

TRUE BLUE PROMISE!

FOURTEEN Tory MPs have called for action to release vacant city land for development, writes Peter Poole.

They articulate some of the steps that the Thatcher government ought to take, if it is sincere about solving the problem of city centre blight, in a new booklet published by the Conservative Political Centre. They call for:

- A national land use survey: the Department of the Environment relies on land use statistics produced by the late Robin Best, which are far from satisfactory;

- A Land Register which identifies privately-owned vacant land as well as sites in public ownership suitable for housing;

- A Public Auction Notice System, designed to force public authorities to release undeveloped land to the private sector at market prices.

The vested interest behind these proposals is the need to protect the Tory vote in the shires. Villages now carry more of the burden of housing and industrial development which is spilling out from the metropolitan centres. The MPs fear that their electorally-secure rural

* Nicholas Baker and Jerry Wiggin, *This Pleasant Land: A New Strategy for Planning*, London: Conservative Political Centre, £1.95.

havens might one day become "pockets of rural decay".

"It would be short-sighted and self-defeating to allow this to happen," say the authors. But in wanting to draw the teeth of socialist councillors they add: "The Conservative party cannot afford to allow our great cities, particularly in the north of England, to fall deeper and deeper into the clutches of hard-left councils which have a vested interest in exploiting social tensions."*

Unfortunately, the MPs have not learnt from past mistakes. For example, they call for an exemption from the proposed national business rate (the local property tax) for up to five years for newly constructed commercial or industrial premises in the inner cities. They characterise that exemption as "a powerful incentive", and as proof they point to the developments that have taken place inside enterprise zones, where there is relief from rates.

In fact, exemption from rates

in enterprise zones pushed up rents and the price of land: the benefits were reaped by landowners who, by speculatively holding onto their idle sites were the ones who caused the problem of under-development in the first place!

But the MPs do hint at one sensible suggestion. Money invested in the rehabilitation of existing buildings should benefit from tax allowances. But how much more dynamic, then, would be the policy of *taxing site values* — which would force owners to relinquish their land, if they did not want to develop it — and compensating for this by *untaxing capital improvements*, which would encourage capital investment.

The Conservative Government has not yet set its sights on such a positive market-oriented strategy. It still sees a solution in terms of planning and moral suasion. But the call for a land use survey from such a strong block of backbenchers is encouraging: and we have to hope that, one day, the party may recognise fiscal reform as the permanent solution.

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to significantly reduce the usefulness of the data to others. In view of the usefulness of HM Land Registry ownership data and Valuation Office transaction data for individual properties we believe there is a strong case for removing the constraints on releasing these data to any interested parties."

So persuaded was the Committee of this point that it forms its main legislative proposal:

We recommend that there should be open access to details of land ownership contained in the HMLR's Register of Title and to

details of land and property transactions held by the VO and the Valuation & Lands office of Northern Ireland. This would bring England and Wales and Northern Ireland into line with Scotland. The necessary legislation to lift current restrictions should be introduced as soon as practicable.

The Chorley Report represents a radical initiative regarding the government's fact-finding capability: this resource should not continue to be devoted simply to meeting its own needs in the cheapest way.

The report goes on: "Information needs to be seen as a corpor-

ate resource and be more widely shared between departments and organisations ... A major promotional exercise is required to maximise returns on the existing national investment in geographic information ... Charges for data should be at a marginal cost, and only at a higher rate if the market will bear it."

In other words, information is a "public good", and public goods should be made to yield the maximum public benefit. Imperfect information is a constraint on the market economy. Chorley has pointed us down the path towards that provision.