

Prescience, or what?



Introducing this year's RTPI Planning Convention theme of 'Better planning solutions for the challenge of growth', Antony Rifkin of Allies and Morrison suggested ten key aspirations including a modernisation of green belts, especially around stations.

"They are a substantial chunk of Britain: 9.5 per cent of the land of England and Wales ... But do they still .. represent sound planning? Originally, there were at least three good reasons for them: negatively, to stop urban sprawl, thus reducing long commuter journeys from soulless dormitory suburbs; positively, to preserve agriculture as a national asset; positively again, to keep green lungs around the cities for the enjoyment of townspeople. None of these justifications now seems to have the same force".

No, this is NOT how Antony Rifkin continued. It is part of the plea from a young Peter Hall, writing in *The Observer* in April 1973, for Green Belts to be reassessed. And so it has continued, with Kate Barker's key recommendation ten years ago in her Review of Land Use Planning that green belt boundaries should be reviewed, The Adam Smith

Institute's proposals for reform entitled *The Green Noose* ("The concept of ever-expanding urban sprawl is mistaken and pernicious"), and London First's recent suggestion that, especially in and around London, "the Green Belt can play a small part in helping to accommodate the new homes that London needs".

Several speakers at the Planning Convention highlighted the current disconnect between the supply of homes and jobs, typified by the brownfield/greenfield/green-belt conundrum that often separates people from homes and transport options that are affordable and at the same time reasonable. As Peter Hall pointed out, all those years ago: "Far from cutting commuter journeys, green belts have too often increased them". And while "agricultural land now seems less sacred than in those post-war years [when the green belts were created following the 1947 Planning Act] ... too little of the green belts is truly available for the people's enjoyment - only 5.5 per cent of London's green belt, for example..." Green belts are certainly not the bucolic idylls that some imagine

"[We should] urge the mind to aftersight and foresight" –
from T S Eliot's *Four Quartets*, 1942

them to be.

The challenge of growth is to update local plans more rapidly to reflect changing markets and conditions, to take proper account of high-speed modern transport and digital links, and to plan for what people want, where it's needed to meet real demand. All of which was emphasised by a number of contributors to the Planning Convention, leaving the distinct impression that the planning system can work well (as Helen Hayes MP eruditely explained) when it's not restrictive but used as a tool for delivery through the wider participation of communities - and is properly resourced.

Whether my Almanac column for 2012, which suggested "a consortium of Russian and Chinese businessmen will invest £200bn in new housing on condition that half can be built on green belt land; Grant Shapps says "This is just what our country needs" turns out to be half accurate in the upcoming world of Planning in Principle and under a new Infrastructure Act alongside Brexit remains to be seen. Watch this space.

PS. In the same column I also made the following prediction:

May 31st – Coalition government defers decision on having a referendum about EU membership the day after announcing one; George Osborne says "We cannot consider voting on an issue as important as this when we don't know what the answer will be". Prescience, or what?

"What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from."
– T S Eliot *Four Quartets*, 1942



Green Belt land refused development permission near St Albans