

**Olivier Sykes (2024), Being Professional in a turbulent world, *Town and Country Planning*, January/February 2024, pp.70-73.**

Sitting at the keyboard four years to the day of the 2019 UK General Election gave pause for thought in column dedicated to reflection on the European and international dimensions of planning. The ongoing schisms between those who still supported the UK's exit from the EU and those who either wanted the whole idea abandoned - or at least a chance to vote on the terms on which 'Brexit' would take place - and tensions with the UK union exacerbated by it, were once again on full display. Despite a slight progressive majority in terms of vote share the UK's first past the post electoral system delivered a significant majority to Boris Johnson's Conservatives<sup>i</sup>. It is hard to look back over the intervening years and the UK's choice without having the ironicising quip popularised by social media - 'How's that working out for you?' - playing somewhere in the back of one's mind.

The morning news bulletins on 12 December 2023 were full of the attempts of the third Conservative PM since 2019, Rishi Sunak – fresh from his awkward appearance at the COVID Inquiry the previous day - to secure the passage of his Rwanda Bill through Parliament. In 2022 the second post-2019 Conservative PM, Liz Truss's premiership had been marked by the hard application via her chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng's 'mini budget' of 23 September - of the economic prescriptions of many of the think tanks that have spent half a century decrying the apparently negative effects of planning on national economic vibrancy and potential. Commenting on the mini-budget, Mark Littlewood of the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) had excitedly gushed that *'This isn't a trickle-down budget, it's a boost-up budget. The government has announced a radical set of policies to increase Britain's prosperity'*<sup>ii</sup>. Even better for the deregulators, in his speech announcing the mini budget, Mr Kwarteng stated that *'in the coming months, we will bring forward a new bill to unpick the complex patchwork of planning restrictions and EU-derived laws that constrain our growth.'*<sup>iii</sup> A libertarian, low tax and regulation, post-'Brexit', *Britannia Unchained*<sup>iv</sup>, beckoned. Back in the real world by Friday 14 October, the Bank of England had had to commit around £65 billion to try and restore some stability to Britain's bond market<sup>v</sup>. Yet within weeks - in response to a speech to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) by the new Prime Minister Rishi Sunak - Matthew Lesh, Head of Public Policy at the IEA, was opining that *"Sunak entirely failed to discuss the single biggest handbrake on our prosperity: Britain's broken planning system,"* which *"hampers the construction of infrastructure, factories, lab space and housing, which are all essential to innovation and growth"*<sup>vi</sup>. Perhaps if Mr Kwarteng had been granted the time to 'unpick' the complex patchwork of planning restrictions that hold us back, things might have been very different and Liz Truss would not have had to stand down after only 44 days as Prime Minister? Perhaps planners were also part of the 'left wing economic establishment'<sup>vii</sup> that conspired to stymie her vision? So many questions - 'Asking for a friend' of course.

Rishi Sunak, the latest Conservative PM, was soon vaunting the benefits of a new agreement with the EU on Northern Ireland<sup>viii</sup> for placing the region in an *"unbelievably special position"* with access to both the UK and European Union markets<sup>ix</sup> making it the *"world's most exciting economic zone"*<sup>ix</sup> - a privilege the whole UK enjoyed before the 'Brexit' he campaigned for. A prominent Brexiter extolling the benefits of access to both the UK and EU rather underscored the fact that after all this time those who promoted the UK's exit from the EU cannot point with honesty to anything positive the UK's retreat from the EU had generated, or anything negative that had been forestalled because

of 'Brexit'. To be clear 'Brexit' was never going to mean *nothing* positive was ever going to happen again in the UK. But nor was the bar for 'Brexit' success supposed to be a situation where certain positive things that would have happened anyway might still take place, but typically with more complexity and costs involved due to leaving the EU. Think of the example of the car and other industries enticed with tax payer subsidy – often at undisclosed levels – to remain and invest in the UK. This is a far cry from the Brexiters' promises of a 'turbo charged' economy. It was reported by the British Chambers of Commerce in December 2023 that '*Almost two-thirds of British exporters have said selling to the EU has become harder in the past year*'<sup>x</sup>. Even the flagship post-Brexit trade deal the 'Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership' is now predicted to be worth even less to the UK than previously thought, with official estimates showing it could add just 0.04% to GDP in the "long run" after 15 years, rather than the originally expected 0.08%<sup>xi</sup>. Whilst inflation started to fall by the end of 2023, the London School of Economics estimates that 'Brexit'-induced food inflation has cost UK households up to £6.95 billion overall since December 2019<sup>xii</sup>. Not really a great help for 'left behind Britain' and the delivery of the increasingly spectral<sup>xiii</sup> levelling up agenda.

