**Reflections on resistance to reform – from spatial planning to localism**

**Accepted by Town and Country Planning, June 2011**

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**Introduction**

As discussed at length in these pages and elsewhere, the Localism and Decentralisation Bill, currently passing through the UK Parliament, proposes major reforms to the English planning system. In a speech to the TCPA annual conference in 2010, the Right Honourable Greg Clark MP, Minister of State for Decentralisation, explained that the reforms will ‘change the philosophy behind local planning... to move away from a system with significant elements of imposition from above, to one with participation and involvement at its heart... and away from a system that seeks to resolve the different needs of different groups at a local level by imposing choices from above, towards one which enables a mature debate at local level’[1](#_ENREF_1). Rather than joining the (entirely legitimate in my view) discussion about the deeply problematic aspects of the detail of the Bill, I want to focus on the feasibility of the demands from the Government for a fundamental shift in approach amongst planners, i.e. culture change, by considering the current proposals in the light of the experience of implementing the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act.

The Government’s rhetoric in relation to the 2010 Bill is not dissimilar in tone to that which surrounded the 2004 Act, which enacted similarly fundamental changes to the process by which town and country planning was carried out, and crucially, promoted a similar ‘culture change’. In 2004, that change was intended to be from land-use planning to ‘spatial planning’, and several authors have written about what that change meant in practice[2](#_ENREF_2). In 2010/2011, the proposed change is from top-down to bottom-up planning – ‘localism’.

I worked in Local Government between 2003 and 2006 so experienced at first hand the challenges of implementing the 2004 Act. In more recent times I have the luxury of observing the reaction to the 2010 Bill at a slightly more remote distance, which perhaps allows me to take a more detached view on the reforms. To that end I have read with interest some of the many articles bemoaning the current changes and attended a number of briefing sessions on localism, organised by the RTPI, TCPA, BPF and others, featuring discussion between practitioners. The tenor of these discussions has been one of despair and intense resistance to the Government’s new proposals. Notwithstanding the criticisms which can be levelled at many of the details of the proposals, I have come to believe that what drives much of the opposition to the Bill derives from an in-built resistance to change amongst the planning profession, which in part derives from an increasing emphasis on technical and process-driven aspects of planning. Others have noted a similar set of responses to the 2004 Act, which I now discuss before returning to the 2010 Bill.

**Failure of the 2004 Act**

The 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act promoted both changes in the process of planning (i.e. the move from local plans/UDPs to LDFS; the introduction of RSS, etc) and, more fundamentally, a change in culture from land-use planning to spatial planning. Graham Haughton and Phil Allmendinger, writing in the April 2011 edition of this journal, dissect the concept of spatial planning in some depth, and I do not propose to go into detail on it here. The crucial issue I wish to focus on is whether the culture change the Act demanded has occurred. My colleagues Dave Shaw and Alex Lord (2007), writing at the outset of a research project which set out to explore the implications of the 2004 Act, argued that it would have been possible for planning practitioners to produce RSSs, LDFs, *et al* without fundamentally changing their focus, as ‘actors adapt behaviour to satisfy monitoring mechanisms’[2](#_ENREF_2). They concluded that culture change could only be said to have occurred if ‘shared ideologies, assumptions and work practices alter’[2](#_ENREF_2). Writing again in 2009, at the conclusion of their project, the same authors found disappointingly little evidence of culture change: ‘the extent to which local planning authorities have adapted to the terms of the new planning system and the culture change entailed by it have been limited. Case study findings would point to a landscape where, with only a small number of notable exceptions, the realisation of reform, and, by extension, the attendant culture change required to engage fully with the new system, has not been extensive, uniform or complete’[3](#_ENREF_3). This is borne out by the statistical evidence (only c. 30% of local authorities having adopted a core strategy) and others who have explored culture change – Inch (2010) found that practitioners paid lip-service to spatial planning and the new system, but tended to operate a culture of ‘“working back to the local plan” – of trying to enact the new regulations in a spirit as close as possible to that of the old system’[4](#_ENREF_4).

Some argue that planners are just now coming to terms with spatial planning, and that had the system been allowed to proceed without another round of major reform, then we would have seen a surge in core strategies and other DPDs emerge over the next few months and years. That may be so, which would tell us that (a) the 2010 Bill is particularly badly timed; and (b) it may take six years or more before localism becomes embedded in the planning system. Alternatively, it may be, as I argue here, that more fundamental problems have led to such partial adoption of spatial planning and will hence stymie implementation of localism – this is important because regardless of our attitude to the Con-Dem Government and its ideas, the concept of empowering communities to have more of a say in the planning system is not a new one, but benefits from a broad cross-party consensus and follows the trend set in place by the last Government[5](#_ENREF_5).

My belief is that the reason for the reluctance of planners to embrace culture change is that the planning discipline in the UK, and England in particular (as it is of England that I have most knowledge and experience) has become too focussed on process and outputs – in short, planning as it is practice in many areas is increasingly a technical rather than professional occupation. No lesser figure than Ted Kitchen has espoused similar concerns: ‘it is important in developing (a practitioner’s career) not to lose sight of what the process is all about, and to become more concerned as a consequence with the efficiency of the machine rather than with what its efforts are actually trying to achieve’[6](#_ENREF_6).

