



Campaign to Protect
Rural England
OXFORDSHIRE

Save Radley Lakes Meeting 9 February 2007

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Thank you for the invitation to speak to tonight's meeting. I am here because CPRE believes that the destruction of Thrupp Lake is an act of vandalism against the environment and the community. npower's wish to infill the Lake is not being driven by any pressing need. Simply a desire for lower costs and higher profits, which surely are no longer excuses to destroy a valued landscape. I am here because Thrupp Lake is beautiful and because it is much loved by the community that uses it. That is second time I have used the "community" word. It an important word, but one that is much abused.

Last week, I had to make an urgent visit to my doctor with chest pains. Fortunately, it proved to be only a cracked rib. When the doctor inquired how I might have sustained such an injury, I replied, somewhat tongue in cheek, "through laughing". While in the waiting room, I had been browsing new guidance from Ruth Kelly's department on how planners can create "sustainable communities". In truth, I lied to the doctor because that guidance was more laughable than funny. The very thought that Whitehall bureaucrats can define how a community is created and sustained is plain daft. But this is how the concept of community is being abused in planning.

"Environment" is another problematic, even abused, concept. Many years ago environmentalists were against almost all development. But now they are quite often collaborators with developers. In many ways, this is right. Development is sometimes essential, and in these cases working with the developers to improve habitats and to mitigate impacts is the right thing to do.

But what if environmental values clash with community values? This situation regularly occurs at the moment with battles around the nation over wind farms. And this is the situation we have at Radley Lakes and Warneford Meadow. In the case of the wind farms, the battles are between two different sorts of environmentalists; those that treasure the landscape and those fighting the global emergency of climate change. In the case of Thrupp Lake, ecologists are being used,

perhaps abused, to argue that the destruction of the landscape is of no consequence. Because npower have no moral case for destruction of the Lake, spokesmen such as Leon Flexman, love to tell us that "the local wildlife trust didn't object" or "our work will supervised by ecologists". The truth is that ecologists and community groups often view the landscape in very different ways. Guided by European legislation, and money flows with such legislation, environmentalists are focused on Biodiversity Action Priorities (BAPs) and a whole heap of HAPs, SPAs, SSSIs and more. What many ecologists have yet to learn is this. Just because a landscape is not designated and just because it may not be top ranking in biodiversity, that does not mean that it is not valued by communities.

I said that communities often see their landscape differently from others. Surely, if a community loves a chunk of landscape, that ought to be reason enough for its protection? However unlike the environment, there is very little legislation protecting community values. Perhaps that is a good thing. As I said at the beginning, some of the thinking of central government on communities is laughable, even risible. But we are faced with the reality that if a landscape cannot be shoehorned into some sort of protected status, it is vulnerable to destruction.

That is why Jo Cartmell's application for Town Green status for Thrupp and Bullfield Lakes is so important. The whole point about this piece of legislation is that it defines a "green" in terms of community perspectives, in terms of how land is used and valued. It does not take account of whether it is beautiful or biodiverse. Indeed, the recent Trapp Grounds case in Oxford could not illustrate this point better. Trapp Grounds does have its areas of beauty and biodiversity but it also has mounds of building rubble and is in parts decrepit. "No matter" the House of Lords said. It is the use of the land by the community that matters. The Commons Registration Act is one of the few pieces of community legislation that we can use to preserve landscape, for the simple reason that it is loved and well used.

I am not a lawyer or planner, and I cannot tell you whether the application will succeed. But I do hope it will. It deserves to succeed because the local community wants it to. And because npower's proposal is a despicable act of vandalism unworthy of a civilised society. And because Thrupp Lake is a beautiful lake.