### **Matters of substance, matters of process**

Some readers may recall the notion of the substantive and procedural distinction in planning theory. In this, substantive theories relate to the 'object' and the 'ends' of planning, or as the name suggests the 'substance' or 'stuff' planning deals with (e.g. urban land use, green infrastructure, mobility etc.), whilst procedural theories relate to the processes and 'means', of planning. The distinction has been questioned over recent decades, for example, on the grounds that the 'means' and 'ends/goals' of planning can be hard to disentangle in practice – e.g. achieving public engagement could be a goal of planning as well as part of its processes. However, the substantive and procedural distinction can be useful in making sense of the impacts of something like 'Brexit'. The evidence indicates that in *substantive* terms this archetypal 'solution in search of a problem' has not delivered on its promises whilst aggravating a host of other issues. This assessment is not only that of those who oppose the idea, but increasingly voiced by those who supported the UK's exit from the EU – though this is often accompanied by the argument that the mediocre results are due to 'Brexit' 'not being done properly', it being undermined by an amorphous 'blob' of deep state agents and 'remainder' bureaucrats, or to the fact 'we haven't properly left the EU' etc.

Yet the substantive impacts of '*what was done*' with 'Brexit' are just one issue. The impact of '*how it was done*' is another and significant as this sets the context within which future policy choices – and by extension the impacts of these – will be generated. The 2016 EU Referendum campaign and its aftermath shifted the dial on the manner in which public discourse and the natural public discord on different matters are transacted, and supercharged the routine dismissal of facts and evidence and the counsel of experts<sup>xiv</sup>. This has durably eroded the quality of public debate, civility, truthfulness, and probity<sup>xv</sup> in public life which is a big issue for planning which seeks to serve the public interest through balanced reasoning and just and effective institutions. 'Brexit' thus became the UK's version of a wider descent into populism, culture wars and conspiracy theory movements around matters of public interest<sup>xvi</sup>. Concrete examples of the impacts of such a context on planning were provided in a clutch of articles in the November-December 2023 issue of *Town and Country Planning*. Robin Hickman thus discussed the exploitation of divisive 'wedge issues' by populist politicians in the context of transport planning and motorists<sup>xvii</sup>. Meanwhile Gavin Parker and Mark Dobson pointed to how '*the values that appear to underpin planning and development choices are being increasingly contested using populist tropes*' and noted that '*planning itself is being dragged into the 'culture wars'*'<sup>xviii</sup>. The progressive 'Utopian' visions explored by Hugh Ellis in the same issue - whether

promoted by an enlightened state committed to universal solutions, or versions of more bottom-up 'community-led mutual aid' seem to lie some way off below the horizon in such a context<sup>xix</sup>.

### **Being professional in a troubled world**

Political moments and movements like 'Brexit' also have wider environmental, social and strategic geopolitical dimensions. The ease with which populist political messaging and opaque political financing were able to prise a supposedly advanced democracy away from a vital alliance with likeminded countries with shared strategic interests, was an encouragement to authoritarian regimes in Europe and elsewhere to continue seeking to undermine free and democratic states and societies. Populist politicians in those same societies - often with financial and social media support from such regimes – continue to play the game of destabilisation and division in pursuit of votes. Though their success has been mixed - and in some places held back or reversed - many societies seem stuck in an enduring loop of ever diminishing political returns, where the populists' crude offer of 'solutions in search of (purported) problems' (predictably) generates more problems leading to calls for ever more extreme 'solutions'. As the shadows of conflict lengthen internationally in certain regions around the globe and various states face their own populist 'moments', professionals face the question of how to practice when real and culture wars flare and falsehood reigns.

Professionalism rests on a number of claims: *the claim to control a particular area of knowledge or expertise; the claim that problems the occupational group's members seek to solve are ultimately resolvable within the existing social and economic structures of society; the claim to altruism, that the occupation serves the public interest or common good*<sup>xx</sup>. A commitment to equality and autonomy in transactions with clients are other often cited features. Graduating medical students, for example, recite the Declaration of Geneva<sup>xxi</sup> - the contemporary version of the Hippocratic Oath – one clause of which states '*I WILL NOT PERMIT considerations of age, disease or disability, creed, ethnic origin, gender, nationality, political affiliation, race, sexual orientation, social standing or any other factor to intervene between my duty and my patient*'. Yet sifting issues and discriminating amongst humanity according to such characteristics is the bread and butter of populist politics and culture wars and can in extreme situations lead to open and armed conflicts (including the 'urbicide' and forced displacement peoples witnessed in current wars).

