**Progressive town planning and community engagement**

A recent edition of this journal saw an impassioned plea from “Tom Pain” for a rediscovery of town and country planning’s progressive roots1. Pain sees the Government’s recent “revocation of the remaining guidance on equalities and inclusion in planning” as the final nail in the coffin of planning’s “social purpose”. I have commented in this journal before about what I see as the unfortunate tendency of planners today to rely on advice from government rather than following their own initiative2, so I am not in principle of the view that *more guidance = better planning*, but I concur more broadly with the view that planning should at root be about making life better for people – as, Pain argues, did the “the founders of the planning movement”. I also agree with Pain that part of the problem is that amongst many in the planning profession today there is “a twisted view that so long as there’s a development plan the system will be alright”. Concluding a powerful, scathing and challenging critique of both the coalition Government and today’s planners, he does happily end on a more positive note, that it is not too late for “the planning community to speak out… to resist, to campaign for progressive planning”.

But what does this mean in practice? It is one thing for organisations such as the TCPA to campaign for progressive planning – that they have a strong track record of doing so is beyond doubt, and is one of the reasons I, and presumably many others, am a member. But what about the rest of “the planning community” – particularly practicing planners, whether members of the RTPI or not? In effect it must mean challenging the simplistic mantra of the coalition that “development means growth”3. But in challenging this mantra, it seems to me that planners must take something of a political position. I return to the question of whether this is desirable below, but first we need to consider whether it is possible under the RTPI’s Code of Conduct4. Perhaps as a Member of the RTPI I am expected to know the Code off by heart – but I must confess I do not, and I doubt I am alone. Having found it on the Institute’s website, I was mildly surprised to read that the Code requires Members to “promote equality of opportunity” in their professional activity (p. 2). Equality, of course, is not the same as equity, and the Code then states that “Members must take steps to ensure that their private, personal, political and financial interests do not conflict with their professional duties” (ibid.). Could campaigning for progressive planning be seen as a political interest? I suspect the Right Honourable Eric Pickles might claim so – that would be entirely in keeping with his description of planning offices as “the last bastions of Communism”. But the Code does not rule out political interests for planners – only those which “conflict with their professional duties”. So let’s assume that unless an MRTPI planner works for an organisation which has set its face against progressive planning, then campaigning for that cause is not bringing that planner into conflict with the Code of Conduct. Phew.

So if a planner, working let’s say for Grotton Borough Council (apologies to Messrs Ankers, Kaiserman and Shepley), agrees with Tom Pain that progressive planning is something worth fighting for, what is she to do about it? She might seek to guide the local plan for Grotton in more progressive directions, or perhaps if she works in development management she may recommend decisions which contribute in some way to reducing social inequity/inequality. But, as I am always telling my students (and anyone I meet who wishes to take issue with a perceived problem caused by “bloody planners”), planners in fact do not take this type of decision – planning, in the UK at least, is ostensibly a democratic process, with decisions taken by elected members of local authorities. Those elected members are, of course, guided by recommendations from the planners employed by their local authority, along with a host of other factors, including the views of local people. In the post-modernist era, after the gigantic failures of “rational” planning represented by, amongst other things, urban motorways blighting our cities, it would be a brave planner indeed who advocated a model of planning which did not listen to the views of local people. Of course, Professor Patsy Healey and others go further in suggesting that communities should effectively design their own plan, and the role of planners should be redefined as being facilitators of such “Collaborative Planning” 5. Indeed, in their 2010 *Open Source Planning* “green paper”6, the Conservative party suggested their ideas about localism were in part inspired by collaborative planning theory. Whilst some might decry that as political opportunism, there is now a political consensus which is, rhetorically at least, supportive of more community involvement in planning, whether for “democratic” or “efficiency” reasons.

The rub, of course, comes in the fact that planners cannot simply say to communities “go ahead, we’re ready to listen to your views”. The planning system in the UK is, even for those of us who have been trained it its operation, fiendishly complex. In a very real sense, *knowledge is power* when it comes to planning in the UK. Further, it is increasingly acknowledged that certain groups in society (for example middle class people with “sharp elbows”) are better equipped to attain this knowledge7, and so are able to use their power to influence the planning system in their favour8. So an advocate for progressive planning might wish to devote time and attention to encouraging and facilitating less advantaged individuals and groups representing them to get involved in planning – and this might be something that those of us who do not work in the public sector could also contribute to.

