pany's previous application to build on a neighbouring site, and is sure to reject this one. But even if it does, Tesco can go over its head to the Secretary of State for Wales — a man who is not exactly renowned for favouring the interests of local communities over those of developers.

Monmouth's situation is exceptional only in that its community, its idiosyncratic architecture and fragments of its local economy remain intact. If Tesco's application goes ahead, it will succumb to the forces which already afflict the rest of us — the homogenization which, paradoxically, leads inexorably to atomization. Monmouth's peculiarities will yield to the universal. The anchors of belonging, embedded in local character and the local economy, will find no purchase in the shifting sands of globalization.

This process, which has taken place all over Britain, is able to happen only because of a series of monstrous distortions of the way land-use decisions are made. Until we have democratized the use and distribution of our most fundamental resource, we can expect to remain helpless in the face of a creeping standardization which serves only those who set the standards.

A few streets from where I live, a consortium based in Hong Kong wants to build a condominium for visiting business people. Local folk don't like the idea, as they feel that so many people coming and going will threaten the cohesion of their neighbourhood. Slowly they have been discovering that a group of anonymous financiers living on the other side of the world has more power over what happens on their doorsteps than they do.

LOCAL PEOPLE CAN make their views about a planning application known to their local authority, which should, of course, take them into account when making its decisions. But any developer who doesn't like a local authority's decision is entitled to appeal to the Environment Department or the Welsh Office. Objectors have no such rights if the decision goes against them.

Going to appeal is threatened by developers more often than it is used. Local authorities know that they can ill afford to fight expensive cases. Time and again they give in to this blackmail and let the development go ahead.

A developer whose appeal fails can simply resubmit another planning application and start the process all over again. In the Hampshire villages of Hook and Rotherwick, for example, local people spent everything they had — £62,000 — in fighting a housebuilder's attempt to merge their villages by means of an enormous development. They won their case at the public inquiry. But now that their financial and moral resources have been exhausted, the developer has submitted a new application to build on the same piece of land.

In case such blunt instruments are insufficient, property speculators have even heavier weapons at their disposal. Developers have long been allowed to modify their planning applications in order to get permission. This entitlement is fairly unobjectionable — they may, for instance, offer to build some low-cost homes alongside the expensive ones they're erecting, to help out a council with its housing problem.

But they routinely abuse this reasonable provision by offering inducements which have nothing to do with the original development. A supermarket chain might propose to build a swimming pool on the other side of town, for example, or to restore a council's offices. Increasingly, they offer the local authority cash.

These practices, which planners call "off-site planning gain" and the rest of us call bribery, are, according to the Department of the Environment "outside the scope of the planning process". Yet councillors boast openly of the amenities or the cash they've secured for their wards. No offer is too outrageous to propose. In Stornoway last June, Safeway offered the Western Isles Council sports facilities worth £375,000 if it would agree not to let the Co-op build a competing store. To its credit, the council rejected the offer — but on moral grounds, not legal ones. Last year the Law Lords ruled that, despite the DoE's advice, such blatant attempts to pervert the planning system are not lawful.

THE PROCESS FREQUENTLY goes a step further, into the realms of undisputed illegality. Where a local authority is both selling land of its own to a developer and deciding whether to grant planning permission there, the temptation to raise the price of the land on the understanding that permission will be granted can be overwhelming. Indeed, as sales of council land are often "subject to planning permission", conflict of interest can be inbuilt. This issue is especially perti-

ment now that the government's Rural White Paper has allowed local authorities to keep ninety per cent of the receipts from the sale of their smallholdings, thereby greatly increasing the incentive to sell them to developers in defiance of their own published plans.

While we have precious little involvement in decisions to erect buildings, public inquiries for road schemes provide even fewer opportunities for genuine public engagement. The terms of an inquiry are set in advance by the Department of Transport. Astonishingly, they exclude any consideration of the scheme's objectives and the department's policies. The objectors' key arguments, in other words, are struck out before discussion begins.

The decision to build the road is made before the period of public consultation starts. All that is left to decide is which route the road should take. Worst of all, the DoT and its quango the Highways Agency act as both promoter and decision-maker. The department puts the scheme forward, the agency steers it through the consultation process, and the department then decides whether or not it should go ahead. The decision emerges, in other words, from what is essentially an internal discussion, a small part of which the public is allowed to witness but, in practice, not to influence.

The results of these distortions affect every aspect of our lives. They lead to land uses which reflect not our needs but only those of the developers. Derec
ted land suitable for housing in city centres is used instead for office blocks nobody wants, or left idle for years as speculators wait for the price to rise. Superstores are dumped onto communities which don't want them, leading to a major net loss of employment and removing the last vestiges of consumer control over production. Roads which exacerbate rather than solve our traffic problems are built because there are no legal means of opposing them.

JUST AS IMPORTANT are the effects that these anomalies have on our sense of self. One of the major components of belonging is the ability to identify with a place. This identification requires, above all else, a stake in our surroundings. While such glaring democratic deficits persist, stakeholding will remain nothing but an empty promise.

Our exclusion from decision-making is even more apparent in the country-
side. For the people of Dorchester-on-