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MAGAZINE

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They are being sold off, built on, neglected and taken over by thugs. Today we launch a vital campaign:

SAVE OUR PARKS

By Michael Powell

THOUSANDS of parks are falling into disrepair or being sold off by cash-strapped councils, The Mail on Sunday reveals today. Children's play areas are being closed, grass is being left to over-grow, and flowerbeds are being

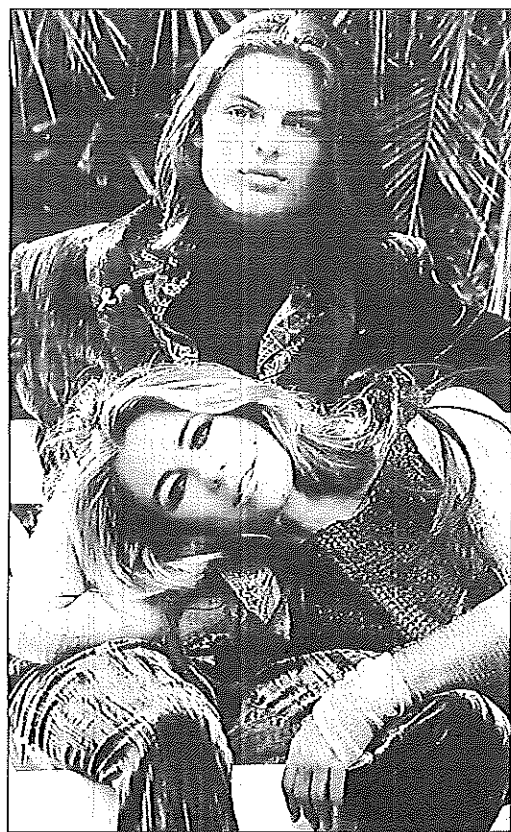
The Mail ON SUNDAY CAMPAIGN

removed at hundreds of sites across the country. Other parks are becoming 'no-go zones' plagued by drug users and

anti-social behaviour as staff are withdrawn. In the worst cases, councils are flogging chunks of parkland to housing developers to raise money – despite huge protests and while wasting millions on vanity projects elsewhere.

Our investigation found that almost one in three councils had sold off

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HURLEY & SON Incredible first joint photo shoot

SEE PAGE 3

They're selling off

From Page One

green space in the past 12 months – and one in five planned to sell off land within the next three years.

Critics say the crisis poses the biggest threat to Britain's parks since they were founded in the Victorian era to promote health and wellbeing.

The Mail on Sunday today launches a major campaign to halt the decline and issues a plea to the Government to intervene before it is too late. Other key findings from our investigation include:

- One in three parks no longer has any staff on site, fuelling fears of a rise in crime;
- Three-quarters of councils say they have cut back on park maintenance;
- 214 play areas across England have been shut since 2014, with 234 more planned;
- Park funding has been slashed by at least £15million in the past two years, with some councils cutting budgets by as much as £750,000;
- 95 per cent of councils expect to make further cuts to parks in the next five years.

Last night campaigners warned that the future of Britain's 27,000 parks were at a 'tipping point'. They said many would be lost for ever unless the Government forced town hall bosses to set aside more money for their upkeep.

About 37million people – more than half the UK population – regularly visit parks, and

'Once you have sold off the land, it is lost for ever'

researchers say Britain's parks provide £34billion in health and social benefits.

Studies have also found growing up near a park can boost children's school results and may cut the risk of asthma and breathing problems in adulthood.

However, there is currently no statutory requirement for councils to fund or maintain parks. As a result, they are able to cut budgets to as little as they like – and many have slashed them to almost nothing.

Newcastle City Council, for instance, has slashed its budget by 97 per cent and handed over the running of its parks to a charitable trust, leaving it in the hands of volunteers.

Earlier this year, Bristol City Council made a similar move to save £2.8million a year.

The major threat that cuts such as these pose to the future of parks was highlighted in a recent survey of park managers from 134 councils by the Association of Public Service Excellence.

Two-thirds of them said they would axe more staff within the next 12 months, as well as revealing details about the state of their parks and plans to sell off green spaces.

The survey also found there had been a 57 per cent reduction in bedding or flower displays in the past 12 months, and 41 per cent of councils were cutting the grass less often.

According to separate Freedom of Information requests submitted by public services union Unison, 207 local authorities have cut their park budgets by a total of more than £15million since 2016.

Sunderland City Council admitted it had wiped £752,000 off its budget between 2016 and 2018. Edinburgh City Council had cut its budget by £860,000.

