

Persistent confusions

Esoteric debates only understood by planners: *Des McConaghy*

The 1976 RTPI working party report "Planning and the Future" suggests a planning role covering "those activities of government at all levels which have a direct bearing on the quality of life"—and "the planning process is to be a more comprehensive and integrated activity at all scales of human activity". Such concern is more usually called "government", and even if we use the working party term "governance" one suspects planners are again trying to upgrade their status too quickly for public credibility. Clearly the RTPI itself still suffers from endemic difficulties in defining the scope of its concern *vis-à-vis* the actual machinery of public planning.

Before we further increase the distance between such elitist planning and politicians (or the vast army of practical jobbists who also have something to do with public policy planning) we might consider why we first came to invent a general planning system that has precious little to do with government at all and nothing to do with spending. Is it because central government likes it that way—since it is generally easier to jog along in an *ad hoc* way with a dummy planning system putting a gloss on things? Is it because academics like it that way, since the whole idea of action is a threat to their intellectual standards? Do professional institutions like it that way because they would much rather have impotence than sacrifice their arrogant pretensions? One could be forgiven such extreme questions while many planners pursue "comprehensiveness" as if it were some sort of aesthetic virtue at the expense of more practical roles.

Planners endlessly debating their future should attempt to get a few things clear about the present and their immediate past. The first fact they should face is that statutory planning remains what it has always been: at base a town and country planning concept dominantly concerned with physical plan-

ning and land use. As such it is a very good system and does not exclude public planning by others. But for the past nine years planners have been trying to pretend that this type of planning was a planning system that embraced "economic" and "social" planning whereas, of course, nothing of the sort has happened. Indeed we don't have any economic planning at all and one of the greatest obstacles to the practical development of expenditure-linked planning has been the planners' spurious notion that we have it already.

The arrogance of traditional planners who claim some special interest and knowledge of the "public good" does not make them very objective when facing their own craft and its inherent contradictions and confusions. These confusions are now endemic and general to planning. Some planners are born confused from planning education. Some achieve confusion by promotion to highly paid strategic posts of negligible influence. All have confusion thrust upon them by the academic debauchery that has characterised planning debate since 1965. Before continuing our largely incestuous discussions, we must see why these confusions arose in the scope and subject matter of planning.

Post PAG:—

The rot started with the Planning Advisory Group Report (PAG) of 1965. We squandered the more prosperous sixties in an academic debate about land-use planning as we tried to make town and country planning into some comprehensive system of environmental decision-making. This trend was consolidated by the 1968 and 1971 Acts. Regard for the operation of all this did not pay much attention to the prevailing realities of decision-making at any level of government. Planning practice developed, as it were, in a vacuum and, in particular, ignored three important areas of environmental decision-making. Firstly, no interest was taken in the *control of finance* resulting in a mis-match between the aspirations of planners and any ability to deliver the goods. Secondly, scant attention was given to the prevailing realities of central and local government *management systems*. This has resulted in a credibility gap between planners and their colleagues in public service. Thirdly, the development of the planning system had little regard for the pragmatic nature of our *political process*.

As a direct result, during the expansionist sixties town and country planners came to anticipate more influence than, in fact, they could ever have. This was reflected throughout the planning system and inevitably led to notorious uncertainties among all concerned. The confusion was even to affect local planning and development control: an honest jobbist role where the mass of people still have some basic understanding of what planners do. Certainly at all other levels of planning the confusion between what the planner thinks he does and what, in fact, he is able to do became general.

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The same confusions led to certain developments in higher education following the Robbins Report of 1963. Education to provide specific skills became chained to other irrelevant matters with the expansion of the spending sixties. Reflecting the trends in planning practice, town and country planning moved from a multi-discipline into a non-specific discipline. Planning Schools began to expand their concern into ever wider aspects of public policy planning about which they had neither knowledge nor experience.

