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CORBY: NEW TOWN PLANNING AND IMBALANCED DEVELOPMENT

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### Abstract

The object of this paper is to present an anatomy of the imbalanced development of Corby in the post-war period. The consequences of this imbalanced development, which caused a small Northamptonshire village to grow into a major steel town, are now reflected in the grim economic and social problems of Corby following on from the closure of major sections of the steel works. The paper focusses, in particular, on the role of Planning in this failure. It is argued that the principle of balance which has at the heart of the New Town ideology found no place in the development of Corby New Town. Indeed, it is shown that the New Town status itself was used in further accentuating the regional and structural imbalance represented in Corby - a striking contrast with the common view of the role of New Towns. The paper concludes by drawing out the policy implications of this Planning failure.

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6 Key Phrases:      New Town Planning, Regional Imbalance, Imbalanced Development,  
Industrial Enclave, Manorial Labour Market.

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## 1. Introduction

The latest round of rationalisations in the British Steel industry have spelt mass redundancy for Corby.<sup>1</sup> The impact of the closure of major sections of the steel works is both critical and immediate, because Corby is, for all intents and purposes, a one-industry town. As we shall argue below, for the redundant workers of Corby, there is little hope of ever gaining comparable employment within the town or the surrounding area again. Ironically, Corby itself was the product of previous rationalisations in the British Steel industry, which caused a small Northamptonshire village to grow into a major steel town.<sup>2</sup> In the present, Corby stands as a social and economic disaster of the worst order, a 20th Century British company town which the company has just deserted.<sup>3</sup> There was, however, nothing unpredictable about this particular disaster. It is the contention of this paper that the present circumstances represent a predictable outcome of imbalanced development, and our object is to highlight the role of state planning authorities in the permitting of such imbalanced development. Section 2 of this paper begins the chronicling of the creation of Corby as a heavy industry enclave by looking at the imbalanced emphasis on steel employment, while Section 3 considers the role of housing in supporting this process. Section 4 establishes Corby as an "ethnic" enclave whose (Scots) inhabitants have little cultural or

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1. For example, in the late spring/early summer of 1980, approximately 6,000 redundancies occurred in Corby. See Evening Telegraph, Monday 24 March, 1980.
  2. See Pocock (1967), p. 204, Stewart and Lloyds (1954), p. 88, Scopes (1968).
  3. In 1979, half of the total jobs and two thirds of the jobs for men in Corby were still with the British Steel Corporation. See Coopers and Lybrand (1979), p. 7.

economic contact with the surrounding area, and the rationale for this development is discussed. Section 5 highlights the role of planning in this imbalanced development while Section 6 looks at the policy problems posed by the current situation. Section 7 concludes the paper.

## 2. Overdependence on Steel

Although Corby was designated a New Town three decades ago, and the issue of overdependence on one industry and, even worse, on one employer was raised, it was decided that Corby's "imbalanced" course of development should be permitted to continue. As the Corby New Town Extension Master Plan (1965) noted:

"There is a fundamental identity between Corby and the steel works, the growth of one would not be possible without the development of the other, the existence of one is dependent on the existence of the other."

This imbalanced development was defended not only on the grounds of the national interest, but also on the grounds that Corby's centrality to British Steel production was its own guarantee of the continued prosperity of the town.<sup>4</sup> Further expansion of steel was consistently advocated as the best defence against the prospect of future mass unemployment, as early planning documents show:

"Moreover, economic vulnerability - the most powerful pre-war argument against a one-industry town - does not now seem to us to be a danger. Steel is likely to be needed in large quantities for as long as it is profitable to look ahead and if competition develops for a limited market, Corby is well placed to hold its own."<sup>5</sup>

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4. See Corby Development Corporation Annual Report, 31 March 1966, p. 105, for an example of such a tone.
  5. Corby New Town. Report to accompany Master Plan of the Corby Development Corporation, December 1952, William Holford and H. Myles Wright, p. 38.