Town hall chiefs have pleaded poverty and blamed the cuts on central government austerity measures. But research by The Mail on Sunday found that were spending vast sums on vanity projects and new headquarters.

OLD FARM PARK, SIDCUP

BUILT ON



New houses will blight half the land

ACROSS the country, park users are dismayed at plans to tarmac over green spaces and turn them into new housing estates.

In Sidcup, South-East London, the local council has given the green light to build 60 new homes at Old Farm Park, despite strong opposition and a petition signed by 2,500 people against the plan.

Almost half the park will be lost to the hundreds of people who use it every day.

Father-of-two Garry Cooper, 49, who walks his golden retriever dog Koda in the park, said: 'It is

mortifying. The trouble is once it has gone it has gone.'

Childminder Diana Brient, who was walking with two of her five grandchildren – Teddy, eight, and Ivy, five – in the park on Friday, said she was 'heartbroken' adding: 'It is too beautiful to ruin.'

During his successful

They want
60
new homes
built on park...

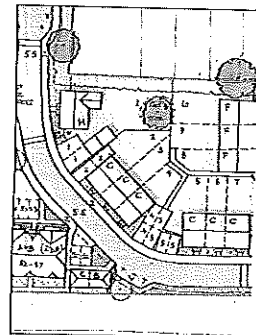
...even though
2,500
locals signed a
protest petition

campaign to become London Mayor, Sadiq Khan branded the park's sale a 'disgrace'.

Meanwhile, villagers in the picturesque seaside resort of Westward Ho! in Devon are fighting plans to build ten houses on their village green, reducing it almost by half.

Around 4,000 people have signed a petition against the plan and there is a crunch council meeting tomorrow to decide whether it should go ahead.

Campaigner Nick Laws said: 'All the health experts say we must preserve our open spaces.'



'HEARTBREAKING': Architects

Labour-run Middlesbrough Council shut a children's play area to save £3,000 a year, while councillors splashed £32,000 on a banquet for champagne-swilling VIPs to celebrate its reopening of the town hall after an £8million makeover.

In Torquay, the council has paved and grassed over its flower beds yet has spent more than £1.3million

in the past three years putting on an air show.

Other parks under threat include Old Farm Park in Sidcup, South-East London, where the council is

planning to build 60 new homes, despite strong local opposition.

In Stone, Staffordshire, the council is planning to sell one third of Tilling Drive Recreation Park for £1million to a firm which runs private nursing homes.

Campaigner Neil Richardson, 61, said: 'Once you've sold it, it's lost for good – it's a travesty.'

The Mail on Sunday is calling for a new legal powers to force council chiefs to ring-fence £30 per household per year to pay for parks – a figure that environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy estimates to be enough to plug an estimated £1 billion funding gap.

We also call for councils to be given a legal duty to manage all green space to a good standard, and for a ban on development or the inappropriate use of park land. The

The Mail on Sunday

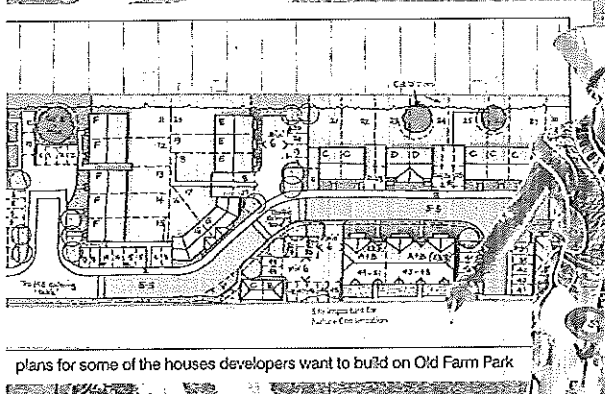
SAVE OUR PARKS

CAMPAIGN

WHAT WE'RE DEMANDING

- A statutory requirement for councils to ring-fence funding for parks at £30 per household, per year.
- A legal duty for all green space to be managed to a good standard.
- New rules banning development on, or the inappropriate use of, parkland.
- A new central Government fund to provide emergency help for the parks most at risk and ensure the long-term future of Britain's green spaces.

our green spaces



plans for some of the houses developers want to build on Old Farm Park



NETHERFIELDS PARK, MIDDLESBROUGH

LOCKED UP

Cost of council's bash could keep shut play area open for a decade

BARRED: George Martin, five, at the gates erected to stop children using Netherfields Park, above

HUNDREDS of play areas across Britain have closed because local authorities claim they do not have the money to keep them open. But councils somehow still find vast sums for vanity projects.

