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#### POLITICS AND POLICY CHANGE IN BRITISH PLANNING

This paper aims first to identify the ways in which British town planning has changed during the present century, and second to offer a framework of explanation in which we see policy change in response to shifts in socio-political attitudes. These are important tasks because of the idea of town planning has received universal acknowledgement, the concepts, practice and legislation of the subject field having been transplanted over the years from one national and cultural setting to another. World wide operators of planning systems need to be aware of contemporary change, and the reasons for it; the paper is therefore particularly apt for an Anglo-Polish seminar, designed to assist in the mutual appreciation of different national approaches.

#### British Planning in Change

It can be argued that the starting point of British town planning was a fresh attempt to improve 19th century working class housing. It led to an embrace with issues of civic art, early forms of land use regulation and suburban estate design, with liberal, reformist and progressive ideologies making a dramatic leap forward from the concepts and practice of Victorian sanitarianism. Once established, town planning changed little for 30 years or so; it stayed rooted in a design-oriented task of land use management by a professional elite. The targets were low density, suburban development, protection of the countryside from urban sprawl and the search everywhere for beauty, order and convenience.

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In the 1940s a real departure took place in the highly conductive context of the Second World War. Aerial bombardment had led to massive housing damage and the destruction of central areas of cities. The needs of urban redevelopment stemming from obsolescence and war damage summoned a flurry of consultants' reports offering both strategic models of decentralisation and dispersal as well as detailed design plans. Planning had won the war and it could win the peace; town planning took its place in ambitious post-war programmes for economic and social reconstruction.

For a quarter of a century and more the firm base of statutory planning, together with a broad acceptance of planning aims and objectives provided a stable, coherent picture characterized by features such as land use control, countryside protection, green belts, New Towns, housing improvement and redevelopment, new roads and motorways, city centre schemes and aid to the disadvantaged regions. But the purpose of planning gradually lost its clarity, disillusionment with the system being fed from a number of sources. An ideological reappraisal of both planning and the role of the State led to a sharp withdrawal of the sympathies for a strong public sector. The town planner became vulnerable as one of the architects of the planned, welfare-state society which had promised so much but, it was alleged, had failed to deliver.

Particularly during the last quarter of a century a significant change can be observed. The State has continued to maintain and indeed enhance its community-based standards, and to follow its role as a general provider, but the growing reach of the centralist function has been sharply modified. Negotiation with the community over policies and programmes is now replacing the previous straightforward normative policies implemented through the authority of central and local government. Consensus on aims and objectives has significantly broken down; in a pluralist society the aspirations and values of individual groups within seek expression and articulation. As a result, environmental and community policies which have varied consequences for groups within society have to be negotiated by the

central and local State with the groups most concerned.

British town planning is trying to come to terms with this new situation. In those heady years of the 1940s and 50s when centrally and locally directed programmes covering population distribution, employment location, infrastructure investment and land use control were devised, the State, armed as it was with weapons of almost unquestioned regulation and provision (apart from nationalisation of land values, which failed), gave powerful support and authority to town planning. Today sanction by the community of these plans can no longer be assured; there are flash points of difference when the interests of the community seem to be prejudiced, as with new developments which give rise to alleged environmental damage, or with the withdrawal of services such as schools and transport in rural areas.

Historical and political perspectives such as these help to provide an important background for understanding the way in which town planning in Britain is undergoing radical changes both in concepts and practice. Up to the late 1950s, post-war conventional wisdom still had it that State regulation was crucial to the creation of a healthy, caring and relatively equal society; that the State was fundamentally benevolent; and that without its underpinning of medicine, education, employment, social welfare and public utilities, social Darwinism would prevail. The State had prevailed against 19th century individualism and the traumas of the inter war years. But doubts set in, and from the 1970s there has been a receding tide of belief in the efficacy of State direction. Arguments have been turned around; it is now increasingly alleged that the State is basically malevolent rather than benevolent and likely to ride roughshod over the community it is meant to serve.

There is, of course, not one community, but many, and the different values which they represent are today expressed with vigour. It is in this sense that various aspects of social and environmental policy now have to be negotiated with the people most affected. Public policy can no longer be imposed for very long; it needs the acquiescence (however grudging) of those who have an interest in it. In a highly sophisticated representative



democracy such as Britain's this has customarily been the case to some extent, but the present period is one, the end of which is not yet in sight, when demands for a negotiated order are particularly pressing.

Town planning, its ideals as well as possibilities, is affected accordingly. The subjugation of private preferences to collective needs, implicit in Britain immediately after World War II, (and still the key feature of planning today in socialist countries) has been much eroded, if not reversed. New social values are being articulated in contemporary society and the town planning system is called upon to adapt. For example, an energy conscious society, or one which calls for self-sufficiency or self management, would be very different from that which rushed for economic growth in the 1950s and 60s. Similarly, the assertion of human values in phrases such as 'small is beautiful' or in movements as 'limits to growth' also has challenging implications for town planning. The important point is that increasingly what stands for town planning has to be negotiated with the community at a time when its expressed preferences are changing so sharply. In Britain, town planning can no longer be a question of imposing decisions from one set of formerly agreed positions; many of the assumptions on which planning strategies were based are today strongly challenged from various directions and the institutional vehicles through which they were implemented are in some disarray.

