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THE GREEN BELT: THE PROBLEM OF THE URBAN FRINGE
IN BRITISH PLANNING

The outer limits of urban development, beyond the peripheries of city growth, constitute an area of land use where there is competition for scarce resources. In British planning therefore this area is one of conflict, where control is exercised over competing forms of development. Agriculture is challenged by demand not only for forms of building development including housing, schools, shopping and industry, and of course roads, but also for sport, recreation and in some cases sand and gravel extraction.

The problems presented by these land use options are exacerbated by the fact that the urban fringe is in many British cities today an area of growth. Urban decentralisation has long been a recognizable feature whereby economic activity and population increase are at their highest at the edges of cities rather than in the middle, as used to be the case. In the 19th century British cities grew by a process of attraction; in the late 20th century cities are growing by dispersal, with the peripheries showing the most dynamic features. It is the fringe therefore which is attracting population to live in pleasant, low density, semi-rural settings, while employment is gravitating there too to take advantage of beneficial locations.

The planning problems of the urban fringe have been given yet another perspective, from the long standing desire to restrict the outward spread of development. The 19th century growth of London into a world giant among cities produced a

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backlash of emotion: size was thought to lead to economic inefficiency, and result in an accumulation of health and social problems; there was also a deep-seated fear of uncontrolled sprawl. The garden city tradition, established by Ebenezer Howard, articulated this determination to restrict the growth of big cities and to consciously shape their form and spread. In the 20th century the crucial planning device whereby this policy might be achieved became the green belt.

During the century the green belt has become a major feature of British planning, with objectives of keeping land between towns open, so that they do not merge. It has become a major strategic planning tool. It is a phrase which has achieved popular recognition and approval in many countries, though definitions differ, and has become well established in the planner's vocabulary. Moreover, at a time when many planning objectives and activities attract opposition by the public, the idea of keeping an area surrounding a town open by permanent or severe restriction on building usually meets with popular approval.

This paper sketches the history of the green belt in British planning. An evaluation of the successes and limitations of the green belt is offered. From this it is argued that over-rigid policies of constraint should now be reconsidered in the context of the decentralizing city.

History

Although essentially a 20th century concept, the idea of forcibly restricting the outward growth of towns is an old one. In England, Queen Elizabeth I's famous proclamation of 1592 forbade any new building within three miles of the City of London. The situation was that suburban workshops were being established outside the control of long-established City Guilds. The Queen was advised by the wealthy merchants of London to stop this activity. (There is a lesson to be learned from this piece of history: restrictions on the use of land are always

made in order to ensure that benefits are conferred on one set of people and withdrawn from another. Even in the present day green belt we shall see that some people derive considerable advantage, while others are disadvantaged in certain ways).

But it was in the late 19th century that the demand for effective control over the population size and territorial spread by cities, notably London, took the form of a strategic policy. There were two spectres: one was the loss of vitality in the surrounding countryside areas where agriculture was depressed and migration to the towns strongly in evidence; the other was the seemingly relentless march of outer suburbia in an unplanned and uncoordinated manner. The second half of the century was marked on several occasions by ambitious schemes to resettle overcrowded Londoners in utopian colonies of one kind or another in rural localities.

By the end of the century conditions, both urban and rural, were highly conducive to the emergence of new ideas about the spread of urban development. It was in this context that Ebenezer Howard's book *Tomorrow: a peaceful path to real reform*, published in 1898 met with such success. Reissued with some modifications in 1902 with the title *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, it had the effect of promoting the garden city movement. His satellite towns of up to 30,000 population would be grouped as a "Social City", surrounded by agricultural land producing crops, milk, meat and market garden produce for the inhabitants. The idea of a strategic green belt around existing cities was born.

There was a number of flirtations with the idea in professional circles, but 30 years were to pass before the concept really took further root. This came with Raymond Unwin's Report to the Greater London Planning Committee, 1929-33, which advocated a "green girdle" as a narrow barrier of open land at the outer extremities of London's built-up area with the immediately practical intention of providing open space and playing fields for an urban population.

During the 1930s a number of streams of thinking came together to produce a powerful green belt lobby. The traditional

arguments for restriction of city size and the provision of sports field and recreation land were now complemented by a demand for the conservation of attractive countryside on the outskirts of London (the North Downs, the Chilterns, the Thames Lowlands etc.) where more informal leisure pursuits could be followed without disturbing farming interests. The London Green Belt Act, 1938, provided for the setting up of a fund of £2 million in order to facilitate the purchase of private land both to give public access and to prevent the encroachment of urban development.

