

Planning and politics are like oil and water

Attacking the planning system

The new government has old ideas about how to stimulate growth: attack the planning system. As usual, politicians spout nonsense about how they will simultaneously increase consultation, empower communities, and speed up decisions. Alternatively, they will make life easier by creating special zones where normal planning procures will not apply – subject to local political support. Or by encouraging generation of new energy sources, such as shale, but again on the basis of local support. Are these politicians taking any professional advice, one wonders?

At a local level things are no better. Take, for example, the behaviour of councillors in Southwark in respect of an office proposal for the Elephant and Castle area. The planners supported the application, describing the architecture as 'exemplary'. Councillors on the other hand thought otherwise. The application by Lendlease was rejected, and since rejection requires reasons, out were trotted those old favourites, height, bulk and mass. Not exemplary then. You feel sympathy for the planning officer who might end up at a public inquiry being cross-examined about whether their judgement was utterly incompetent, or whether their political masters were simply inventing reasons for refusal which had no basis in fact.

There is a way whereby government could speed up planning. This would be to provide rapid inspection of applications supported by planners but rejected by councillors. Such cases could be referred to the office of the government chief planner, whose default position would be that the advice of professionals would be supported unless there were compelling planning (not political) reasons for overturning that advice. The local authority would have to pay for this service.

It would be tempting to re-introduce personal liability for councillors wilfully ignoring professional recommendations.

Whatever happened to moral hazard? ■

Going for growth

Liz Truss's demonisation of north Londoners as key members of an 'anti-growth' coalition reminds us of David Cameron's 2011 broadside labelling planners 'enemies of enterprise'.

Whilst sending broadsides against Kamikwase Trussonomics, *The Economist* and *The Financial Times* also chose recently to target the planning system as an enemy of growth. 'Britain's failure to build is throttling its economy,' *The Economist* blasted in September, just before Liz and Kwasi put on their own firework show. 'The country,' it said, 'has become a vetocracy...the whole thing is a disaster.'

The *FT's* Martin Wolf, a fairly frequent commentator on land use matters, while labelling the >>>

Planning in London has been published and edited by Brian Waters, Lee Mallett and Paul Finch since 1992

RIGHT:

Cover story and first leader
in a recent *Economist*

Free the bulldozers

Britain's growth problem won't be fixed until its absurd planning rules are reformed

Leaders · Sep 1st 2022 · 4 min read



>>> Tories' dynamic duo 'mad, bad and dangerous', instead of their 'magic potion' of unfunded tax cuts to encourage growth, called for further deregulation of land use. He didn't think their proposed local investment zones would deliver desired growth, and nor would a 'big jump in inequality' implied by the now-torpedoed cut in the top rate of tax.

But there's the point. Growth, good growth, encouraged by planning, is our best tool for tackling inequality. Where there isn't growth, inequality is worst. And if there are people in London who think growth per se is bad, then they probably aren't living where it is absent or necessary. If you live in an east London borough where the population has risen by 20 per cent again, you may be quite keen on more homes getting built.

And the irony is, the people who hate growth most are the Nimbys with which the Conservative Party is stuffed. Lots of them around Amersham, where Boris Johnson's planning white paper was blasted out of the water.

It seems unlikely however, even if Truss were to survive for two more years until an election, that the Tories' planning schizophrenia around its role as promoter or preventer of growth is likely to be resolved in planning reform. Too high above the parapet.

There is a more cunning plan for embedding growth, however. Suggested by former chief planner Steve Quartermain at the September meeting of the London Planning and Development Forum. And that is to swiftly implement the long overdue update of the National Planning Policy Framework, which requires no primary legislation.

Approval of Local Plans could be simplified and speeded up. Support for much needed growth could be strengthened, national development management policies could be standardised and downloaded and not reinvented for every topic by every authority, making plans easier and cheaper to create.

You would also expect, said Quartermain, that the NPPF might more strongly support legislation around what needs to be done to deliver the climate change agenda through planning and could be clearer about retro-fit versus redevelopment.

Saving the planet should be a material planning consideration, but so is growth – as voters in the Red Wall, and the poorer parts of London, know only too well from years of waiting. ■