



Campaign to Protect
Rural England
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PRESS RELEASE

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Sir Max Hastings urges Cheshire residents to stand up for local democracy

Journalist and military historian Sir Max Hastings has called on Cheshire residents to stand up for local democracy in the face of increasing centralisation of decision-making affecting the county.

Speaking at the recent AGM of Cheshire's Campaign to Protect Rural England[1], Sir Max, CPRE's national president, said that all it takes for our countryside to disappear under steel and concrete is for the English people to stand by and do nothing, and urged more people to become involved in CPRE's cause.

Sir Max pointed out that CPRE's work to protect the countryside and regenerate urban areas hinges on local democracy, and attacked the 'the scandal of the abolition of county powers', and their reallocation to central Government and unelected Regional Assemblies.

Referring to the Green belt, pioneered by CPRE 50 years ago, he said, 'This is not our wildest or most remote landscape, but our charm. It is the countryside next door, a great British invention and the envy of other countries who have suffered appalling sprawl.' Yet he warned that the Government's 'Sustainable Communities Plan' and initiatives such as the Northern Way in the North West present a threat to Green Belt.

'Speculators in Cheshire and all over the country are selling Green Belt land, holding out the prospect to developers that planning permission will soon be given,' he said. 'The Green Belt around Chester in particular is being undermined[2], each successive nibbling justified as "only a little one", yet the overall impact is devastating.

'The Government's plans represent the tyranny of centralism, and fly in the face of what we understand to be democracy[3]. Both major parties have much to answer for. What Mrs Thatcher began, Mr Blair eagerly picked up, and throughout we are expected to accept that "the man in Whitehall knows what's best for us all".

'Central decisions are now not just on big things like going to war – planning legislation is now seen as an impediment in the path of economic growth, yet CPRE believes our planning law is the great bastion in the protection of our environment.

He urged the view that determining the pattern of land use is a local responsibility. 'This was recognised under the older system before the scandal of the abolition of county powers,' he said. 'The bedrock of public consent has been swept away from official decisions. Whitehall has hijacked powers to impose development whether we like it or not - we need to regain control of the plane!'

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Sir Max outlined CPRE's work in Cheshire and nationally to press for to greater energy efficiency in housing, fight for urban regeneration and, with a decision on the M6 issue pending[4], to continue to make the case that building new roads is not the automatic answer to congestion. "It is easy to fool ourselves into thinking that that environmental disaster is unavoidable' he said, adding that there are solutions to meeting the demands of modern life that cause less harm to the environment.

He concluded by urging more people to support the efforts of CPRE to protect Cheshire's countryside and precious landscapes, 'We all have a heavy responsibility to our children and grandchildren for the future of rural England, yet many feel it is too hard to fight the Whitehall juggernaut – but if CPRE had thought like that in the past, we wouldn't have the countryside we have today.'

For more information about the work of Cheshire's Campaign to Protect Rural England, phone their Branch Office on 01606 835046, or visit their website at www.cprecheshire.org.uk.

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Cheshire CPRE's retiring Chairman Richard Bass and wife Christine, new Cheshire Branch President Lord Grey of Codnor, retiring President Lady Baker Wilbraham, Sir Max Hastings and new Cheshire CPRE Chairman John Turnbull

Notes for editors:

[1] The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) exists to promote the beauty, tranquillity and diversity of rural England by encouraging the sustainable use of land and other natural resources in town and country. For more information and archive of press releases see the CPRE Cheshire website at www.cprecheshire.org.uk and the national CPRE website at www.cpre.org.uk.

[2] Cheshire CPRE has recently conducted a major campaign in Chester, funded by a National Lottery award, to alert residents to the many threats to the Green Belt in the area.

[3] Sir Max referred to statistics in Simon Jenkins' report *Big Bang Localism: A rescue plan for British Democracy*, (page 13, Policy Exchange / Localis November 2004), showing that the UK has the highest ratio of voters to elected representatives in Western Europe, eg: France: 116:1 Spain: 597:1 UK: 2,605:1, and that elected representatives in the UK are outnumbered 3:1 by appointees and members of unelected bodies.

[4] An announcement from the Minister is expected later this month on the results of a feasibility study and consultation on 3 options for increasing capacity between M6 junctions 11a and 19 (Cannock to Knutsford)

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