The above is the tone of not merely the early planning documents. Almost up until the point of closure itself, Corby was being re-assured by way of commissioned reports and documents that the imbalanced employment structure of the town was neither pathological nor problematic:

"At present the New Town has an employment structure dominated by the British Steel Corporation and with a very small proportion of jobs in the service industries. The first type of imbalance is one that may not necessarily be cause for alarm."<sup>6</sup>

It is of course one thing to neglect non-steel employment, because of a misperceived faith in steel. It is quite another to deliberately exclude other employers from the Town. There were, in fact, a number of critical points at which a change in the direction of Corby's development could have been effected. Corby's development as an enclave is not merely the outcome of one initial and crucial decision, but it is rather a consequence of recurrent decisions to steer the same direction. Steel was to be protected at all costs. Whereas in other New Towns a number and variety of employers were induced to enter, in Corby other employers were actively held out of the town. This was true before nationalisation, when Stewarts and Lloyds owned the Corby steel works, as well as after nationalisation. In 1952, Holford and Myles Wright, in their report to accompany the Corby Development Corporation Master Plan, stated that

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6. Corby New Town: Master Plan Review. Colin Buchanan and Partners, Drivers Jonas and Professor Kenneth Alexander, p. 88. This was an astonishing conclusion to reach, given the existence of the 1973 White Paper on the proposed rationalisation of the steel industry. It did little to advance the cause of developing policies of replacement employment. Indeed, this report argued against granting Corby Intermediate or Development Area Status - "we believe that this approach should be reserved for those areas whose very economic existence is threatened." (p. 8).



"It is the main aim of the Corporation to provide for 10,000 workers in Messrs. Stewarts and Lloyds. To expand services will help to obtain and especially retain the added numbers. Encouragement of alternative manufacturing industries on any large scale would have the opposite effect." (emphasis added).

More directly, Coopers and Lybrand (1979) characterise the situation as follows:

"... while Stewarts and Lloyds had several hundred job vacancies in the steel works, it was difficult and at times impossible for the Development Corporation to persuade either the Company or the Board of Trade to allow any major competitor for male employees to enter the town."

Not until the 1970s, 20 years after the establishment of Corby as a New Town, was the Development Corporation permitted to commence upon the diversification of the town's economy.<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, this diversification was limited and its occurrence coincided with steel's reduced demand for labour, and there continued to be examples of employers excluded on the grounds that its entry would be detrimental to the interests of steel.<sup>8</sup> Even when the phasing out of steel was well under way, all attempts to obtain the necessary planning equipment to phase new employment into the town met with failure. Steel, it appears, was to remain the major employer in Corby right up to the point of planned production stoppage. The Corby Development Corporation's Annual Report for 1976 is revealing:

"In view of the unemployment in the town, the Corby District Council addressed a report to the Secretary of State for Industry asking for a meeting with the object of having Corby designated an Assisted Area. The Corporation while applauding the Council's zeal advised them that they considered this premature."

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7. The Corporation was permitted to encourage some diversification of the Corby economy before this date, but diversification of significant magnitude was confined to the sectors of economic activity which utilised female labour. There was to be no competition for male labour. See Coopers and Lybrand (1979, p. 5).
  8. See Barber (1974): "One major manufacturing company was refused an Industrial Development Certificate in Corby within the past two years. The company was a German concern, who gave undertakings to employ 400 males in a car accessory plant."



The consequences of the above attitude are of course glaringly apparent today. However, Corby was an enclave not merely in terms of its employment structure, but in terms of its housing and residential patterns as well. The next section takes up the role of housing in Corby's development.

### 3. Corby and Housing: New Town or Steel Manor?

Although during significant phases of its development Corby bore the status of a New Town, it might perhaps be more accurately described as a Steel Manor - with only one major employer and employment determining the right to residence, the result being that one agency (the employer) controlled both access to accommodation and access to employment. We have argued elsewhere (Grieco, 1981, 1983) that such manorial labour markets potentially provide employers with extra degrees of control over their workforces, and it is therefore in their interests to deliberately attempt to construct such a labour market. Corby, we argue in this paper, represents a deliberately constructed manorial labour market.

