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Even the dawn chorus is gentrifying



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Checking one's privilege (metropolitan liberal or otherwise) is February's version of dry January, at least until it begins to impinge too much on your desired lifestyle. A test that has been doing the rounds since the American author Anand Giridharadas posed it at a Ted conference two years ago — and now gaining a bit more bite — is simple: “If you live near a Whole Foods, if no one in your family serves in the military, if you're paid by the year, not the hour, if most people you know finished college, if no one you know uses meth, if you married once and remain married, if you're not one of 65m Americans with a criminal record — if any or all of these things describe you, then accept the possibility that, actually, you may not know what's going on and you may be part of the problem.”

In a more light-hearted vein, you could ask yourself: “Do I have bifold doors? Do I own more than one home? Did I get on the property ladder before I was 30? Do the kids have separate bedrooms? Do I have an ensuite? Do I have room to park the car(s)?”

Another question. Have you ever signed a petition or waved a placard to protest against new homes being built near your house? The march of middle-class populism is set to soar to dizzy heights in the coming months, especially if reports of a radical housing white paper are true.

We may know this week whether restrictions governing the height of buildings and green-belt development will be shaken up. I am not reassured by phrases such as “the land lost is replaced by other safeguarded areas” — the idea of “safeguarding” makes me uneasy. I would, however, like to see a reassessment of buildable land, including the green belt. This should be “traffic-lighted”, with green signifying areas prioritised for immediate building, amber for the undecided and red for land that will be preserved. And the designs should be equitable, not just about equity. We need the right mix of homes in the right locations.

The housing crisis is not simply a numbers game. If we don't consider how we might be living in the future, the need for affordable rentals, flexible multigenerational living and homes for an ageing population, then we will have to check more than our privilege.

Incidentally, the top-end buying agency Quintessentially Estates says it has noticed a 30% rise in clients wanting to live near health-food shops, gyms and parks in the past year — what it calls the Whole Foods effect. It may also be a result of owners not wanting pay exorbitant service charges for a private gym: anyone considering buying a leasehold property needs to [read our report](#).

- Spring really is on its way — the birds are singing ever earlier and ever louder. It is a delight. Sadly, I cannot enjoy the full-throated blackbirds, the upbeat robin or the fussy twittering of sparrows over the noise of the builders. In the past week, four sets of scaffolding and sky-high flapping tarpaulins have appeared on neighbouring houses. It seems even my dawn chorus is gentrifying. They won't be the only ones. A survey from [Plentific.com](#), a home-improvement website, predicts that a quarter of owners are planning to spend more this year on renovations. Those in Sheffield, London, Brighton and Birmingham are the early-bird DIYers so far.

- And a shout-out to the residents of Shenfield, in Essex, who, I think it is safe to say, are a proud bunch. They felt slighted that their suburb wasn't selected as one of the top 30 commuter locations *not* on the dreaded Southern network in Home last week. This was no snub — Shenfield's absence was down to the fact that it didn't meet the minimum population of 15,000 set by the property consultancy JLL, which compiled the rankings. The bigger question is whether or not it will make it into the annual Sunday Times survey of the Best Places to Live. All will be revealed next month.

To read more, please visit: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/scaffolding-flapping-tarpaulins-even-the-dawn-chorus-is-gentrifying-53s07pz60>