Life as a professional against such a background can be challenging. However, more positively in a politically divided and troubled world courageous professionals and professions can play a valuable role in keeping dialogue open between different and sometimes opposed political perspectives, people, and cultures. A concern with common problems and shared 'repertoire' of ways of apprehending reality and acting to address such problems can help maintain or rebuild bridges (sometimes literally). As a planner and educator, it is heartening and a privilege to be able to often witness meetings where students and professionals who come from certain nations, cultures, and identity groups that may be in disagreement or conflict 'in the world', can come together as planners to reflect and work constructively on ways to improve places and the prospects for 'flourishing lives on a sustainable planet'<sup>xxii</sup>. Andreas Faludi and Bas Waterhout once described planners as 'notorious internationalists'<sup>xxiii</sup> – in the present troubled world this notoriety should be worn as a badge of honour!

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- <sup>i</sup> The Conservatives got 43.6 per cent of all votes cast – but 56 per cent of all the seats in the House of Commons. <https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck/factcheck-what-might-have-happened-under-proportional-representation>
- <sup>ii</sup> IEA (Institute of Economic Affairs) (2022) 'IEA responds to mini budget statement'. Available at: <https://iea.org.uk/media/iea-responds-to-minibudget-statement/>
- <sup>iii</sup> [Kwarteng announces new bill to unpick 'complex' planning restrictions | The Planner](#)
- <sup>iv</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/sep/27/britannia-unchained-global-lessons-review>
- <sup>v</sup> In comparison the UK's net contributions to the EEC/EU budget over the 47 years from 1973 - 2020 totalled about £178 billion at cash, or £252 billion at real, prices (Source: HM Treasury)
- <sup>vi</sup> Lesh, M. (2022) 'The prime minister's words are no substitute for bold action to turbocharge innovation', Institute of Economic Affairs, 21 November. Available at: <https://iea.org.uk/media/the-prime-ministers-words-are-no-substitute-for-bold-action-to-turbocharge-innovation/>
- <sup>vii</sup> [Liz Truss blames 'left-wing economic establishment' for her being the shortest serving prime minister – 9 top reactions | indy100](#)
- <sup>viii</sup> [The Windsor Framework - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- <sup>ix</sup> Walker, P. (2023) 'Sunak draws ire after hailing Northern Ireland's access to UK and EU markets', The Guardian, 28 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/feb/28/sunak-northern-ireland-access-uk-eu-markets-trade-deal>
- <sup>x</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/dec/19/british-exporters-call-on-government-to-ease-post-brexit-trade-frictions-with-eu>
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/nov/25/uks-flagship-post-brexit-trade-deal-worth-even-less-than-previously-thought-obr-says>
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/brexit18.pdf>
- <sup>xiii</sup> Nurse, Alexander and Sykes, Olivier. "Levelling Up and The Privileging of sub-national governance in England in the inter-Brexit space" *ZFW – Advances in Economic Geography*, vol. 67, no. 2-3, 2023, pp. 161-171. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfw-2023-0048>
- <sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>
- <sup>xv</sup> As regards this issue and probity, as noted in 2020 by Lord Evans, Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, 'There can be little doubt that the handling of Richard Desmond's proposed scheme to redevelop the Westferry Printworks knocked public confidence in the fairness of the planning system'. See: *The Hugh Kay Lecture: Are we in a post-Nolan age?:* <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-hugh-kay-lecture-are-we-in-a-post-nolan-age>
- <sup>xvi</sup> [Why does the spirit of Remain survive? Because it is about so much more than Brexit | Rafael Behr | The Guardian](#)
- <sup>xvii</sup> R. Hickman: 'wedge issues, winning votes, and car drivers'. *Town and Country Planning*, November-December, 2023, 367-69.
- <sup>xviii</sup> G. Parker and M Dobson: "do the right thing" – planning at the intersection of the 'culture wars', *Town and Country Planning*, November-December, 2023, 381-86.
- <sup>xix</sup> H. Ellis: 'utopia – the wind in our sails or the ghost in the machine?', *Town and Country Planning*, November-December, 2023, 375-80.
- <sup>xx</sup> B Evans (1993) 'Why we no longer need a Town Planning Profession', *Planning Practice and Research*, 8(1), 9-15.
- <sup>xxi</sup> <https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-geneva/>
- <sup>xxii</sup> H. Ellis, *Ibid.*, 380.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> A. Faludi & B., Waterhout (2002). *The making of the European spatial development perspective. No masterplan*. RTPI library series. Routledge.