In the initial phase of its expansion, Corby was visibly a company town, with the steel producers, who at that time were a private company, occupying the joint role of employer and landlord. Accommodation was tied to employment, the loss of job resulted in the loss of accommodation. This was followed by local authority housing augmenting that provided by the steel producers, and culminated in New Town Development Corporation provision of housing (see Pocock, 1959). With the advent of state provision of housing the relationship between employment and housing was weakened but it did not disappear. Accommodation remained subsequent to employment. Holding a job in the steel works was essential to the obtaining of state provided housing in Corby. Thus the hiring practices of one employer determined the social composition of a whole town. This is not the only

case to be found of such a practice,<sup>9</sup> but it is the only New Town case.<sup>10</sup>

Coopers and Lybrand (1979) recognise this explicitly:

"As we have seen Corby was unique amongst the New Towns in its conception since it was designated not to serve as a location for the dispersal of population or to form part of a strategy for regional economic growth but primarily as a means of providing housing and other facilities to cater for the growth in employment at one company. Largely for this reason, Corby now has some unusual features which distinguish it from other New Towns and from its surrounding region."

Of course, in the era of state provision of housing leaving the employ of the steel works no longer necessitated the forfeiture of accommodation. However, as we have been in the previous section, non-steel employment was kept to a minimum within Corby, and the situation was compounded by the lack of integration of Corby's communication system into the surrounding hinterland. The steel works were serviced by a branch line of the railway network and made little use of the road system. Corby's passenger service was closed in the 1960s even though the main line passes through Corby and despite the fact that the town represents a major population base.<sup>11</sup>

Thus labour had nowhere else to go within the town and was handicapped by the local communications network and transport system from entering the labour market of the surrounding area. But there is another major feature

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9. However, from the lack of attention this topic receives in the mainstream sociological literature, one might be forgiven for thinking that it were. The focus here has tended to be on occupational community rather than upon employer control of residence. Clearly both perspectives have their place but one has tended to develop at the expense of the other.
  10. Mullen (1980) provides an interesting analysis of Stevenage New Town which also draws attention to the relationship between residence and employment in the New Towns. The focus is however on a group of employers, for more than one major employer is present. Stevenage thus represents a substantially different situation to that of Corby. For other instances of the relationship between housing and employment, see Grieco (1981).
  11. "In general, however, Corby remains a town which is only to a very limited extent integrated into its sub-region." Coopers and Lybrand (1979).

of Corby labour, again accounted for by the recruitment decisions of the steel employers, which compounded the problems of integration into the surrounding labour market. Corby labour was primarily migrant labour from Scotland, and the consequences of this are taken up in the next section.

#### 4. Corby: A Scottish Enclave in Northamptonshire

The initial expansion of Corby took place during the last great depression. Labour from contracting or closing Scottish steel works was relocated en masse in Corby. There was little room for choice on the workers' part in respect of their move to Corby. Workers had the option of either migrating to the Northamptonshire village or being made redundant in both a local and national situation of high unemployment. As the official history of Stewarts and Lloyds 1903-1953 notes,

"In the depression of the 1930s the fortunes of Clydesdale - and most of the Scottish works, for that matter - had been at a low ebb. A good deal of labour had gone south to Corby and there had been rumours that Stewarts and Lloyds might be pulling out of Scotland altogether."

This initial wave of migration from the central belt of Scotland was followed by subsequent waves of migrants, many of whom were drawn from subsequent redundancies in the Scottish steelworks (see Pocock, 1959).

Thus Corby's steel employer continued to recruit long distance labour from Scotland. The rationale for such recruitment is discussed in Grieco (1982a, 1983), but the end product was a community which was highly distinctive in character. Corby was not only a heavy industry enclave, it was also a Scottish enclave. In 1979, 57% of the town's population was estimated, by Coopers and Lybrand (1979), to be of Scottish origin; and even this represents an underestimate

for it does not include the second generation born of Scottish parents - a significant number given that the initial migrations took place in the 1930's. Corby's population differs from that of the surrounding subregion on a number of other, related measures. Corby families are larger than those of the sub-region, it is a Catholic settlement in a Protestant sub-region and its labour possesses heavy industry skills in a market town sub-region (see Holford and Myles Wright, 1952).