In general it could be said that new planning aspirations rescued the social sciences by giving them something to bite on but it is not at all clear what this did for planning itself. Planning education mopped up geographers and other academic disciplines and, while all this led to important academic work inherently good in itself, the credibility gap widened. Planning graduates faced increasing difficulties in finding real life job opportunities to match aspirations rarely found in public service. Until recently the wealthier and more "prestigious" local authority planning departments were able to cope with this supply of graduates, as they themselves took on the "ivory tower" characteristics of planning schools and developed the potent myths of "participation" and "strategic planning" in dreadful isolation from the rest of public service.

The political parallel

But it would be unfair to suggest that largely academic planning systems were solely the result of unbridled professional ambition. After all, the new planning system was given to us by Parliament. Indeed the politicians concerned welcomed the naïvetés of PAG and all the ringing optimism that was to blossom in the Dan Smith era. It seemed to many that physical planning had a major part to play in pioneering much wider government strategies.

Since the war politicians have been struggling in a losing battle of accountability for increasingly complex government and associated bureaucratisation at all levels. The response in management terms led to the corporate planning myths of the early seventies. In financial terms the sixties saw the evolution of the Treasury's Public Expenditure Survey System (PESC) as a further struggle for accountability and control. There is no doubt that spending politicians also wanted the visibility of physical planning to strengthen both control and constituency roles. Nobody was very concerned about how these and other innovations came together. Nothing was clear except perhaps the dominant belief of the sixties that various technologies would lead to the organisational conquest of government and hence to accountability.

So grappling with the complexities of modern government the Labour Party was prepared to take a shot in the dark and then the 1968 Town and Country Planning Act went through in spite of profound uncertainties about how it would be operated. Wind-ing up the debate in Westminster in 1968, Lord Ken-

net said: "My Lords we take leave of a long bill. I regret that it is in places an obscure bill but if it were any clearer than the surrounding landscape it would give rise to greater obscurity".

Back-lash

So there it was; and Governments were stuck with a planning system which many planners took to be a new mini-system of "government" (governance?) while the general management systems of government and actual spending controls were developing in quite separate ways. The consequent confusion about what the planner does do and what he cannot do could be tolerated, and even fostered, in a climate of economic opportunity and growth.

Given the general economic problems of the seventies a back-lash was to be expected. Central confusions about the real scope of planning became more evident and of critical importance. For example, the Treasury has now become almost "paranoic" about local government staffing and about planning staffs in particular. This reflects a widespread concern among the mass of people about rising public service costs. Whether justified or not, this concern exists and is growing rapidly. Against that back-ground the wilful perpetuation of basic confusions about the planners' role is academically and professionally suicidal.

Central confusions at DoE

The worst problem is that these confusions persist and are still actually promoted in the central government. In Whitehall generally there is consensus that planning is mainly concerned with the physical environment; the wider aspirations cultivated by planners themselves generally go un-noticed and when noticed are regarded as uninformed. Even in the Department of the Environment (DoE) there is no generally accepted *formal* view of the scope and content of the Development Plan System.

For example, in DoE a wide spectrum of opinion exists about the extent to which plans are, could be or should be vehicles for executive action. Our "Structure Plans" remain the only statutory planning mechanism for bringing together all the policies and priorities of government departments and local authorities. But the fact that the Environmental Secretary's approval is on behalf of the government must limit the scope of such plans. The arguments against using plans as a vehicle for decision-making include:

- i) they are not amenable to major fluctuations in the management of the economy and complementary fluctuations in local management;
- ii) social criteria used by local and central spending departments are not comparable;
- iii) time horizons in the Development Plan Systems are not compatible with the forward estimating of local departments, central government departments or the Treasury; and;
- iv) the principle of subjecting programmes of "eco-

conomic", "social" and environmental policies to formal statutory procedures of public debate and resolutions is not compatible with the political process.

