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NEW TOWNS DEVELOPMENT

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As an English observer of the American urban scene, I welcome the appearance of a symposium concerning the problems of new towns development. The symposium properly draws on both the English and French experiences to indicate problems which must be resolved in an effective American new towns program. Although the legal and administrative structure for the building of these new communities is treated elsewhere in this symposium, a brief discussion of the history and nature of the English new towns movement can serve as an introduction to the articles that follow.

The first purpose of new towns was, and still is, a simple one. Ebenezer Howard, the founder of the new towns movement, saw them as compact urban settlements set in the garden of the countryside—hence the term “garden city.” To them would move families and firms from the overgrown and overcrowded large cities. The strategy was to build enough new towns well away from the parent city’s fringes both to absorb the region’s pressures for growth and, more importantly, to reduce population, employment and land values in the congested and often squalid inner districts of the metropolis. This would permit the rebuilding of the cities to meet much better standards for family life and for business enterprise. Howard also advocated conservation of the countryside around new towns and the metropolis—a “green belt” policy. His new towns would be individually small, but grouped to form a highly articulated network with a much larger total population. Mumford alone of the urban philosophers has appreciated Howard’s remarkable foresight in evolving at the end of the nineteenth century a regional design fitted to the trends and technology of the mid-twentieth century.

In launching two new towns himself, at Letchworth and then at Welwyn,

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Howard tried to trigger-off the process and to demonstrate to the government that it could be done. Eventually, though belatedly, he succeeded, and between 1946 and 1950 twelve new towns were started in England and Wales and two in Scotland. But out of the first fourteen, only the eight around London and one near Glasgow performed the "overspill" function first contemplated by Howard. The other five were not related to large cities at all but were established to resolve particular local problems: for example, to organise new housing and town facilities in an area of employment growth, or to build those things and at the same time draw in new industry to diversify the local employment structure.

The six more recent new towns, however, and the proposals to expand further some of the earlier ones, are all related to the continuing growth and worsening congestion of big cities. Even so, almost all of the new ones have additional functions. Washington, about which Dick Atkinson writes, is intended to accommodate families moving out from the crowded Tyne-side conurbation. As important, it must also become an attractive location to draw new industry and enterprise into a region still over-dependent on basic industries in relative decline. Lastly, it will provide work and homes together for families now living in the smaller mining towns of the north-east region who might otherwise move out of the region altogether as the mines close and job prospects dwindle.

So "more new towns" is not just an automatic response by British planners to the country's diverse regional problems. There is widespread understanding now among planners, politicians and the public of the need for a comprehensive policy for each of the great urban agglomerations in and around which almost two-thirds of Britain's people live. Four aspects of policy are common to all these urban regions. First there is the need to define and hold green belts around the big cities to prevent their further outward sprawl. Then come the new towns and town expansion schemes beyond the green belt to which firms and families are attracted and where they can grow. With this must go a much larger programme for rebuilding the crowded cities to modern, superior, more open standards. Lastly, the most difficult aspect of all, is the need for an administrative and financial system for inhibiting or preventing the building of factories and offices in overcrowded centres and at the same time for stimulating their building in new towns and town expansions. The new Government's recent decision virtually to ban further office building or rebuilding in London for an indefinite period exemplifies this approach, as do, on the other hand, the capital grants and tax allowances offered to firms setting up in regions of relatively high (above four per cent) unemployment.

In those regions more new towns are being designated primarily to help

with their necessary internal redistribution of population and employment. But their secondary function of attracting private investment and productive enterprise into the region is hardly less important. And in some cases the new town corporation will have to redevelop extensive blighted areas of a small industrial town selected for expansion into a sizeable (80,000 to 100,000) new industrial town.

There can be little doubt that America needs a new towns programme similar in concept though much larger in scale. But this will not come without recognition that the entire city-region must be treated as a single planning unit; and that the broad aims of regional policy must be to stimulate growth in those places where it can be accommodated and well-planned, to inhibit growth in congested centres, to reserve large tracts of open land around and between towns and cities, to coordinate transportation plans, and perhaps above all else to renew more quickly and in better ways than now the decaying quarters of the great cities. Urban renewal and new towns are complementary, not competitive processes.

An effective partnership between public and private enterprise is the first pre-requisite. It is a continuing disappointment to British observers that there appear no clear signs of its emergence.