Events then moved quickly. Endorsement of the green belt concept, with its various objectives, came with the Scott Report on Land Utilization in Rural Areas (1942). A little later Patrick Abercrombie's Greater London Plan (1944) proposed a green belt between five and fifteen miles wide around London, beyond which expanded towns and new satellites would accommodate the city's overspill and surplus economic activity. After that, the Town and Country Planning Act, 1947, enabled local planning authorities (basically, boroughs, cities and counties) to establish green belts without the need to purchase land. The first statutory green belt was designated for London in the early 1950s.

London was not the only urban area where a green belt was desirable, but in respect of the provincial cities there was some delay while the local authorities battled out their priorities for control over building land. The initiative was seized by the then Minister of Housing and Local Government (as the Planning Ministry was called). Duncan Sandys issued a Circular (No 42) in August 1955 to local planning authorities. Paragraphs 3-6 read as follows:

" 3. The Minister accordingly recommends Planning Authorities to consider establishing a Green Belt wherever this is desirable in order:

- (a) to check the further growth of a large built up area;
- (b) to prevent neighbouring towns from merging into one another; or
- (c) to preserve the special character of a town.

4. Wherever practicable, a Green Belt should be several miles wide, so as to ensure an appreciable rural zone all round the built-up area concerned.

5. Inside a Green Belt, approval should not be given except in very special circumstances, for the construction of new buildings or for the change of use of existing buildings for purposes other than agriculture, sport, cemeteries, institutions standing in extensive grounds, or other uses appropriate to a rural area.

6. Apart from a strictly limited amount of "infilling" or "rounding off" (within boundaries to be defined in Town Maps) existing towns and villages inside a Green Belt should not be allowed to expand further. Even within the urban areas thus defined, every effort should be made to prevent any further building for industrial or commercial purposes; since this, if allowed, would lead to a demand for more labour, which in turn would create a need for the development of additional land for housing."

This recommendation, 30 years ago, marked a critical phase in green belt history; the objectives and procedures for implementation were laid down. In due time all major conurbations, and some smaller towns too, established green belts. Some indeed are very extensive: the West Midlands green belt for example covers over 700 sq. miles, a greater area than the Snowdonia National Park.

The objectives enunciated by Sandys have not remained static. For example, local councils have since seen fit to endorse green belts in the interests of providing outdoor recreation facilities. Further, a green belt may be seen to have a particular function in the promotion of a regional settlement strategy of dispersal to new towns or expanded towns. In very recent years a new feature has emerged: a green belt may be seen to have a role to play in the regeneration of the urban core (the inner city); it is argued that to prevent the establishment of industrial premises on the urban fringe is a very positive step in leading to the redevelopment of the inner urban areas.

Hence, once established, the green belt comes to adopt a number of functions. It is in the happy position of satisfying many objectives. Everyone seems to find favour with a green belt in view of its multi-purpose characteristics, now going far beyond Duncan Sandys' relatively simple statement in 1955. But there is mounting criticism from one set of developers who feel that British planning regards green belts with over-rigorous zeal. The house building industry, particularly around London, has been complaining for many years that there is a shortage of building land and that unnecessarily restrictive green belt application is prejudicing the identification and development of an adequate supply of new land for housing purposes. The continuing outward spread of big cities is seemingly remorseless and the green belt today occupies a critical strategic role in metropolitan land use strategies for the 21st century.

Evaluation

Proponents of the green belt are quick to point to its many merits. It has, after all, for over half a century been instrumental in reserving open space, playing fields, recreation areas and farmed countryside for the enjoyment of an urban population. It may reasonably be argued that without some positive steps of land protection in this way, crucial open areas would have been lost to urban development. It is impossible to quantify this, and it can always be argued that the operation of a private land market would somehow still have protected leisure and recreation interests, but the basic supposition as to the merits of urban fringe planning is a reasonable one.

One argument often heard is that the green belt around British cities has avoided the loose urban sprawl that has characterised American cities. British planning has sought to achieve a distinctive demarcation between town and country, and the green belt has been the planning weapon to secure this.

The argument proceeds: green belts help to shape and give

greater definition to urban settlements. American metropolitan cities straggle and sprawl; the British metropolis is much tighter. British planning has stressed the importance of giving identity to settlements through well-defined boundaries; hence the merging of settlements has been discouraged. The loose sprawl of inter-war suburbia was found unsatisfactory, and in the post war years higher densities on the urban edges have been encouraged by green belt policy.

British planning has also stressed the importance of saving agricultural land. This has meant in practice that post war urban development has been at a higher density than that achieved in inter war suburbs. Loose urban sprawl wastes agricultural land. Green belts avoid this occurrence. They also have a further consequence in that they provide greater certainty to farmers; green belt designation, with the implication that most forms of urban development will be strongly resisted, means in effect that agricultural practices may continue with little disruption from the threat of urban takeover.

