

Planning a post-Brexit Britain

The planning system should bind Britain together again

Are we out without a deal? Or what? We didn't know what might happen as this issue 'went to bed'. But just ahead of the Commons vote in early January, it looked as though the only thing Parliament was able to do was block a 'no deal' Brexit. This prompted a leader in *The Guardian* along the lines of 'the government has failed – it's time to go back to the people' – an argument for a 'citizens assembly' to break the impasse, and a radical national plan to even things up between north and south, rich and poor.'

The UK planning system has not been used constructively as a national tool for resolving the consequences of rapid globalisation, tech advances, and centralisation in the South East for many years. In London particularly, where incomes have risen by a third since the crash of 2008. They have fallen by 14 per cent in Humberside and Yorkshire. That outcome cannot be blamed on 'planning' – only perhaps on the lack of it.

We've been arguing about the arrangement of deckchairs since the Brexit vote in 2016 while nobody has been on iceberg lookout or hull inspection.

'Long-term comprehensive reform of Britain's concentrations of economic, social and political power is essential. Inequality must be tackled in a radical way, from the top as well as the bottom. There must be innovative, sustainable plans for towns, for the north, for the many areas that feel excluded from progress and success,' said *The Guardian*. And added: 'There is no single magic answer to this national need.'

Well yes there is actually. It may not be magic and it will not be a single answer, but it is the planning system. It was an invention of a Labour government (if not the Labour party) and it has endured as a sort of bumbling policeman of the market. But its real purpose is to draw together and make sense of national ambitions for prosperity and fairness. And to remove these to a safe distance from politicians, so that they can be implemented over a longer time scale than the short-term political cycle. This fundamental role has been obscured by the system's demotion to become a pettifogging, obese development controller.

A new head needs screwing back on to the planning system, including a brain that thinks about the UK's fundamental needs for reconstruction, refitting and refurbishment – to keep the place afloat and hold it together.

The Conservatives have squandered their inheritance by not addressing things that needed sorting, especially up north. Sink-or-swim blowhard ideology obviously contributed to the Brexit mindset. Meanwhile Labour has yet to demonstrate it can move forward without using only its rear-view mirror to navigate.

Whichever party is first to pull its head out of wherever they've stuck it, the primary goal must be to 'bind Britain together again'. The planning system is a key tool in helping to do this, but not if it too has its head in the sand of too much local detail. The call for a Citizens Assembly to forge a stronger consensus, in the absence of clear political majority, might also be useful for forging new national planning policies (rather than just development control policies).

It's worth a try. ■

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We can learn from Singapore

When it comes to combining density with amenity, aimed at promoting health and well-being, look no further

Recent controversy regarding what the UK can learn from Singapore about how to run an economy (despite not being part of the EU) ignored the very real lessons that a city state could teach London, which is not so different in terms of size and population.

How is it that an avowedly free-market country manages to build a sufficiency of housing, and indeed has brought most of the country out of slum conditions over the past half-century? The answer, which seems have evaded successive London mayors – and let's ignore the litany of nonentity housing ministers – is to run a dirigiste public sector supply programme via the formidable Housing Development Board.

This board actually builds homes as a client, sponsors good architectural competitions, and puts in place landlord/tenant relationships which avoid the us-and-them attitudes which produced Grenfell. Some 80 per cent of Singapore citizens live in state housing and there is no embarrassment about living in this sort of accommodation. Instead of moaning about the country, the Labour Party should be citing its record on housing as proof that the public sector has a critical role to play if we are going to sort out London.

Another lesson we could learn is how to run a public transport system without the almost unbelievable incompetence and dishonest communication cover-ups that have characterised the Crossrail fiasco. Bear in mind that very few Singaporeans own cars because of pricing policies aimed at limiting their use, so public facilities really matter.

And when it comes to combining density with amenity, aimed at promoting health and well-being, look no further. Singapore is an admirable example of a progressive, plan-led society which is flexible and learns as it goes. The mayor should go there for a study, preferably for a prolonged period during which we invite the officials who have made such a success there to come over here and show us how it is done. ■

Fixing permitted development

All possible measurable standards should be moved into the Building Regulations

Last issue we offered an explanation for the emerging 'shadow' planning system – Planning in Principle, Prior Notification, the proliferation of Permitted Development rights: this being a government work-around the difficulty of simplifying a sclerotic system.

Nick Raynsford's Review provides a masterful analysis but a fairly hopeless synthesis: any report with more than half a dozen recommendations is doomed. This has 26!

It's launch by the Town and Country Planning Association was dominated by recriminations against permitted development rights which gave it the atmosphere of a conference of traffic wardens told they could no longer issue tickets.

The TCPA's Hugh Ellis did make the point that the small proportion of substandard permitted developments (we published a particularly awful example in our last issue) would be blocked if the 'grey' interface between planning and building control were properly addressed.

Planners are always claiming to be under-resourced but go on invading areas of objectivity – space standards, energy and sustainability criteria and so on. All possible measurable standards – for housing these should include minimum floor areas, storage, and access to amenity space – should be moved out of planning and into the Building Regulations.

Doing this will eliminate local and political prejudices which complicate basic national standards and will reduce if not eliminate the small margin of collateral damage without harming the considerable benefits being gained by permitted development freedoms.

In 2014–2017 changes of use alone provided 88,000 mainly relatively affordable homes and in London as early as 2015–16 was already producing 19% of new housing. ■