In Middlesbrough, Netherfields Park has been shut behind a 6ft fence for the last three years, leaving a £63,000 play area tantalisingly out of reach of children.

Middlesbrough Council says it cannot afford £3,000 a year to pay for a warden to open the

park. But they recently splurged £32,000 on a lavish 'Midsummer Banquet' for local dignitaries – enough to keep the park open for a decade.

The party was thrown to celebrate the £8million renovation of the council-owned Town Hall concert venue. Guests swilled champagne, followed by a three-course meal with wine and entertainment from dozens of performers

They won't pay
£3,000
to keep play
area open...

...but they blew
£32k
on lavish party
for VIP guests

including the Spark! drumming group, pictured left.

Furious grandmother Jan Mohan, an independent councillor, said: 'It's disgusting. The council says it doesn't have the money to pay for this park in a poor area, but it's got the money for VIP parties.'

And last month George Chillmaid complained to a local newspaper: 'We've got kids playing on the road while there's a park worth £63,000 locked up.'

A council spokesman said it has found a volunteer who will open the park daily for free, adding that the town hall launch was paid out of 'capital budget', which cannot be spent on day-to-day expenses.

Government should also set up a central fund to provide emergency support for the parks most at risk of closure or decay and to ensure the long-term maintenance of green spaces.

Keep Britain Tidy is backing our campaign. Chief executive Allison Ogden-Newton said: 'We need to fight for parks' survival because they are crucial to the health of the nation and once they are gone you can never get them back.'

'This is has become an urgent crisis – if nothing is done soon, it may be too late.'

'People may have seen some early warning signs of the significant cuts that are threatening the future of our parks: flowerbeds full of weeds and shrubs not pruned; bins emptied less often; damage to play equipment and buildings

not being repaired, or the facilities removed,' she said.

'Our parks are a national asset and the envy of the world. If we do not find a way to fund them and standards fall, we know that people will stop using them and anti-social behaviour will creep in – effectively turning them into no-go zones.'

In some areas, volunteers are stepping in to keep their parks running, with some even putting in their own money to stop the rot. But campaigners say the situation

is unsustainable. Dave Morris, of the National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces, warned: 'Time is running out. The public will not forgive politicians who let the sun set on the UK's parks.'

Last year, a select committee of MPs warned 'parks are at a tipping point and face a period of decline with potentially severe consequences'.

In response, the Government set up an action group with Parks and Green Spaces Minister, Rishi

Sunak, vowing to 'do all we can to protect and improve' parks.

But campaigners are becoming increasingly concerned that not enough action is being taken.

Prince William heads the charity Fields In Trust, which works to protect public green spaces from being sold off. He said recently: 'Access to parks and green spaces can help us to stay physically and mentally well, reduce social isolation and instil pride in our local communities. Whether it is playing sport,

socialising with friends or taking a moment for quiet reflection, parks and green spaces quite simply make us happier.'

Helen Griffiths, chief executive of Fields In Trust, said: 'Parks that are not cared for attract fewer visitors and are then easier to sell off for development. This spiral of decline will have health and social impacts – and once a park is gone, it is gone for ever.'

Comment: Page 25

IS YOUR PARK UNDER THREAT?

Email your story to:

parks@mailonsunday.co.uk

or write to: Save our Parks Campaign, Mail on Sunday,

Northcliffe House, Derry Street, London W8 5TT

ABBEY GARDENS, TORQUAY

Victorian flower beds ripped up as gardeners culled

PARKS are being deliberately run down by cost-cutting councils.

In Torquay – once the jewel in the crown of the English Riviera – the vibrant flower beds in Cary Green pavilion, right, which dated back to the Victorian era, have been grassed over. Those in Abbey Park Gardens, below right, have been filled in with concrete.

Local campaigner Cordelia Law said: 'Torquay used to employ gardeners who regularly won national acclaim and recognition and Gold Medals at the Chelsea Flower Show. Nowadays it is the council's waste management company that tends our open green spaces and gardens.'

Torbay Council has cut £150,000 from its parks budget since 2015, and recently introduced a freeze on all 'non-urgent' spending to plug a £2.8million hole in its finances.

