

Rural Economies

A letter to the Herald, March 2009

Sir -

Many Herald readers will have suspected for some time that the Labour party has given up even the pretence of caring about rural and semi-rural areas in the south of England.

Last week the Commission for Rural Communities found that the recession was taking a stronger grip on rural areas, with more applicants per job than in urban areas. On the official headline numbers, Hampshire now has three unemployment claimants for every vacancy; the real number is significantly higher.

Bizarrely, the government have continued with a programme of looking for Job Centres to close in the south of England, even as the recession has deepened.

Fuel poverty is worse in rural areas. Post Office closures have fallen disproportionately on villages. And despite all the targets and diktat, the acute need for affordable housing in many rural communities has not been met. It surprises many people to hear that less social housing has been built each year since 1997 than under the last Conservative government.

And of course Hampshire gets a government support grant far, far below that given to Labour heartlands in the urban north.

The centralised Labour approach lets down areas like ours. For the needs of all communities to be properly served, we need a massive transfer-back of power and responsibility to the local level – and a government that understands and values the countryside as much as cities.

Yours

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