

Rise of supermarkets threatens to wreck community spirit

The Romans bribed the masses with bread and circuses. Today Parliament tries to distract with soccer and supermarkets. In consequence, both football and retailing have been monopolised by conglomerates to the detriment of all.

Can nothing stop the march of the multiples? The pages of this newspaper, which reflect so accurately what is happening in the rest of the UK, is spattered with depressing news of communities swamped by the deluge of corporate coffee bars, takeaways and supermarkets.

That 200 people in Barnes packed a standing-room-only public protest meeting about the dismal proposals by Sainsbury to establish yet another outlet in an empty showroom in White Hart Lane provided reassurance that democracy is alive and ticking and that people care about preserving the character of their localities.

But this was nullified by the

Government inspector who overruled Richmond upon Thames planning committee's rejection of the superstore application after a public inquiry, bringing into question whether government for the people by the people is functioning at grassroots level at all.

Since the advent of the Blair government, corporations like Waitrose, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Marks and Spencer have manipulated the decision-making process and, time after time, local opinion is overridden by the Man from the Ministry who do their Westminster master's bidding.

The present Government's biggest failing – setting aside its disastrous foreign policy decisions – is the way it has become an appendage of big business, accepting whatever commercial whim is currently profitable, including airport and airline expansions, regardless of the social or environmental consequences.

Increased centralisation has been the

strategy to impose its will and so, in every area of life, the supremacy of local authorities is being eroded. It is ironic that at a time we have given regional powers to Scotland and Wales, local councils are not even being allowed to make decisions such as the way their shopping centres are to develop.

At the angry meeting in Barnes residents were frustrated by the defeatist attitude of local councillors who say they are helpless to prevent "the heart being ripped out of Morrilake". They were urged by MP Susan Kramer to "work together against Sainsbury's". Fine words, but less forthcoming were details of how this is to be achieved.

How can residents, small shopkeepers and councillors "hinder the developer" as was advocated? Can you expect someone with a family to feed, living on a modest income, to boycott the new store when the remaining small shops are bankrupted by the power of the giants?

Once Sainsbury's is established, there is

little that any individual – however green and caring – can do to back an organisation like the White Hart Lane Action Group, whose declared objective is to try and save the businesses that have survived and to leave Sainsbury's "in no doubt of the opposition they face".

In reality, once planning permission is granted they can do no more than throw stones at an armoured tank.

What is left to people who want to act within the law and in a constructive and positive fashion to work together against Sainsbury's?

We need to hear more from the Conservatives on this issue and, as he gets his feet under the table, it will be interesting to hear how the new Tory hopeful, Zac Goldsmith, with all his green allude, proposes that we can keep our communities intact and full of variety and character against the formidable power of the elephantine corporations.

Last week's local election results

suggest he could retake Richmond Park in 2010. Under David Cameron's leadership the Tories have identified the areas where the present government is failing. They recognise what the electorate is looking for in an alternative administration that supports local communities and safeguards what is left of corner shops, post offices and family businesses.

If he is the environmental champion he claims, Zac Goldsmith must work to get his party to come up with some positive proposals to reverse the way Westminster is castrating the local decision-making process. In his ten years, Mr Blair has embraced the ugly face of capitalism not wisely but too well.

Mr Goldsmith needs to tell us how the more benevolent visage of free market policies could be reinstated. Imposing a new Sainsbury's in Barnes where it is neither wanted nor needed illustrates precisely how autocratic gigantism is running out of control.