anti-politics, professionals and a bear called paddington

The success of populist right-wing parties in a number of European countries continues to be one of the defining political trends of the day. In May 2014 the Front National won ten *mairies* (town halls) in the French local elections. Closer to home UKIP emerged as the party winning the most seats in the European elections, increasing its share of the vote by 11%, and since then has acquired its first two elected MPs.

Mainstream parties struggle to respond to the seemingly unstoppable increase in support for such parties, driven by what some commentators have described as a sentiment of 'anti-politics'.[1] The rise of Nigel Farage's 'reactionary cultural movement',[2] with its anti-EU and anti-immigration rhetoric, is pulling political discourse ever rightwards 'towards its own favoured terrain'[2] and has frightened David Cameron into making a gamble with Britain's future in the EU in the hope of placating hard-line Eurosceptics in his own party and stemming a flow of Tory votes in the direction of UKIP.

UKIP seems to have succeeded in widening its appeal from its initial support base of 'traditional' nationalist, C/conservative and Eurosceptic voters to attract a wider range of supporters, including some who previously voted for Labour. Despite a series of absurdities and gaffes – including recently mistaking Westminster Cathedral for a mosque in a rebuke for 'liberal bias' directed at the BBC,[3] or Nigel Farage bizarrely blaming his late arrival at a meeting in Wales on an M4 motorway which has become less 'navigable' in a country with 'open-door' immigration[4] – nothing seems to stall the rise of a party which even its (to use Keynes' phrase) 'academic scribbler' founder Alan Sked now describes as a 'Frankenstein's monster'.[5]

Politicians from the other parties (except, perhaps, the Liberal Democrats) appear reluctant to 'call out' UKIP and expose the potential implications of its policies and positions for British values and prosperity. Sustained and effective media scrutiny also seems limited.

Particularly striking is the contrast with the way in which significant sections of the media keenly emphasised that the 'Yes' campaign in the recent Scottish independence referendum apparently incorporated some 'nasty' nationalist elements.[6] UKIP and its members can, it seems, say all kinds of unsubstantiated things about immigrants, the EU and a host of other issues without facing a similar level of scrutiny. Nigel Farage has even enjoyed having his avuncular 'man of the people' image bolstered by being invited for a pint with a journalist from Britain's leading liberal newspaper.[7] The most coherent critique of 'Farageism' (at least on an implicit level) has probably been provided by a recent film about an illegal immigrant from the Ursidae family (*Tremarctos ornatus* one assumes), which lavishly celebrates Britain's historic tolerance and diversity and eulogises the welcoming and multicultural nature of its globalised capital city.[8]

Meanwhile, the debate (to use a perhaps rather flattering term) surrounding EU issues in the UK is driven by desperate politicians keen to appeal to the section of the electorate who seem angriest with the current 'state of the world'.

Steve Richards, writing in the *Independent* following the election of Mark Reckless as UKIP MP for Rochester and Strood, notes how those in the 'Westminster bubble' who scrutinise polls and focus group results 'are so in touch with the level of discontent that they try too hard to please, appearing to accept the premise that both Europe and immigration are the source of all the UK's problems when they know this is not true'.[1] He goes on to rather bravely observe that 'For some of the angriest voters or non-voters there is no reciprocal arrangement. They do not try to please the politicians by reflecting on the dilemmas and challenges faced by flawed leaders. It spoils the fun of feeling angry and betrayed.'

As many planners know from experience, the true sum of a society's feelings on a given issue does not necessarily equate with the position of those who have the strongest and most polarised views. Similarly, although objections to particular developments might rapidly fill the in-trays of planning departments, those who support a development are less likely to write in during a consultation process. Letters to say 'well done' to

planners from those particularly satisfied with a development outcome are even rarer – a pleasant surprise rather than something to be expected.

The point here is not to bemoan that attempts to work in the public interest (as a politician, professional, or active citizen) may sometimes feel thankless, but to reflect on the wider point that the current conversation on Europe seems to missing a number of what might be deemed more dispassionate or 'informed' voices.