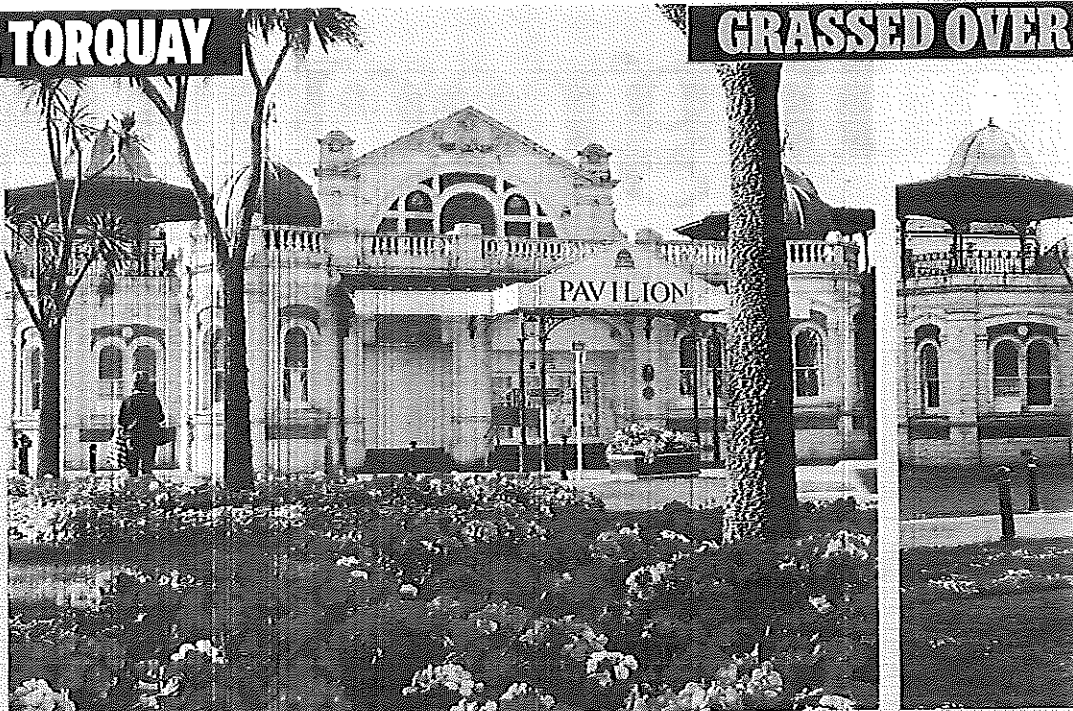
But the same council has splurged more than £1.3 million in the past three years hosting the Torbay Air Show, which features flypasts by the Red Arrows, a Spitfire and aerobatic wingwalkers.

In London, Brent Council announced earlier this year that it will allow swathes of its parks to turn to meadow to save £450,000 a year. Furious parents say their children have suffered insect bites in the long grass.

Despite cutting its spending on parks, Brent councillors signed off £17.8million to pay for new steps leading up to Wembley Stadium. The plan was withdrawn after a backlash.

Budget cut by
£150,000
for local parks
since 2015...

...but council spent
£1.3m
on hosting
air shows



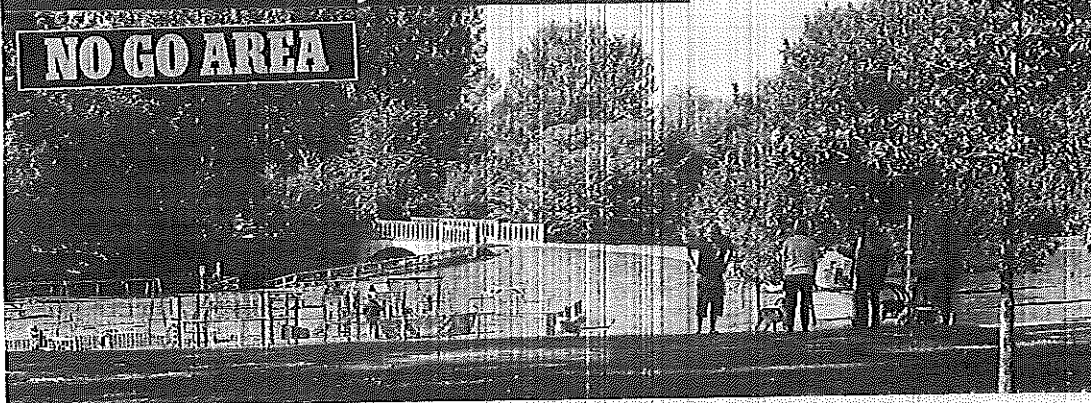
GRASSED OVER



CONCRETED

ADMIRALS PARK, CHELMSFORD

NO GO AREA



'I wouldn't go in after dark... or even some areas in day'

BRITAIN'S parks face becoming no-go areas if they are allowed to decline.