In short, Britain is living through a period of transition: from one where the sources of social authority were taken as given, or prescribed, to one in which social arrangements are more and more subject to the authority of negotiation. There is an increasingly negotiated social and political order; consequently, forms of town planning more suited to earlier decades are naturally subject to stresses and strains. We might argue that town planning in the mixed economy countries has come, not to a cul-de-sac, but to crossroads.

In this situation a number of criticisms of British town planning have been made in recent years. In the first place, it is argued that the planning system has failed to produce what

it promised. It has proved strong on the things that are relatively unimportant, in detail of various kinds, but weak and ineffective on the things that matter much more, such as major locational or distribution questions which might lead to personal satisfactions in jobs, housing and life chances. It is maintained that town planning has failed to create truly satisfying, new physical environments and the whole operation of plan making with its mystique is alleged to have become distant from the people. The operation has failed to be 'positive' in the sense of creative innovation, and has been 'negative', relapsing into unnecessary restrictionism. Always thought to be progressive in character, it can on occasions be regressive, actually contributing to difficulties. Furthermore, in spite of high hopes the planning system has failed to co-ordinate the plans of other public services: town planning is imperfectly related to other spheres of State policy and activity, either at local and central levels. Finally, there is the criticism that town planning is too slow and demanding of manpower.

There are then serious defects to town planning today, and they derive from political factors as much as those which are professional and technical by nature. It is held that the planning process needs to be a more effective operation, more expeditious, and more commanding of public respect. This is not easy to achieve when local politics are volatile and any consensus for reform is largely absent. But the issues revolve round a number of important questions. For example, how much planning is now thought desirable? In view of the failures of the public sector, will the importance previously attached to collective demands now reside with private preferences? What are the likely socio-political attitudes and postures towards town planning over the next quarter of a century? Is the current 'retreat from government' a short term hiccup or a long term trend?

Town planning and planning generally have come under sharp scrutiny from both the political left and right. Questions are being asked again as to the role of the State in post-industrial society in the social democracies of the West.

In Mrs Thatcher's Britain since 1979 arguments have been advanced which have advocated a substantial retreat from the present and any extension of forms of bureaucracy at all levels. These arguments have stressed that unnecessary State control of our community affairs is wrong in principle and merely serves to weaken the capacity of the individual to enhance his own life chances. They point to the fact that the actual post-war fruits of State control have often been unpalatable and that the results have not always been in the interests of those most affected. They dismiss the idea that town planning is always 'progressive'; town planning can, in fact, be regressive, actually contributing to a new set of problems. The insensitivities of planning bureaucracies are given as unwelcome manifestations of State power, while its inefficiencies are compared to the more attractive features of adaptive private market intelligence.

Ultimately, 'How much planning' depends on the extent to which society will be prepared to ask the State to deal with community and environmental problems, rather than ask other agencies, institutions or markets. A feature of post-war Britain has been the almost unwavering support given to State involvement in many fields. An equal feature is the very considerable criticism of the results of that State involvement. The weight of that criticism may lead to a profound reluctance to repose any more confidence in the State to act effectively in environmental, economic, social and community affairs. If so, town planning would be one of those areas to experience significant consequences.

#### An Explanatory Model

We have argued above that for many years local and central Government in Britain has sought to intervene in environmental change. Nineteenth century urban regulations over new street widths, sanitation, housing, and space around dwellings led to a twentieth century concern for land use, location of activi-



ties, standards and allocations of all kinds, so that urban environments became the product of what might be claimed to be a dominant public interest, rather than a set of individual private interests. Over time, the continuity of objectives has given a particular characteristic to cities and parts of cities: Warsaw looks different from Coventry; Birmingham looks different from Lodz.

We argue that these differences arise from differences in the planning systems of the two countries. Different objectives have been pursued; differently trained professional staff have been involved; different social aspirations from the community which they serve have been experienced; different forms of government and administrative machinery have been used. The fact is that planning is not just a technical activity undertaken by an elite group of appropriately qualified people with unquestioned universal application anywhere in the world: it is much more complex than that.

Planning is essentially a political activity, because it is concerned with the allocation of resources by one group of people on behalf of others, and in that process some people derive benefit, others have their interests adversely affected. Planning is not a neutral activity in which the answers to problems can be scientifically proved to be right or wrong. Planning is not a totally objective exercise, rational, and a - political. Rather, it is a decision making process in which some people's interests are advanced, and others retarded. This is a view which has come to be expressed in recent years in western countries, but it may be advanced as an observation applicable to any planning system, anywhere, at any time, however rudimentary, however sophisticated.

To simplify a very complex situation we can suggest that in Britain those engaged in the planning system fall into three categories, and these are interactive:

a) a bureaucracy: central and local government and State agencies;

b) demands and pressure groups in the community, representing special interests; and

c) central and local government politicians, democratically elected to take decisions.

