

Politicians who abuse planning are hypocrites

The public might imagine, given the ordure heaped on the planning system by politicians from the Chancellor of the Exchequer downwards, that the problems of the construction sector, the homebuilding industry, and the nation's infrastructure are the product of a sclerotic and outmoded planning system, operated by what some might describe as 'plebs'.

Whatever the faults of the system, however, it is the same one which operated during periods of intense housebuilding, construction and infrastructure activity.

No one is saying the system is perfect, but there comes a point where it is appropriate to ask who exactly should shoulder the blame for the chronic shortage of housing in the South-east, the eternally delayed production of a workable aviation policy, and the stasis which delayed Crossrail for 20 years.

Politicians would like us to believe that all would be well but for their brilliant ideas being held back by planners who want to stop things happening. (Not that the ideas are necessarily brilliant: silly as-of-right domestic extensions will do little to 'revive' building. Very few people need planning permission for extensions in the first place, and by definition these works will do nothing to allay the housing problem.)

More important is the attack on the Green Belt as though the National Planning Policy Framework was a waste of time, even though it was largely devised by private practitioners rather than development control officers.

This attack, of course, is a diversion. If you want to know who really delays things happening in the world of the built environment, look no further than the politicians themselves.

Who has just delayed a decision on a new runway at Heathrow for at least three years? The Prime Minister. Who dilly-dallied over Crossrail? Politicians. Who couldn't make up their mind about High Speed 2? Politicians. Who failed to ensure a decent supply of homes by adopting a 'predict but don't provide' policy, in the face of massive population increase? You don't need to ask.

It is time that abuse about the planning system ceased. It is political decisions, including whether or not to promote development by Act of Parliament (like Crossrail), which determine what is built and how quickly. We could have sorted out Terminal 5 in the Palace of Westminster instead of at public inquiry, but only if the politicians had been prepared to risk occasional unpopularity. ■

A new hub airport

Interwoven between the Summer's enthralling Olympic reports was a stream of stories reflecting the Government's back-tracking on its obstructive position on new airport capacity for London and the South East. The Mayor has run an effective campaign to pressurise for this change, promoting every proposal for a new airport or runway. Even the third runway for Heathrow is back on the table.

The Government has now asked Sir Howard Davies to chair an independent commission which will identify and recommend options for maintaining the UK's status as an international hub for aviation but has made clear there will be no decision until after the 2015 election. More of the same – see above!

The current debate is framed in terms of alternatives but the exciting proposal put together by Michael Schabas and *PiL* editor Brian Waters to extend Crossrail to Stansted making it a second hub to the East of London, but as close as Heathrow in travel time, can be delivered with Crossrail in 2019, leaving open the estuarial option if needed in the longer term. It just needs a decisive government. ■