Corby represents a speech community which is distinct from that of its surrounding area.<sup>12</sup> The Scottish accent persists in Corby even though the town is located in the heart of England. Children born in Corby have Scottish accents. We have elsewhere (in Grieco, 1983) documented the persistence of the Scottish accent in Corby. The cause of the persistence is of course the initial and subsequent migration from Scotland, and that the town is effectively sealed off from the surrounding hinterland, as discussed in the previous two sections. However, the labour market consequences of a Scottish enclave in Northamptonshire remain unexplored and as we argue in a later section, are crucial to policies for the recovery of Corby. A survey was undertaken in 1980 of 16 employers in the sub-region. The detailed results are reported in Grieco (1983), but we note here that employers encountering a Scottish accent within the sub-region identified that labour as Corby labour and attributed to it the characteristics associated with heavy industry. Thus ethnicity, which rests on a detectable difference, represented an identification device. Scottishness was a proxy for heavy industry characteristics, and these were discriminated against in the predominantly

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12. For a further discussion of the concept of speech community, see Milroy (1980).

market town sub-region.<sup>13</sup>

That accent provides a persistent vehicle for discrimination against Corby labour would appear to be an unintended consequence of action rather than the consequence of a deliberate strategy. It was a by-product of the decision to recruit Scottish labour and of the decision to seal Corby off from the surrounding area. It did, however, act to reinforce the efficiency of this seal. Related to the imbalanced economic development is therefore an imbalanced social development which led to a Scottish enclave in the heart of England, and this certainly plays a role in the compounding of the current problems. Our object here, however, is to draw attention to the way in which the practices and social planning of the steel employers of Corby rendered a mainstream section of the British labour force "ethnic" and the manner in which this construction permitted discrimination against this group within the local labour market.<sup>14</sup> The planners of Corby failed to build the necessary bridges into the surrounding area and the surrounding labour markets to overcome this problem. It is the object of the next section to present an analysis of this planning failure.

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13. Further fieldwork for Grieco (1983), in which over 100 people were interviewed between 1977-1980, also backed up this conclusion. Interviewees were aware that Corby had a "bad name", that steel had a "bad name", that Glasgow had a "bad name" and that the Scots had a "bad name". Often measures were taken by labour to conceal its Corby address when applying for a job, in order to even get into the first round of the process.
  14. It should be noted here that the entry of Scots labour to Corby shares many features with the patterns of chain migration documented for the entry of ethnic minorities to British cities. See Grieco (1983), Brooks and Singh (1979).



5. Imbalanced Development: The Failure of Planning

It appears paradoxical that Corby's status as a New Town should have gone hand in hand with the pattern of imbalanced development described in the last three sections. The principle of "balance" attending most British New Town development - indeed the principle which was at the heart of the New Town ideology - found no place in the development of Corby New Town. The "national interest" appears to have dictated that in the case of Corby this principle should be discarded. Moreover we will argue in this section that the endowment of New Town status on Corby was a device for accentuating the imbalanced company character of the town rather than an instrument for redressing the imbalance, as was supposed, for example, by Pocock (1959). The inauguration of Corby as a New Town removed from the existing local authorities the ability to control the town's size and development - an objective they had pursued with some vigour, placing the power to determine the yea or nay of Corby's expansion very firmly within the province of the central state agencies, in the form of the Development Corporation. It is of crucial importance in understanding Corby's development to recognise that Development Corporations are appointed Boards responsible directly to the central government. Making Corby a New Town in fact enabled the by-passing of local opposition to the expansion of the town, an expansion directly related to the increase in the actual and planned labour demand of the steel works.<sup>15</sup>

Local opposition to the development of Corby was advanced on more than one count, but it is clear that a significant factor in fostering

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15. Similar "by-passes" were constructed in Scotland for the development of North Sea oil. See Grieco (1975, 1978). See Moore (1982) for a similar analysis.

