

# THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

## Top Tory rounds on core support over green belt

**Francis Maude risks enraging grassroots over countryside and post-2015 government**

**By Jane Merrick and Matt Chorley**

Senior Conservative cabinet minister Francis Maude today describes opposition to the Government's controversial planning reforms – from the National Trust and Tory grassroots – as "bollocks", and says he has no sympathy for their position.

He also claims it is "insane" that, in the interests of economic growth, that there is not already a high-speed rail line running the length of the country.

The remarks, which will raise eyebrows in Westminster and beyond, appear to be backed by David Cameron, who last night described claims made about the planning reforms as "misleading" and insisted the planning regime has become an "enormous regulatory quagmire".

The row pitches the Government, – which is increasingly anxious about the need for growth – against popular countryside campaign groups and much of the Tory grassroots. Last night the National Trust said the comments were "the latest in a string of insults" by the Government towards the conservation body over plans to have a "presumption in favour of sustainable development".

Mr Maude, one of the key modernisers in David Cameron's party, also distances the Government from the Big Society, saying it is "not a government programme".

And he holds out the prospect of Mr Cameron offering Nick Clegg and other senior Liberal Democrats positions in the Cabinet after 2015, even in the event of an outright Tory victory. He refuses four times to rule out a secret plan – being privately discussed by senior members of the coalition and leaked to *The Independent on Sunday* – that, in the event of Mr Cameron winning the next election with a tiny majority, he could "cherry pick" top Lib Dems for a Tory Cabinet. Mr Maude says that "there will be lots of people speculating".

After being asked about the plan a further three times, he adds: "I have heard people speculating. I think it's time to think about that when we see what the landscape looks like."

The incendiary move would go some way to ensuring Mr Cameron was not beholden to his own backbenchers and would co-opt Lib Dem MPs to back government policy.

Mr Maude's comments, in an interview with *The IoS*, will fuel suspicions among the wider party, which is meeting for its autumn conference in Manchester today, that the Prime Minister is deserting the Tory grassroots in a desperate drive to kick-start the British economy and keep the coalition together.

In an interview with *The Sunday Times*, Mr Cameron insisted he was an "absolute lover" of the countryside. Mr Cameron also apologised for comments which were interpreted as sexist. "It's my fault. I've got to do better," he said, after twice appearing to insult women MPs in the Commons. Tory support among women has slumped.

In an attempt to diffuse the row over planning reform, the PM is to announce the release of thousands of hectares of disused public sector, mainly brownfield, land to build 100,000 new homes, creating 200,000 new jobs by 2015. Developers would be allowed to use a "build now, pay later" scheme, by paying for the land only once the homes were sold. Mr Cameron pledged "the most ambitious growth plan that we could possibly have".

In his interview Mr Maude says it is "absurd that virtually every other country has high-speed rail". He adds: "We are a long, thin country – it's insane that this hasn't been done before. The national government has to take a view on the route, consult and do all the right things, but actually you have just got to take a view that this is in the national interest and see it through."

Asked whether he had sympathy for the National Trust and other opponents of planning reform, Mr Maude says: "No. I mean our position is right. I think this idea that creating a presumption in favour of sustainable development is somehow a massive erosion of the ability to conserve, is bollocks, frankly.

"Actually the presumption that we are putting in place is arguably more constrictive, because it's a presumption in favour of sustainable development instead of just development. So I think there's a lot of misapprehension about this."

Norman Tebbit, writing in *The Independent on Sunday* today, says: "The Prime Minister's speech this week should set out the programme for a majority Conservative government. We, Tory activists and the electorate alike, want to know what sort of Conservative Mr Cameron really wants to be."