

FINCH

The challenges ahead for Labour

A change in approach has been noted but government must right its mixed messaging on housebuilding

Labour's election victory was given a cautious welcome by the property and construction sector. Presenting itself as the party of housebuilding and a proponent of growth made a change from the shambles of the last lot, the first Conservative government that sadly thought kicking away the homeownership ladder (and housebuilders) was a formula for electoral success.

The new government's claims that it would 'drive a coach and horses' through the planning system seemed over-egged, but a development control mentality has overtaken planning authorities and some amenity groups: the default attitude is that if it is new construction, it's to be opposed.

Labour said it would sort this out.

So, as we near the end of the year, how should we assess what the new government has done, as opposed to said?

One clear change of direction has come from Angela Rayner's housing, communities and local government department: taking the word 'beauty' out of the National Planning Policy Framework and scrapping the Office for Place (OfP) and its chair, beauty proponent Nicholas Boys Smith.

Greeted with some concern by architects interested in aesthetic debate, other observers, including your correspondent, always distrusted the B-word entering planning legislation - because beauty was never satisfactorily defined. Eye of the beholder and all that.

As for the OfP, it never established itself as much more than a Tory party plaything. There was also the slightly uncomfortable relationship with the Create Streets organisation, founded by Boys Smith, which offered local authorities consultancy services on OfP-promoted design codes. The founder was not involved, but Create Streets was run by his wife - not a good look for a government that fell foul of conflict-of-interest issues early on in its life.

Removing beauty as a planning criterion, in favour of 'good design', is sensible, since the latter can be defined, analysed and identified. This is a good example of how the planning

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'system', rather than failing due to fundamental flaw, is being overwhelmed by endless additional policies, some of which it is not equipped to administer. An example would be carbon and climate calculations, which planners are not trained to assess. Surely it is a matter for building control; the same applies to fire design, which has been pushed in spatial planning when previously it has been a regulatory matter.

There is little sign this unhealthy trend, with nature and ecology policies now used routinely to challenge planning permissions, is changing. Planning is still a huge risk for complex projects, and few will be rushing to try developing on green belt, however many jobs it may generate, following recent ministerial rulings upholding inspector objections.

If Rayner wanted to inject greater certainty into planning, she should force proponents of judicial reviews to pay the full court costs rather than relying on legal aid. More broadly, she should regard call-ins as a last resort rather than the displacement activity they became under Michael Gove.

The decision on Marks & Spencer in Oxford Street indicated whether the government was serious or virtue-signalling - in this instance it was the former.

On housebuilding, the government is sending a lot of mixed messages. On the one hand, we hear it is

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all systems go; but on the other, housebuilders get a pasting over post-Grenfell activity and its funding. Meanwhile, we wait for Whitehall's response to the Grenfell report recommendations, and to explain the odd relationship between the supposedly independent Building Research Establishment and civil servants responsible for building regulation guidance - a murky situation explored in the report.

Ministers could also review the Building Safety Act, introduced in haste and causing all sorts of problems - as mentioned, making fire design part of spatial planning, for instance: yet another example of policies being loaded inappropriately on to overburdened planners' shoulders.

If planners are to be helped to speed up housing permissions, they could appoint a panel of people who know what they are talking about, perhaps run by Homes England to give swift responses to designs for significant housing proposals. The review would give proposals a 'green', 'amber' or 'red' light, with standard score sheets to create a level playing field for applicants.

Green would mean planning authorities could provide speedy approval safe in the knowledge that the designs were good. Amber would mean subject to satisfactory revisions (and a second panel review), they would be good to go. Red would mean poor design that should be refused permission, and an implication that the client might think about employing a different design team.

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