such opposition was the cost Corby's expansion represented to the local authority. By rendering Corby a New Town, this particular basis of resistance was effectively removed, for the cost of Corby's development was directly transferred to the central government.<sup>16</sup> Local financial politics no longer had a role, so that although opposition remained throughout the local hinterland to the expansion of Corby, with the establishment of the New Town Development Corporation the vehicles for translating this opposition into effective resistance lost their place. By establishing Corby as a New Town, moreover, the employers and the state had removed at a stroke the obstructions that the local authorities could have put in the way of expansion through the normal use of the old planning procedures, as indeed it seems they were prepared to do.<sup>17</sup>

Thus New Town status removed the barriers to the town's expansion, but it also permitted the articulation of the steel interest as part of the development policy of the town. The Development plan, for example, was one of the instruments used to exclude all competitors for steel labour from the town.<sup>18</sup> The planned character of Corby appeared to be a crucial part of the rationale for holding other employers out. To

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16. One argument that has been put is that since the development of steel was in the national interest, it was only proper that the state and not the employer pick up the bill for the provision of housing via the New Town Scheme. The consequence of this accountancy device, however, was to remove all serious opposition to imbalanced development.

17. "At the time, the Urban District Council opposed the designation of Corby as a New Town ... Underlying these objections were reservations by the local elected members to the imposition of an independent Development Corporation with wide powers and governed by appointed board members reporting directly to central government." Coopers and Lybrand (1979).

18. Other instruments, e.g. the withholding of development certificates by the Board of Trade, were also used.



permit the entry of employers other than steel would cause the town to grow beyond its planned size. Yet when steel demanded an increase on planned size, expansion appeared infinitely possible (see Coopers and Lybrand, 1979).

Thus the Development Plan, normally an instrument for ensuring balance, was used to accentuate the imbalanced development of Corby. However, it can be argued that had Corby not obtained New Town status, the steel employers would have found it more difficult to maintain their employment monopoly. That the Development Corporation operated unerringly in the favour of the steel interest was as good as guaranteed by the composition of the Development Corporation. The employers of Corby, that is the steel employer alone, had direct representation on the Development Corporation Board. This was the case both during the period of steel under private ownership and during the period of steel as a nationalised industry. It would seem that this is the only case of a single employer being so represented on the Board of a British New Town Development Corporation, and the steel interest was thus in a position to ensure that there would be no planning changes that could adversely affect steel.

Throughout the history of the town's development, local criticism has been two pronged; over-expansion on the one hand and over-dependence on steel on the other. Had the local authority been in control of Corby's development, it would have been in its interest as the ultimate inheritor of problems surrounding any closure of the steel works to ensure that other employers did precisely enter Corby and thereby reduce the towns overdependence on steel. Ironically, the winding up of the Corby New Town Development Corporation and the closing of the steel works occurred almost simultaneously. The winding up of a New Town Development Corporation is customarily given as the sign that a town has accomplished a

healthy maturity; it is the democratic time, as custom has it, for the "planning guardians" to withdraw. In the case of Corby, the planned withdrawal of the Development Corporation coincided with the complete collapse of the local economic structure. The collapse happened suddenly and without adequate prior information, leaving a population and a planning system ill-prepared for coping with the immediate and subsequent impact of mass redundancy. It is the object of the next section to look at this run up to the closure in greater detail, and to consider policies for the future.

#### 6. Closure and Policy Options

Had a longer warning period been provided as to the imminent redundancies, the disbanding of the Development Corporation might have been resisted, and the planning mechanisms might have been used to deal with the problems of closure. However, as noted in the last section, the steel closures and the disbanding of the Development Corporation occurred almost simultaneously. In the final stages, therefore, the town was still expanding to meet the planned needs of steel but steel had changed its mind and failed to communicate the change.

There are, in fact, good reasons from the point of view of the employer why information on redundancies was concealed till the very final stages. It enabled or contributed towards the maintenance of a full work force untill the planned production stoppage, thereby minimising the need for the recruitment of new labour and resultant contracting of new responsibilities. Such evidence is also presented by Martin and Fryer (1973), Wedderburn (1965), Brannen et al (1976) and Slowe (1978) for a number of different cases. Suffice it to say that in what turned out to be the last stages of the development of Corby steel works, but before the destiny of the steel works had been made public knowledge, labour was still

being transferred to Corby, this time from closing Welsh steel works.<sup>19</sup>

