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GREEN BELTS HAVE BENEFITED BRITAIN'S COUNTRYSIDE AND ECONOMY FOR 60 YEARS. SO WHY ARE WE SO KEEN TO BUILD ON THEM?

■ OPINION

My list of 'British Politicians For Whom I Have Absolutely No Respect' grows so rapidly that even I find it hard to keep track.

But I could forgive the latest incumbents for at least some of their shortfalls if they would do just one thing: bring one of the most innovative bits of legislation we've ever had back to life.

I'm talking about green belts. These swaths of countryside and farmland draw a firm line around towns and cities and, as if by magic, stop them from merging into one another to form one great urban sprawl. They provide a lot of other benefits, too, from encouraging urban regeneration (instead of urban expansion) to providing an easy escape from the city and forming a buffer zone to protect the deeper countryside.

Quite simply, green belts are brilliant. And in their 60-year lifetime they've stood the test of time remarkably well.

Until now, that is.

They are supposed to be safe from

development – indeed, that's the whole point – but our dictatorial state has been slackening and speeding up the planning process in a way that allows developers to build on once-sacrosanct green-belt land.

Every time I open a local newspaper, there seems to be yet another story about a community campaign to stop new houses (plus all their associated roads and superstores) being built on the local green belt. But these days it doesn't matter whether there is public approval or not. The answer to developers is inevitably a resounding 'yes'.

Politicians claim that it's to meet an ever-increasing demand for affordable housing. But they ignore one blisteringly obvious alternative. One of the best qualities of green-belt legislation is that it forces developers to build on brownfield sites, locations that have previously been developed, which keeps new houses and businesses close to services and transport links. According to the Coalition's own figures, there are enough derelict brownfield sites available and suitable for building no fewer than 1,494,070 new homes – and still more for commercial and industrial development.

But the problem is this. Politicians have a vested interest

in building on green-belt land. They are tempted by the false promise of an easy construction boom (why else would they ignore the fact that there are enough long-term empty houses to provide homes for more than 300,000 families?), and at the same time they can help their plutocratic developer friends to make bucket loads

of dirty money. It's no coincidence that many brownfield sites would be more costly to develop than virgin countryside – which is precisely why so many of the Coalition's develop-at-any-cost cohorts quote "affordable housing" as justification for building on green belts instead.

The irony is that weak planning laws are

actually bad for the economy. Cities decline as they are hollowed out, while longer and longer travel times drag down efficiency. More importantly, the planning system isn't there to be hijacked by politicians desperate to promote economic growth at any cost. It's not about money – it's about quality of life.

The Coalition saw conservation as a worthless impediment to economic growth, and blatantly despised anyone even remotely linked with the environmental movement. Maybe the new government will be different. It will certainly need to act quickly. As our green belts are eaten away piece by piece, we are already sliding down a very slippery slope. Once they have gone, that will be it. We'll never be able to suck them back. ■

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Green-belt land in the Vale of Clwyd, north-east Wales, is destroyed to build houses.

David Woodfall/naturepl.com

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