A hard-hitting report by MPs last year warned that parks could revert to the 'disaster' of the 1980s and 1990s when drug-taking and anti-social behaviour were rife.

Residents in Chelmsford, Essex, have raised concerns about increasing crime at Admirals Park, above.

Official figures show a 50 per cent increase in crime in the park between 2016 and 2017, while reports of violent and sexual offences doubled last year.

Margaret Moy, whose corner shop near the park has suffered two armed robberies in the past year, said: 'There is drug dealing

going on and it is attracting a certain type of person.'

'The last time two men in balaclavas came into the shop and threatened me with a meat cleaver. They took £80 from the till and ran off into the park.'

'We've had the shop for 12 years with no problems – but in the space of a year we've had two robberies.'

Liberal Democrat councillor Jude Deakin said she had appealed in vain to Chelmsford City Council for CCTV costing £15,000 to be installed to monitor the park's entrance.

She added: 'It is a lovely park and it's vital we do everything we can to protect it.'

'It's getting worse. I wouldn't go there after

dark, and there are certain parts which are probably best avoided even during the day.'

'We have seen a spike of robberies and break-ins in houses around the park recently and reports of strange people hanging about near back gardens.'

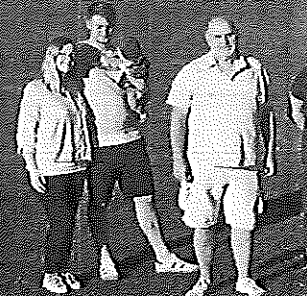
'It all goes hand in hand with the drug dealing that is going on.'

There's been a
50%
rise in crime
in the park...

...while council spent
£0
on installing
CCTV cameras

TILLING DRIVE

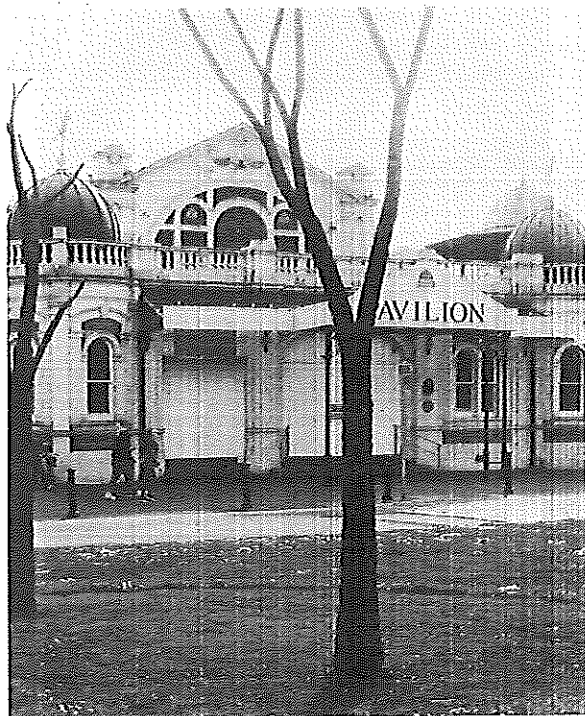
SOLD OFF



'Once you've

A THIRD of councils have raised money by auctioning off parkland in the past year, according to a study by the Association for Public Service Excellence.

Residents in Stone, Staffordshire, above, have been rocked by plans to sell a chunk of Tilling Drive Recreation Park. Leaked council papers reveal it has received a £1million offer from a residential care firm to build a 66-bed nursing home there. Stafford Borough Council said



SAVE GARY GREEN /IAN MCGLOTHLIN



PARK, STAFFS



sold land, it is lost for good'

that cash raised from selling off the land will be earmarked for a £10million leisure centre ten miles away. But campaigner Neil Richardson, 61, said: 'Once you've sold it, it's lost for good - it's a travesty. You can't sell it twice, so what do they do when

they need more money in a few years' time?' It is a similar story in Scunthorpe, where the council plans to sell Quibell Park to housing developers for an estimated £2million.

North Lincolnshire Council rejected a petition signed by more than 2,400 residents against plans to build 91 houses there, saying it is urgently required for affordable housing.

The council is in the process of moving its 600 staff to a new £5.7million headquarters in Scunthorpe town centre.

Council to make
£1m
from selling
off park...

...while building
£10m
leisure centre
ten miles away

Parks are our natural health service - let's fight for them

W E USE our local park almost every day. Round the back of my house, it's where my son is learning how to ride his bike. Never to be outdone, his barely toddling little sister is convinced she can now scoot (she can't).