The continued in-migration to Corby and the corresponding lack of out-migration which was based on false information raises some interesting questions for migration theory.<sup>20</sup> The consequences for Corby, however, lie in a town ill prepared to cope with mass redundancies and the attendant social and economic problems. The planned withdrawal of the Development Corporation, discussed in the previous section, itself had an independent effect on the existence of local competence to combat or to avert high unemployment in Corby. The knowledge that the Corporation (but not the steel works) was scheduled to be wound up caused the usual attrition and turn-over in planning staff which is usual in the penultimate phases of such institutions.<sup>21</sup> Those who knew Corby best had moved on to newer and more certain planning pastures; the planning competence present at the point of announcement of closure was insufficiently acquainted with Corby to launch the necessary initiatives.

Even if appropriate planning personnel had stayed on in Corby, the problems of providing employment to replace steel would be severe. As we have argued earlier, the recruitment practices of Corby, and the "social planning" which accompanied it, resulted in the acceptance of "dirty industry" as the only possible future employment prospect for the town. There is little chance of local industry entering the vacuum created by British Steel, and the present reliance on the hope of a new "dirty industry" to

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19. This evidence is presented in the Fieldwork Interviews for Grieco (1983).

20. For example, we can question the conventional approach of Davanzo and Morrison (1978), and consider structural factors as leading to "poor" migration decisions on the part of individuals - particularly with regard to false employment signals which are, initially, believed.

21. This was discussed by Les Howard of the Corby Business Advisory Bureau at a meeting of the National Union of Blast Furnacemen and Job Ownership Ltd, Wednesday 26 March 1980. See Fieldwork Notes in Grieco (1983).

reduce the high levels of unemployment, can be seen as the consequence of the failure to attempt any integration of Corby into the surrounding economy - the poor state of Corby's transport network being a leading example of this failure.

Moreover, the derivation of the Corby labour force from outside the locality, and its subsequent lack of connectedness to the population of the surrounding area as a consequence of the adoption of manorial labour policies, makes it difficult for Corby labour to find employment in the surrounding area. As we argued in Section 4, Corby labour is discriminated against in the surrounding area, and this is compounded by the lack of adequate transport facilities which would make commuting a possibility. In fact, one solution being adopted by Corby labour is return migration to the area of origin - Scotland (see Grieco, 1983).

British Steel and Job Ownership Ltd. have attempted to establish co-operatives as a solution to Corby's problems. We have analysed this solution in Grieco (1982b), where it is argued that these initiatives are unlikely to make even a dent in the unemployment figures. More promising is the declaration of Corby as an Enterprise Zone on 22 June 1981, the first town to receive such a status. But without a significant improvement in Corby's communication network, which we have argued is a major factor in attracting light industry to the town, it is difficult to see how Enterprise Zone Status of its own can solve Corby's problems. A minimal requirement would be the re-opening of the railway station, and this is most certainly within the power of the government. Since the imbalanced development of Corby, and the development of Corby's problems, was national in character, the solution of the problem can only originate from the same source.

## 7. Conclusion: The National Interest and A National Debt

In this paper we have documented and analysed the imbalanced development of Corby, particularly during its period as a New Town. It is clear that on the departure of British Steel, Corby New Town bore little relation to the Garden Cities envisaged by Ebenezer Howard, nor indeed to the other contemporaneous New Town developments. It was unique. The principle of "balance" - which was at the heart of the New Town ideology - was sacrificed in the "national interest". Indeed the New Town status was used to accentuate the imbalance and to further the interests of Steel.

Corby's initial expansion took place "in the national interest" and against the wishes of the local planning and development authorities. Its subsequent over-expansion took place "in the national interest" and was a violation of all New Town planning principles. Its ultimate contraction also took place "in the national interest", leaving in its wake a town with a severely imbalanced social composition, a labour force with skills inappropriate to the economic activity of the surrounding area and, equally importantly, poorly placed to attract employers into the town, and a communications network deliberately designed to insulate the town from the surrounding area. The imbalanced development of Corby has been "in the national interest". One wonders whether the corresponding concept of "a national debt" should also be considered. If so, Corby would seem to be a worthy candidate for our attention.



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