For example, the 'business view', which one might think may have some authority and legitimacy, notably on the economic issues associated with British membership of or exit from the EU, seems to have been rather absent of late. Although many businesses and business organisations are privately deeply concerned about the prospect of a British exit (Brexit[9]), they frequently choose to keep their counsel rather than speak out – perhaps understandably given the shrill timbre of the current public debate on the matter. This is significant given that arguments for and against EU membership currently (and in the event of an in-out referendum after the 2015 general election will undoubtedly) revolve a good deal around its economic benefits, or costs (UK contributions to the EU budget, for example).

With UK growth currently higher than the EU average and unemployment lower, the arguments of the 'go it alone' or 'better-off not together' camp might appear attractive to some voters. However, the wider and longer-term economic perspective arguably needs to be more fully discussed than it is being at present. Equally, the 'European project' has always been about more than the completion of the Single Market and economic growth for its own sake. From the outset the pursuit of economic prosperity through the creation of a large free-trade area was viewed as a guarantor of peace, partnership and stability in Europe. Economic enmeshment, international trade and the oversight of key industrial sectors such as coal and steel by a High Authority (later the European Commission) was seen as a way of making another major European war not only unthinkable but to all intents and purposes materially impossible.

In time, 'Europe' adopted other principles and goals and developed an interest in diverse policy sectors, many with more obvious links to the concerns of planning. Action within the collective framework of the EEC (subsequently the EC/EU) in fields such as environment, transport and regional development policy reflected this widening scope. This was welcomed by some as a way of improving standards in some areas (for example in relation to environmental protection), but has been a matter of concern to others who see European 'competence creep' as a fundamental threat to state sovereignty.

Regardless of one's view on the EU's commitment to its wider stated goals beyond the economic, it is clear that it *is* currently about more than just economics. That is not to say that economic issues are not a central concern of the EU and its actions, particularly at present as many European countries struggle to find a way back to stronger growth.[10] Yet there are other issues and values that pertain to EU membership, and one might legitimately ask which interest groups, or organisations, are effectively highlighting these in the current public debate in Britain.

'The EU is about more than just economics... there are other issues and values that pertain to EU membership, and one might legitimately ask which interest groups, or organisations, are effectively highlighting these in the current public debate in Britain'

As regards the original goals of peace and stability in Europe, one might look to the European Movement founded in 1948 under the Presidency of Duncan Sandys (later founder of the Civic Trust and an Honorary RTPI Member), with Winston Churchill as one of its Honorary Presidents. However, this is a rather small organisation which does not have anything like the resources that a political party like UKIP can draw on from its wealthy Eurosceptic supporters, such as the multi-millionaire Paul Sykes.

The views of other interest groups on the value, or constraints, of EU membership in diverse fields are also barely represented in mainstream debates. Numerous NGOs either have representation 'on the ground' close to EU institutions or seek to lobby from a distance to promote their agendas. However, they have yet to play any major role in the public debate on the EU in Britain.

Many professions, too, have an increasingly international outlook, reflecting the impacts and opportunities of Europeanisation and internationalisation for their fields of activity. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has had an office in Brussels since 1993,[11] and the RTPI has taken an active interest

in EU matters over recent decades and become involved in initiatives like the ESPON programme.[12] The TCPA has also participated in EU-funded projects and considers planning as an activity within its European and wider international context.

Even 'at home' the EU scale of governance/regulation has become part of the 'professional world' of many professionals, including planners. As well documented since the 1990s, EU legislation, policies and programmes in a number of areas have had effects on the work of planners; through influencing the procedures of planning and helping to define the parameters of action in related policy fields such as environmental protection and regeneration. Yet the professional 'take' on the EU is also largely absent from the current public debate. This could be seen as contingent upon on the extent to which the values that a given profession might be interested in fostering (for example environmental protection) are considered. Professionals might, for example, be well placed to offer a view on how these are furthered, or possibly hindered, by belonging to a supra-national structure like the EU.

The absence of professional/expert views from the EU debate is, however, perhaps predictable. Although professions are commonly expected to perform a wider public interest role in relation to the areas of knowledge and expertise they oversee, and frequently develop and advocate a 'position' on key issues,[13] they typically seek to avoid appearing to adopt an overtly political role – not least because, as Paul Davidoff noted in 1965, 'Determinations of what serves the public interest, in a society containing many diverse interest groups, are almost always of a highly contentious nature.'[14]

Whether a higher-profile intervention on the part of professions would contribute to more informed and dispassionate debate on different issues relating to EU membership is in any case a moot point. In recent decades public confidence in expert opinion has been shaken by high-profile scandals and policy failures, while the development of the internet and diverse social media has made large amounts of data, information, and views on any given topic available at the click of a button. As a result, many of us may feel we can become instant 'experts' on the social or political issues of the day, with our views being reinforced by exchanges with like-minded interlocutors in different internet and social media fora.

