be swept away.

One might add that each conversion would be a one-off: buildings cannot be converted to residential use twice over, so this would be unsustainable. It would be an artificial stimulus to the economy that would store greater problems for the future as builders increasingly found themselves out of work once the conversion opportunities dry up.

The most disturbing implication, however, is the way that the government is prepared to overlook the social value of protected landscapes and reduce it to the bare bones of its price. The economic argument is very simple: if land can be used for housing it is worth about £1million per hectare; as agricultural land it is worth £18,000 per hectare, at most. Therefore you can increase the balance-sheet value of England by simply lifting planning restrictions on agricultural land. However, imagine the whole of a national park were to be treated this way.

If you could turn all 95,000 hectares of Dartmoor National Park into building land, you would make it worth, on paper, £95 billion. But what would its social or non-monetary value be then? Nothing more than a suburban sprawl. Forget the loss in beef and lamb production, with the need to import more meat from overseas; forget the infrastructure costs of serving thousands of remote houses; forget the loss of tourism (worth about £120 million a year to the local economy): these are nothing compared to the wellbeing of the nation as a whole. For millions of people it is important to know that somewhere in England exists where wild and endangered animals can thrive – and where people can go and be in a seemingly timeless place, free from the intrusions of the modern world, and gain perspective on their busy lives.

This revaluation principle has implications further afield too. How can we reprimand South American countries for tearing down their rainforests for private profit, or African countries for encroaching on their magnificent national parks, if we permit indiscriminate building for profit in our own? Why should we oppose the revaluation of the rainforest – from valueless jungle to timber production and agricultural holdings – if it stands to help the local economy?

As a historian, I can see that this revaluation is the most dangerous aspect of all. Such decisions will have exponentially great consequences in the long term. For example, if we increase the amount of land used for residential purposes in Dartmoor National Park by just 1.1% a year then within a hundred years, three times as much land will be built on as today. Some parts of our national parks have been expanding at more than that rate for the last 30 years already – the small town in which I live (Moretonhampstead) has grown 30% since 1990: a 1.2% increase per year. Relax controls now and things will be exponentially worse. Although 1.2% does not sound very much, if every residential area grew at that rate then every bit of farmland within Dartmoor would be built on within 220 years, leaving just the tussocky moorland surrounded by 33,000 hectares of housing and punctuated in the middle by hamlets that used to be farms. At a growth rate of 3.7% per year, the whole of the national park will be housing with 100 years – every last bit of moor, forest, pasture and meadow, every site of special scientific interest and every endangered species' habitat.

No one is suggesting building on the whole of a national park, but the government has opened the door to letting it happen. Some land has to be without price if we want it to last not just another hundred years but forever – and that is the principle that is under threat right now. If the recent, relatively mild financial crisis causes such radical suggestions to be put forward, what will more severe downturns bring? The government of the day, eyes firmly downcast on the Westminster pavements, will no doubt price more and more rural land in such a way to create capital that can be freed up to stimulate the money supply – but at what a colossal cost to the nation.