I have identified what I believe to be a fundamental problem with the planning profession in the UK, and what the implications of that problem may be. I now move on to consider why this problem has arisen, and, crucially, what we can do to rectify it.

**How has this happened?**

I believe there are five reasons for what I call the ‘process-isation’ of planning:

Firstly, planners in England (and as an ex-practitioner I include myself here) have become hugely reliant on policy, information and guidance from central government. It is hard to say in which direction the chain of causality runs – have planners demanded reams of guidance on spatial planning and its implementation, which the last (arguably inherently centralist) Government was only too pleased to provide? Or have planners become overwhelmed by such guidance, leading them to focus on the more easily achievable aspects of it – namely the convoluted process for delivering LDFs – at the expense of a deeper change in ideals? Evidence from Shaw & Lord (2009) and Durning et al (2010) suggests that too much information from DCLG and its predecessors has stymied the ability of local authorities to adapt their ways of working. Due to the ‘constant flux and lack of clarity’[7](#_ENREF_7) in Government guidance, planners have focussed on doing the same things better, rather than on doing things differently.

Secondly, an emphasis on the importance of speed in planning – in both planning policy and development control/management, the last Government incentivised rapidity in decision-making. Best Value indicators (now abolished) required local authorities to determine planning applications within 8/13 weeks, and planning and housing delivery grant was predicated on having certain components of the LDF in place by specific deadlines. Inevitably, this focus on speed led to short cuts being made in terms of the quality of decisions, and the quality of plans.

Thirdly, a breakdown in the relationship between planning practice and academia. In their report for the RTPI last year, Ellis et al at Queens University in Belfast found that this relationship was weak – academic journals were ranked as the least important source of advice and information for planning practitioners (with Government policy most important), and there was ‘a poor understanding of what the academy can offer the world of practice... as a result of these issues, there is some evidence of an increasing distance between academia and practitioners’[8](#_ENREF_8). I believe this is partly the result of academics failing to adequately engage with the world of practice, focussing too heavily on the source of much of our funding – the hallowed ‘Research Excellence Framework’, rather than attempting to demonstrate the relevance of our research to practitioners. It is also, however, the result of a lack of a venue for such engagement (perhaps *Town and Country Planning* could play a greater role here?), and a reluctance on the part of hard-pressed practitioners to spend time reading academic papers.

Related to this is the fourth issue – that of the education of our planners, both initially (at university) and as professionals (via CPD). Working as I do at the oldest planning school in the UK, and having been involved with the CPD programmes run by several RTPI regional offices, I have concerns about both. Planning departments/schools at our universities have a number of pressures acting on them in different directions, the key one in this context being that exerted by both students and employers to make planning courses more ‘practically relevant’. We are exhorted to teach our students more about the ‘nuts and bolts’ of planning, which for many means development management – i.e. planning law and the processing of planning applications. This is doubtless an important part of planning education and should not be neglected, but I share the concerns of others that such ‘competency-based’ training may not be the best way to help our students develop[9](#_ENREF_9). After graduation, the RTPI places increasing emphasis on CPD, often delivered through their regions, networks and associations, in order that planners should continue to develop. From my experience, and again in part due to pressure from those attending CPD events, there is a tendency to focus on process and out**puts** rather than culture and out**comes** – many sessions at such CPD events feature the discussion of ‘best practice’ in a particular context, and do not always fully consider of why something worked where it did, and whether in fact this can ever be replicated elsewhere. Returning to Ted Kitchen, he noted that ‘reflective practice is at least as much about the context, the objectives and issues that frame our experiences and those of others as it is about those experiences themselves’[6](#_ENREF_6) – I fear that much (by no means all) planning CPD fails to consider that broader context, and can be dominated by a consideration of the experiences in question and the process gone through to achieve them.

Bringing these four together is the fifth, and I argue fundamental problem – planning practitioners have come to value the knowledge required to rapidly negotiate their way through the complex system in the UK over knowledge of ‘good planning’ (however one defines the latter). A useful framework to help contextualise this problem is provided by professional educational theorists such as Michael Eraut. Eraut and his colleagues differentiate between what he calls ‘propositional’ knowledge, which might be related to the laws and regulations governing planning; and other, deeper forms of knowledge, which require an ability to analyse, evaluate and draw on propositional knowledge in different contexts. The evidence I have discussed in this paper points to propositional knowledge now being the form of knowledge most valued by planning practitioners, to the neglect of a wider knowledge base that might enhance the way we plan our villages, towns and cities.

Quite apart from undermining the quality of outcomes for the real communities who should be the focus of our work as planners, this trend could lead to the gradual marginalising and de-professionalisation of the planning discipline. Eraut argues that, in his words, the ‘power and status’ of professions depends largely on their possessing unique knowledge to justify their status – if planning is defined in terms of process, this risks undermining the profession and making planning a technical rather than professional occupation. Eraut further distinguishes between competence and expertise in a given discipline – ‘proficiency on routine is essential for competence, but it is the handling of non-routine matters which is responsible for excellence’[10](#_ENREF_10). Despite some of the more extreme pronouncements from Ministers, I do not doubt the competence of the vast majority of planning practitioners, but I think it is legitimate to query whether enough of them can be described as being excellent. I feel the planning discipline and profession needs to ask itself some searching questions about whether we are delivering consistently excellent practice, and whether the issues I have raised in this article might help explain why not.

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