Even if it's a quick 20-minute session, both always seem to sleep better on the days we get there.

If fresh air and exercise are what help keep us healthy, then our local parks are our natural health service. They are like a drop-in surgery, where you never need an appointment and you always leave feeling better.

Worrying figures revealed today by The Mail on Sunday suggest this is in danger. Three-quarters of local authorities say budget cuts are affecting parks and green spaces, with nearly all admitting they will reduce park services in the years ahead. Most alarming, one in five intends to sell off chunks of parkland, raising the prospect of swathes of green being turned into concrete.

The warning signs of a hastening decline are ever more obvious. You'll have noticed overflowing bins or grass that hasn't been cut in months, or dog foul or graffiti that hasn't been cleaned up.

As ITV's national editor, I've seen plenty of evidence that this is happening all over the country. In Preston, I've met walkers and runners unable to indulge their passion as their council lets paths disintegrate to craggy dangerous ruins, leaving hazard signs in place for months rather than maintain the greenery.

In Liverpool, Bristol and Kent I've seen parks become menacing no-go areas. While filming in Birmingham at dusk, a large park quickly filled with 20 aggressive lads who turned it into a place where no one would feel safe. Almost two-thirds of councils agree there's a link between a poorly kept park and crime.

It is becoming clear that these examples are the thin end of the wedge. First, budget cuts lead to park rangers and wardens losing their jobs, and cafes and leisure centres closing. The park starts to generate less revenue. Councils then decide there's no money to clear up dog foul or graffiti. Families increasingly stay away as gangs take their place.

And then the bulldozers start up. The London borough of Bexley has defied a residents' campaign and built 30 houses and 30 flats on one of its parks. Devon's Westward Ho! Village green park is about to make way for ten houses.



By **ALLEGRA STRATTON**

NATIONAL EDITOR OF ITV NEWS

In Stone, Staffordshire, a third of Tilling Drive Recreation Park is up for sale, with talk of a nursing home provider moving in.

It's hard to think of a public policy problem that isn't helped by parks. All roads lead to the park. According to research published in May, parks save the NHS more than £111million a year and deliver £34billion of health benefits, staving off dementia, dulling loneliness, improving memory, reducing obesity and averting type 2 diabetes.

Allowing parks to go into decline is the definition of a false economy. Take away the natural health service and you'll pile costs on to the National Health Service.

If the triangle of greenery behind my home is a drop-in surgery for keeping fit, larger parks such as the 53 acres of Clissold Park a little further away are more like super-duper health clubs. The incredible perk? They're free. Local kids who fire tennis balls about go on to compete nationally.

TO DO 10k, I run around it three times, nodding to other runners. Once, running after sunset I was locked in. I had to scale the railings and in the dark, a passing young man held out his arms for me to jump down. To adapt Margaret Thatcher's remark 'there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and... families', we could retort: 'There's no such thing as society, it's the park'.

Like so many other wonderful pieces of infrastructure, our parks were established by the Victorians at the height of industrialisation. As patches of town like mine morphed from meadows into 19th Century metropolises, people worried that working families would lose green spaces in which to exercise and unwind.

My local Clissold Park, for instance, would have been turned into housing if hadn't been for Joseph Beck, who in 1884 launched a campaign to raise £10million in today's money to buy the land. Even though he got

cancer of the tongue and had half of it removed, he continued his crusade and won, giving us a deer park, an aviary, the lot.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove has talked about saving national parks, quoting Philip Larkin's 'lament for the erosion and destruction of our natural environment under the pressures of corporate greed'. In Larkin's own words: 'And that will be England gone... all that remains for us will be concrete and tyres.'

Indeed, The Government has to think fast about how parks are funded. Currently, there is no statutory requirement for councils to fund and maintain their parks. This must change.

We need laws forcing local authorities to ring-fence the money required to keep parks going. Environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy estimates that £30 per household a year would suffice. That seems a sensible place to start. There should also be a legal duty for all green spaces to be well-kept - and strict rules banning development on existing parkland. Many will find it shocking this isn't already the case.

Parks will continue to hire themselves out for fairs and concerts. These profits, too, should be ring-fenced for the parks, and there should be time limits on how long a festival can trash a lawn.

Alternatively, we face dipping into our own pockets. Fundraising for Clissold Park in the 1880s saw modest and poor Victorians alike contribute subscriptions until the target was reached. When New York's Central Park was spruced up in the 1970s, they asked all residents for a dollar.