The mainstream media does often seek out expert opinion from relevant professionals or researchers when covering news stories (for example inviting the TCPA or RTPI to comment on issues such as housing). However, on the 'Europe' question it seems unlikely that the views of planners, or of their associations

and professional bodies, will be much sought, even if they may have some interesting stories to tell about the 'everyday' impacts of EU legislation, policies and programmes on real people and places.

As already noted, one might also wonder whether professional groups and in particular individual professionals would be comfortable offering views on one of the most contentious political issues of the day, for fear of appearing to lack impartiality. The risk of being attacked for being part of an out-of-touch elite/expert/professional social group (in the same way as the 'political class' or 'Islington types' are currently favoured targets of the 'Farageists') is also a strong disincentive to speaking out.

Yet there are other ways in which a climate of anti-politics and rising 'right-wing radical populism'[15] might impact on professional life. The growth in the number of elected representatives from parties such as UKIP and the Front National means that individuals who subscribe to their doctrines are increasingly to be found in public office and in a position to exercise power and influence. This is significant, and may become more so, given that in their work planners in democratic states are ultimately accountable to elected representatives. They are, however, typically expected also to uphold the values of their profession and act according to their own bona fide professional opinions.

Indeed, the question of how professionals should act if an employer asks them to undertake tasks, or support positions, that are contrary to the code of conduct of their professional body or their own professional opinions is commonly considered as part of training/education on professionalism and ethics. Should the professional demonstrate loyalty to, or find an accommodation with, the wishes of their 'employer' (especially in a context where the professional is accountable to a democratically elected body such as a local council), even if these conflict with their professional code and possibly their individual professional opinions?

Clause 3 of the RTPI Code of Professional Conduct, for example, states that 'In all their professional activities members shall not discriminate on the grounds of race, sex, sexual orientation, creed, religion, disability or age and shall seek to eliminate such discrimination by others and to promote equality of opportunity.'[16] The rhetoric, and many policy proposals from the new wave of European right-wing radical populist parties like UKIP, means it is not hard to envisage a situation in which upholding such standards and values where one of their representatives holds power might prove challenging. In France it is already reported that a number of council officers are leaving local authorities with a

Front National mayor, some feeling they cannot continue to work under such political leadership.[17]

In this connection it is interesting to reflect on the words of Richard Blyth, the current Head of Policy, Practice and Research at the RTPI, who has recently argued that professional accountability to political leadership should not be confused with 'subordination'.[18] The RTPI's Code of Conduct requires members to 'fearlessly and impartially exercise their independent professional judgement to the best of their skill and understanding' as well as to 'discharge their duty to their employers'. Balancing these professional duties and responsibilities can be challenging at any time, but may become even more so where professionals are accountable to a political leadership characterised by 'strong' or radical positions on certain issues.

Conclusion

The definition of the role, objectives and ethical standards of professions is subject to change and can be affected by politics and ideology. As the history of planning shows, and as many of the discipline's theorists have argued, planning is an intrinsically political as well as a technical activity. Planners have worked for all kinds of political masters at different times and in different places, not always for the progressive ends which the 'liberal' profession of planning (as currently defined in places like the UK and by most of the contemporary planning 'academy') may like to think of itself as serving. This reflects the fact that definitions of the 'public interest' which professions are constituted to altruistically serve are mutable, affected by changing values and contexts, and, as noted by Davidoff, often 'of a highly contentious nature'.

In their daily lives professionals may eschew overt engagement in political debates for the understandable reasons discussed above, but at times when politics is in 'dangerous flux'[1] and controversies rage, politics may interpolate professional lives and assumptions in new and challenging ways. Anticipating this and thinking of strategies for individually and collectively coping with and responding to such pressures would seem currently to be an important part of reflective professional practice.

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Notes

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