



MARK CARWARDINE

WILD THOUGHTS

Gordon Brown's plan to build 3 million new houses in southern England by 2020 – combined with a proposed speeding up of the planning process – makes me feel like giving up life in the UK altogether. I dream about moving to a genuinely green and pleasant land where there is some hope for the future and a Government that does more than pay lip-service to the environment.

Riding roughshod over the countryside, our dictatorial state plans to unleash a new wave of urban sprawl by flouting and adapting environmental laws and building at least 40 per cent of the new houses (plus all their associated roads, schools, hospitals and superstores) on once-sacrosanct Green Belt land.

I've always despaired about our Government's cynical attitude towards the environment and its obsession with

economic growth at any cost, but what's pushed me over the edge this time is Natural England. Instead of defending the environment, it's actually questioning the sanctity of Green Belts. What hope is there when the official body charged with protecting England's countryside is helping the Government to find a way of squeezing all those new homes into regions that are already among the most densely populated in the world?

We are exceedingly lucky to have Green Belts. These swathes of countryside, drawing a firm line around towns and cities, should be entirely safe from development. By stopping one town from merging into another, they encourage urban regeneration instead of expansion, form a buffer zone to protect the deeper countryside and provide an easy escape from the city. They've stood the test of time remarkably well. Until now, that is.

Ultimately, there has to be a limit to population growth and development in the UK. Parts of the country are already at breaking point (the south is virtually gridlocked for a start) and yet the population is projected to increase from 61 million to 67 million by the time this catastrophic building plan has been completed. It can only get worse.

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