About this time last year, my son and I brought home a haul of 60 conkers. He lined them up on the kitchen floor and we felt richer than Philip Green. It never occurred to me that anyone could charge for that simple pleasure.

Now the idea that you should have to pay every time you go to the park - or that it might disappear altogether - is becoming all too real. But if even a Victorian with a half a tongue could stop it, we can too.

The Tories need to understand why Labour is so popular ...Corbyn's stolen Mrs Thatcher's best lines

THREE years after Jeremy Corbyn seized control of Labour, the Tories are still baffled. The Opposition is now run by people with the worst ideas in politics. A collection of old-school far-Left ideologues who spent the 1980s arguing that Michael Foot was too Right-wing, and the 1990s and Noughties in despair at the way history was systematically disproving every one of their ideas about how the world should be run.

Party leader Jeremy Corbyn and Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, in other words, are people who have learned nothing and forgotten nothing. Who divide the economy into three categories: things the state should tax, ban or own.

McDonnell lists his intellectual heroes as Marx, Lenin and Trotsky. Corbyn responds to a train delay due to signalling problems by tweeting about the urgent need for nationalisation – despite the signals already being under state control.

When all you have is a hammer and sickle, every problem looks like a nail.

What baffles the Tories is that this gruesome twosome – whose ideas are infused with an ugly cocktail of prejudice, propaganda and poison – remain stubbornly close to taking power.

How to explain it? The answer is that the Conservatives are making a fatal error.

Their central argument has been that Corbyn and McDonnell want to take Britain back to the 1970s. 'Look, I have kids,' Chancellor Philip Hammond told last year's Conservative Party conference. 'I understand we will not engage them simply by droning on about some previously fought war: "I remember the Winter of Discontent!" He then went on to do exactly that.'

But Labour's conference in Liverpool last week revealed a more worrying truth. The party's leaders are now cribbing not just from Marx, but also an altogether more surprising figure – Margaret Thatcher.

McDonnell and others on the new old-Left have realised that Thatcherism – which they spent the 1980s reviling – was actually popular. And that was largely because it offered people ownership and control. Ownership of council houses, of shares in the privatised industries. And



By **ROBERT COLVILLE**

DIRECTOR OF CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

control of their lives and futures by slashing taxes, cutting regulation, facing down the unions and taming inflation.

Last week, Labour talked relentlessly about ownership. Its latest glossy party political broadcast adds that message about control – a direct lift not just from Thatcher, but from the (Tory-dominated) Vote Leave campaign.

Where Thatcher told people (rightly) that militant trade unions were preventing them from having the freedom to live good lives, McDonnell says (wrongly) that 'the Tories' and 'the bosses' are doing the same.

This isn't just about messaging, though. Labour's ideologues now argue that Thatcher's privatisation was popular because it created winners: it took ownership from 'the people' and gave it to actual people, via mass share offers.

SO Labour is selling its renationalisation plans as being about taking from 'the shareholders' and giving to the workers. It is, of course, a con.

Nowhere does Labour mention the upfront borrowing involved in buying these firms back – a total, we at the Centre for Policy Studies have calculated, of at least £176 billion in market prices – the equivalent of £6,500 for every household or ten per cent on the national debt.

Nor does Labour explain how it will simultaneously deliver increased investment, lower bills for consumers and bumper pay rises for the unions. But it is superficially appealing – it pushes all the right buttons.

The same is true of Labour's promise to put workers on boards. It, too, polls extremely well. It, too, is wrapped in talk of mass ownership, of giving control back to the workers.

It is only when you read the small print you find the only workers given this privi-

lege will be members of hard-Left unions.

As if this weren't enough, the new old-Left has also stolen another Conservative idea: localism. Having fought for years to seize control of the commanding heights of the state, it now argues that nationalised industries failed not because they were nationalised, but because they were national: unaccountable monoliths run in the interests of Whitehall rather than the workers.

The promise now, is to hand power back to the people, across the land. But unlike the Tory version of localism – which is based on giving power back to individuals – Labour will give it to 'the community'. Which means the control of every company by its unions, every school by its NUT activists, every council by its Momentum branch.

Labour's new vision is not of one supreme Soviet in Westminster, but a thousand tiny politburos, each propped up by the confiscation of wealth from the rich and the opening of the public spending floodgates.

The reason this matters so much is because, as they gather for their own conference this week, the Tories are still fighting the last war. They still see Corbynism purely as reheated socialism – rather than reheated socialism in packaging shamelessly filched from their own past Election winners.