Finally, we may refer to the recent argument that the green belt may actually stimulate inner city recovery. The economic collapse of the inner city and the loss of population there in recent years has certainly been dramatic. A major policy now being followed is to achieve some measure of recovery in the old urban cores. It is too early, however, to state with any confidence that a rigorously applied green belt will in fact have the effect of encouraging development to return to inner city locations.

All these are reasonable arguments in support of the green belt as a constraint on outward urban expansion, but each may be countered by a contrary view point. For example it may be accepted that access to open recreation land is important - but for whom? The green belt typically is readily available for already-privileged suburban communities, but scarcely so for (largely) non car-owing populations in the inner city.

The fact is that there are costs and benefits. Those fortunate enough to live in the urban fringe, in proximity to the green belt, have distinct environmental advantages over other urban dwellers; but they also have higher housing costs. How-

ever, it may be argued that house prices have been increased substantially for all, by virtue of the green belt which acts as a severe squeeze on land availability for housing purposes.

A major problem in practice, which may be seen as a distinct limitation to the green belt idea, is that any area to be designated as green belt is very difficult to define in detail. If a certain tract of land is to be protected from building development (to all intents and purposes in perpetuity) then it is necessary to be quite precise about the boundaries of that land: why one parcel of land and not another. In planning practice boundaries have to be defended; if they are not determined on reasonable criteria in the first place, they cannot easily be justified afterwards when pressure to develop is experienced.

Finally, one must reflect on the continuing dynamics of urban change. The green belt may be a very blunt instrument when dealing with unpredictable features of urban growth. There is nothing magical in a circular ring: can we really give meaning to the shape, structure and internal coherence of cities by surrounding them with an artificial green belt? It may be argued that the dispersed city does not recognize such a device, the forces of change being able to leap frog a green belt rather than be constrained by it.

Conclusion

The arguments are finely drawn. On balance my own views are that British planning has developed an almost obsessive concern for the green belt. As a planning tool it is now overlain by complex social and political considerations. My preference would be to remove the rigidity of green belt definition and to be much more pragmatic about the possible course of metropolitan development into the 21st century. British planning is faced with the possibility of having to follow two, seemingly contradictory policies over the next quarter of a century: regeneration of inner urban areas and provision for selective

growth in the outer city. Arguments on the simple lines of the Sandys Circular in 1955 will no longer suffice.

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PAS ZIELENI I WOLNE TERENY PODMIEJSKIE W PLANOWANIU BRYTYJSKIM

Wolne tereny podmiejskie są przedmiotem konfliktu dotyczącego wykorzystania terenów, a także przedmiotem walki konkurencyjnej o deficytowe zasoby dla potrzeb rolnictwa, wydobywanie piasku i żwiru, ośrodków rekreacyjnych, dróg, budownictwa i innych form gospodarki przestrzennej obejmującej także przemysł i centra handlowe. W tej dziedzinie, tradycyjną cechą planowania brytyjskiego jest pas zieleni, którego celem jest zachowanie terenów niezabudowanych i nieeksploatowanych między poszczególnymi miejscowościami i nadanie zaplanowanego kształtu jednostkom urbanistycznym.

W artykule przedstawiono w ogólnym zarysie historię pasów zieleni z punktu widzenia ich koncepcji i praktycznych rozwiązań. Szczególną uwagę zwrócono na cele stawiane przed takimi pasami zieleni w powojennej brytyjskiej polityce planowania w okresie lat 1955-1985.

Następnie przedstawiono korzyści jakie przynoszą takie pasy zieleni:

- otwarty teren rekreacyjny dla ludności miejskiej;
- zatrzymanie nadmiernego rozprzestrzeniania się miast;
- nadanie określonego kształtu terenom miejskim;
- zagwarantowanie tych terenów dla potrzeb rolnictwa;
- zapewnienie bodźców dla poprawy warunków w dzielnicach śródmiejskich miast.

Można by tutaj wziąć także pod uwagę następujące czynniki:

- dostęp do terenów rekreacyjnych, ale nie dla wszystkich;
- pas zieleni może stanowić nieefektywny instrument kształtujący rozwój miast;
- faktem jest, że praktyczne zdefiniowanie pasów zieleni nastręcza trudności (definicja ta obejmuje jedne tereny a nie obejmuje innych);

- rozwijająca się metropolia napotyka w pasie zieleni sztuczną przeszkodę dla jej dalszego rozwoju.

Pas zieleni stanowi od wielu lat ważny instrument planowania strategicznego w kształtowaniu miast. Mimo powszechnego i silnego poparcia jakim cieszy się to rozwiązanie, można dzisiaj zakwestionować cele jakie przyświecały tworzeniu pierwszych pasów zieleni.