It is here that I want to take issue with something that Tom Pain said in his article – “Nobody – apart, I must say, from the TCPA – seemed to notice or care that spatial planning now has no social purpose” (p. 312). This is perhaps a little unfair – for a number of years some in the planning academy have argued strongly that planning should be much more heavily oriented towards social justice. Key voices here include Professor Susan Fainstein9 in the USA and Professor Heather Campbell10 of The University of Sheffield in the UK. Some of Professor Campbell’s colleagues at Sheffield are leading attempts to set up a “Planning Schools Community Support Network”, an idea initiated by Friends of the Earth, the charity with an environmental **and social** focus (<http://www.foe.co.uk/what_we_do/about_us/friends_earth_values_beliefs.html>).

However, at, and subsequent to, a recent meeting (hosted and supported by the University of Sheffield) to consider how any such network would work, I have found myself reflecting on the diverse people in the room and the bodies they represented. All those there had of course expressed some interest in facilitating more community engagement in planning, indeed a number of the bodies (for example Planning Aid) dedicate a substantial proportion of their time towards that goal. Beyond that, however, the organisations have (entirely unsurprisingly) different aims – some of them (such as the CPRE) are member organisations and as such the aims of their central offices may differ from those of some of their members – something that I, and others, have commented on elsewhere11; 12. I hope I can say, without fear of being sued for libel, that the political views espoused by some members of CPRE do not, to me at least, appear to be wholly progressive in nature.

So the question for me is something like: “If organisations such as the CPRE (and/or the individuals who represent them) genuinely seek to encourage more people and groups to participate in the planning system (which in general I think is a good thing), does it matter whether I agree with the aims of those organisations or individuals?”. Reversing the question to consider the people and groups who might be the focus of attempts to broaden participation, I ask myself: “Do I believe in encouraging more participation in the planning system by anyone, regardless of their beliefs and/or the outcomes they would like to see?”.

If I want to answer Tom Pain’s call, and if I concur that part of that should involve wider and deeper community engagement with planning, then should I only work with bodies or individuals who can demonstrate they too are committed to progressive planning? Since there are probably very few who would in fact proclaim themselves in favour of *regressive* planning, this in itself probably requires a personal reflection on the aims of those seeking (or claiming) to encourage more community participation in planning – or more widely those getting involved in planning in any way. Taking that to its logical conclusion, that requires me, and anyone else similarly inclined, to come to a judgement on whether groups or individuals are sufficiently progressive for me to want to get involved with them.

But who appointed me moral arbiter? There is no shortage of anthropologists and sociologists, never mind planners, who would scold me about the danger of imposing my world view on others. But how can we argue for progressive planning without making this kind of subjective judgement? Whether or not they state as much, it is clear that many bodies involved in planning do not place an argument for more progressive planning at the core of what they do – and given the discussion above about the in-built tendency in the English planning system for the powerful to dominate given the *status quo*, then one could make the argument that if you are not actively progressive in your aims then the end result is likely to be passively regressive. Again, this is not necessarily a new debate – as long ago as the 1960s some were arguing for “advocacy planning”, wherein planners should explicitly position themselves with, and hence plan specifically for, the disadvantaged in society13.

Of course, I’m aware that having this debate maybe a luxury of those, like myself, who are not practicing planners. For planners in a local authority, whilst there may be aspirations, or even targets, in relation to widening participation beyond the usual suspects, there is an employment and probably professional obligation to treat all individuals and groups equally when it comes to participation and the planning system – they cannot encourage participation amongst one group whilst discouraging it (explicitly or otherwise) amongst another – the “equality of opportunity” in the RTPI’s Code of Conduct. Likewise for those in the private sector who must work for their clients, or their company’s clients, regardless of their personal views on the nature of those clients’ social or otherwise agenda.

So what are my conclusions? Perhaps firstly that it is not quite as easy to, as Tom Pain did, quote Elvis Presley in exhorting planners to demonstrate “‘A little less conversation, a little more action, please’” – for many practicing planners it is hard to know what to do to promote “progressive planning”, and harder still to put it in practice. Taking a pro-progressive stance may require deep reflection about the balance of power in an area, and consequent difficult decisions – it is questionable whether the mainstream of planning practitioners has the ability or desire to do this at present. For me and others who are teaching the planners of tomorrow, perhaps we need to ask whether we are helping our students develop the ability to carry out that reflection and make those decisions.

**References**

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