And it also has huge implications for how the Conservatives should respond. A message of continuity, of strong and stable leadership, lets Labour claim the mantle of change – as does the Tory tendency to photocopy large chunks of Ed Miliband's manifesto, offering Diet Labour to voters who have the option of the real thing.

The best answer to a Labour agenda based on talk of ownership, opportunity and control of your own life is a Tory agenda based on exactly the same thing – one that delivers substance

rather than just form. And the good news is that there are enormous opportunities for the Tories to do so.

Take the all-important topic of home ownership. Polling at the Centre for Policy Studies has revealed that making housing more affordable is the single thing that young voters most want from government. And they want to make it cheaper to buy, not to rent.

Solving the housing crisis is not just a social imperative, but a political one. Labour's surge at the 2017 Election was, statistics show, almost entirely driven by disgruntled renters. There is nothing more likely to flip a voter from Labour to Tory than owning a home.

ALL the great Tory vote winners of the 20th Century had home ownership at or near the top of their agenda: Baldwin in the 1930s, Macmillan in the 1950s, Thatcher in the 1980s. Even David Cameron, in 2015, promised to expand Right to Buy to housing associations and build 200,000 starter homes. Yet those pledges remain stuck in the Whitehall machine.

Labour is now promising to build hundreds of thousands of homes. But it isn't nearly as keen on people actually owning them. The Right to Buy council houses, that emblematic vehicle for delivering home ownership to the masses, will be abolished because it takes from the state and gives to the individual.

It's not McDonnell's only potential weak point. The far-Left increasingly views work as a necessary evil – something inflicted upon 'the people' by 'the shareholders'. Hence the recent obsession with abolishing the gig economy and introducing a four-day week. Conservatives, and voters, view work as a moral obligation.

Never mind Brexit. Given the threat the Labour leader poses to the prosperity and security of this country, the most important task in British politics today is to Stop Corbyn.

To do so, the Tories need to understand their enemy – and take back the language and ideas that have been stolen from them.

● Robert Colville is Director of the Centre for Policy Studies

The **Mail**
ON SUNDAY

Our parks are a priceless asset to us all

FIRST they concreted over the school playing fields. Now the parks of Britain are in danger. Just as science discovers for certain that exercise is the key to health, greedy developers and lazy, mean town halls threaten to destroy the only places where most of us can find room to run and walk.

Just as a noisy, restless, overcrowded world begins to yearn more than ever for shade, peace, clean air and space, these priceless things start to vanish.

In an age of flat-dwelling, disappearing front gardens and shrinking back gardens, the glorious Victorian legacy of municipal parks has never been more precious or more needed.

Astonishingly, local authorities are under no obligation to maintain the parks they have inherited from wiser forebears. This leaves them free to pursue the flashy vanity projects and politically correct activities they love so much, at the expense of green space, flower beds and playgrounds.

The most shocking example of this is Middlesbrough's refusal to pay £3,000 a year for a warden to open a padlocked park and play area – while it managed to find £32,000 to pay for local notables to guzzle costly food and wine.

But there are hundreds of less outrageous examples of the same thing. Unloved, short of gardeners, no longer patrolled by the keepers who used to ensure order and safety, parks decline.

Beneath neglected trees, weeds choke paths and flowerbeds. Drug-dealers and petty criminals begin to feel at home, while parents and children are afraid to enter. Yet more territory is ceded to vandals, litter louts and lawbreakers.

And so the councils involved find it ever easier to lop off pieces of these decaying parks, pointing out truthfully that the public make little use of them, and hand them over to developers. As The Mail on Sunday's special report so graphically demonstrates today, this is a process that is frighteningly well-advanced. One in five local authorities plans to raise money by selling off parkland in the next three years. One in three has already done so.

This is a terrible mistake. Once lost, this precious space will be gone for good. Town halls are notorious for falling for disastrous fashions that look foolish 20 years later, from tower blocks to inner ring-roads. This particular folly looks stupid already.

Local authorities themselves must listen to the protests against their neglect of parks, then find the money to keep them safe and clean. They must also stop selling them off. But central government should act to make the provision of permanent, inviolable green space, well maintained and conserved, an absolute duty. It is a key part of our national health.

Brilliance of Britain

IN THE Great Exhibition of 1851, and again a century later in the Festival of Britain, this country showed the world its inventive brilliance, its energy, industry and unique spirit.

Now there are plans to do so again, just four years from now. It is a great moment for such a display, just as we regain our national independence.

Our inventors, scientists, industrialists and artists will once again have an opportunity to show just how much talent and enterprise these small islands contain.

The most important task in politics is to Stop Corbyn