From these and other criteria our physical planning system is demonstrably not the vehicle for general planning anticipated by many planners. Indeed it can never be. The system provides useful background information for quite separate aspects of public policy but, of course, remains essentially land-use planning as the principal statutory basis for local development control.

Perhaps all this could have been made much clearer if it were not for the unresolved question of DoE's interest in regional policy. Very nominally DoE has some "responsibility" for regional plans and "strategies". This is a very unimportant function largely unrecognised by financial controls or spending departments and, of course, there is no statutory provision. Nevertheless DoE still holds that such planning is the key factor in relating "economic" planning to physical planning. Regional plans are said to link the management of the economy to every other level of town and country planning although this remains such a gross over-simplification as to be totally misleading.

Positive planning postponed

The "cloud cuckoo land" syndrome of the Development Plan System has tended to produce a "Walter Mitty" type planner, pontificating on aspects of public policy from a quite imaginary world. The younger planners often become totally dissatisfied with the "whole system" while their elders are too often seen as a "nuisance" to politicians and colleagues of the real world.

More importantly the unrealistic concept of comprehensiveness diverts attention from innovations actually possible in the financial field. The "trigger" of more positive planning is firmly attached to the machinery of public expenditure but, for most planners, this is uncharted territory. For example; a short while ago, planners hailed the 1975 Community Land Act as an instrument of "positive planning" and were astounded to find that its operation would only "have regard to" plans. It could not be otherwise. On the other hand a total lack of interest by planners in principles for operation and control of the Land Key Sector made sure that there was precious little planning in the measure at all.

Some attempts to make Structure Plans more amenable to budgeting disciplines still show a lamentable ignorance of the financial arrangements of government. The improved prospects of Regional Reports in Scotland are not really due to any development of planning skills but more to the consistent interest of the Scottish Office, since 1972, in involving the whole of local government in the annual PESC cycle. The Scottish Transport and Housing Policies and programmes may also develop more effectively within

overall innovations for local government finance. Clearly the planner's own effectiveness here will depend on his descent to the practicalities of acquiring new skills in public finance and the "hard tack" management aspects of, expenditure-linked plans. There is a great deal of work to be done once planners stop arguing about false dichotomies: physical versus "social" planning; research and anti-research biases. Such polarisations only emphasise the overall academic nature of planning and its distance from practical and positive tasks.

Conclusions

To Government and the mass of people, the idea of a planned approach to environmental matters remains, at base, town and country planning concepts. In spite of the spurious claims of comprehensive planners and mind-shattering intellectuals, this type of planning provides a good base of public credibility. In this country, attempts to extend the planned approach to other areas of public policy should use this credibility and not erode it further. Every journey begins from where one is.

Attempts to expand the planners' influence in the sixties conspicuously failed because the development of skills did not relate to the realities of decision-making in environmental matters; notably; (a) public finance and controls; (b) the prevailing management realities in central and local government; (c) environmental legislation in general; and (d) knowledge of the political process. To avoid the errors of the sixties planners can only extend their influence by building up hard knowledge in the above framework of actual controls. This has to include a thorough understanding of the conventions and language used in these other areas of public service.

To be at all convincing planners will need to have the humility to reject comprehensive and "omniscient" roles including the more extravagant claims of the Development Plan System. With financial stringency they will need to put greater emphasis on developing more operational skills and that means a more informed approach in the financial field.

To ignore all this is to continue the confusion about what the planner does and what he does not do. This confusion has been endemic in central and local government and a rabid feature of planning education. The same confusion also troubles students and Validating Bodies and there is now widespread concern that a future esoteric debate may develop that is only understood by planners. Avoiding such philosophical dissertations, planners must become easily understood by the public and those sections of public service more directly concerned with decision-making. Financial stringency may even increase the market for operational planning skills as the public sector moves towards more critical corporate attitudes. This is one way in which planners could clarify and extend the scope of their concern to overcome present confusions while diversifying career opportunities.