We need to look at these in greater detail:

a) this category is composed of administrators concerned with the maintenance of policy: the civil service and local government staff. They are cautious, conservative, and defend their procedures. Within this bureaucracy there will be professionals including architects, engineers and town planners who have been educated to follow a particular ideology. The planner for example is an activist; it is his job to develop land and get things done, to achieve things, and because he is 'future oriented', to be in advance of public opinion. There are tensions within this group.

b) the community is a client group. Planning responds to preferences and demands from groups which will articulate and demand certain things, both to achieve and to stop. It may be more and better housing, parks and sports facilities; fewer motorways, no more airports, or less destruction of wild habitat in the countryside. Community groups have come to occupy an important position in the social democracies of the West and they now have statutory rights of consultation. Public participation in planning has become a part of this.

c) politicians: conscious of wanting to please and win votes, they will want to respond to community demands. But they will also wish to be regarded favourably by their officials dependent as they are on satisfactory working relationships. Politicians will therefore have to exercise judgement over competing priorities. Locally the situation might become quite complicated, local politicians also finding it necessary to reflect, or occasionally depart from, national political objectives.

This description of the British system is of inter relationships between key groups and actors. These include political parties and their local variations; the civil service and divisions within: DOE, Treasury, DTI etc; local government staff in districts and counties; organized professional interests; and community groups, which have their most vigorous expression in protest groups. It is important to note that these groups are not homogeneous. They are heterogeneous, with important subdivisions within them.



A number of consequences flow from this. First, the planning system is unstable. It is dynamic; it is in flux, changing over time. Because of this the system is also uncertain, lacking continuity in the long term. In British planning it is unusual to have programmes maintained for more than ten years without some quite sharp reversal.

Secondly, the system is pragmatic; it is not forced into an ideological strait jacket as it responds to changes in community preferences. For example, motorway planning, initially a stirring start to the 1960s is now seen as an environmental threat. High rise housing, once architecturally exciting, is now considered sociologically harmful. Advanced technology, promising so much for the next century, is regarded as scientifically hazardous.

Thirdly, the operation of the system is heavily dependent on the influence of key actors with the ability to influence others. This means that the emergence of a particular planning policy is often due as much to the vigour or authority of even one individual as much as the rightness or wrongness of a particular cause. Green belts owe much to Ministerial intervention; so too do New Towns; while traffic planning was considerably influenced by Colin Buchanan.

Fourthly, the objectives of planning become confused and confusing. British planning has often appeared to be process without purpose. This has become so particularly over the last ten years during which time State roles of intervention have been weakened as Britain has sought once again to explore the potential of private markets. There is now a crisis of confidence in the operation of a planning machine where ultimate objectives are obscure.

### Conclusion

Adaptability and change are inherent in town planning. Town planning is always at the centre of a moving scene, revolving round the core concern of environmental management and the right

use of land. It is not an exact science: it is an art, expressing periodic changes in cultural values. Planning will be different in Poland from Britain, but we can still learn from each other by looking at just how our systems actually work in practice.

### Bibliography

The arguments expressed in this paper are further developed in G. E. C h e r r y (1982), *The Politics of Town Planning*, Longman.

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### POLITYKA I ZMIANY W POLITYCE PLANOWANIA W WIELKIEJ BRYTANII

Brytyjski system planowania składa się z trzech wzajemnie powiązanych elementów, którymi są sfera polityczna, profesjonalna i społeczeństwo. Zarówno w obrębie nich, jak i pomiędzy nimi istnieją tarcia. System ten jest zbiurokratyzowany, otaczają go grupy broniące partykularnych interesów, a jego trzecim elementem są politycy podejmujący decyzje dotyczące polityki planowania.

Mimo, że brytyjski system planowania pozwala na pewne zmiany, ich przeprowadzenie wymaga długiego czasu. Jest on ponadto niestały i niepewny, a jego charakter jest kształtowany w dużej mierze przez zmiany w priorytetach, a także przez wpływy wywierane przez poszczególnych aktorów działających w obrębie niego.

Jako przykłady odzwierciedlające sytuację w tej dziedzinie w Wielkiej Brytanii, możnaby tu przytoczyć takie jak:

- Nowe Miasta: wyraźne koncepcje polityczne dotyczące planowania lokalnego pod koniec lat czterdziestych;
- ziemia i własność: różne podejścia rządów Partii Pracy i Partii Konserwatywnej;
- udział społeczeństwa w planowaniu: przykład lokalnej polityki;
- planowanie autostrad: konflikt z postulatami ochrony środowiska;
- bloki mieszkalne: konflikt z interesami ich mieszkańców;
- planowanie lotnisk: technologia kontra ochrona środowiska;
- ochrona krajobrazu: efektywność kontra wygody;
- strategie regionalne i dotyczące miast: reakcja na postulaty lokalnych społeczności.

Brytyjski system planowania składa się z pięciu głównych grup aktorów politycznych. Są nimi: partie polityczne, zorganizowane grupy broniące interesów gospodarczych i różnych grup zawodowych, ruch protestu, zbiurokratyzowany rząd centralny i równie zbiurokratyzowane władze lokalne. Wpływ i znaczenie każdej z tych grup różnią się w zależności od dziedziny jakiej dotyczy polityka planowania.