

Planning and New Labour – Introduction to Theme Issue

The period since 1997 is long enough to start to take stock of the experience of planning under the New Labour governments. It is long enough to be able to make some judgements about the successes and failures of planning during these years. This theme issue is designed to start this process. It seeks mainly to be a situating exercise, as the most important task now appears to be discuss the terms of debate. We are not in fact tackling, to any significant extent, the evaluative task mentioned above – that is beyond our means here. Our aim is much more modest, to bring together the two sides of the equation, New Labour and recent planning. We have found, in setting about this task, that very little has been written about this question. In comparison with the considerable reflection on Thatcherism / the New Right and planning which was emerging by the late 1980s, the absence of consideration of the relationships between this current pair is striking.

Of course the present moment, in the midst of a major global economic crisis, may not be the best moment to make any judgements about anything, as planning, along with everything else, looks to confront the new landscape emerging from this ongoing crisis. These papers were written in their underlying forms before the full unfolding of this crisis, so there is no risk here of any rewriting of the post 1997 period in the light of the crisis. This should be borne in mind in reading these papers.

This introduction has four tasks. The last one, to sketch a few issues for further work, is predictable enough. (I will not try to summarise the papers here, the abstracts in themselves will give readers a flavour of where each is starting from and where it is going). Before that the three main tasks are to think a bit further about the situation we are in and the questions which orient this particular enquiry (certainly every planning academic and planner would approach this differently), to discuss briefly some of the issues missing from the following papers, and to pick up some of the cross cutting themes arising from a reading of the papers. A separate commentary is provided by Klaus Kunzmann from an international perspective, giving a more distanced view of what has been going on the UK backyard. This should prove a useful corrective to the insider views presented elsewhere in this issue. It should be noted that most articles were composed in late 2007, and so deal with developments up to that point in the evolving story.

The Orienting Questions

There is a mixture of feelings in the planning world about what has been going on these years. Some note an enduring bewilderment amongst practitioners, as change on very many levels has become endemic and increasingly complex. Some are excited by the form of the new challenges. Some are forthrightly shocked (who would have expected a wide coalition of planning's normal supporters to sponsor a website called "planningdisaster"?). I will come clean here that I am nearer this last camp, with an increasing dislike of government policies since 2001, which seem to have little to do with the progressive features of planning and Labour policy in the twentieth century, and far more links to business imperatives and the ideology of economic growth at all costs. As I see it, once marketisation passes a certain point, the purpose and sense of any public policy process undergoes a qualitative change. This is so as much in health and education as in planning, but in planning, by its very

nature, the change is more complex, and therefore less easy to track, with more complex appearances. But that does not make it any less real. For me, the New Labour approach to planning has brought it, or is bringing it, to that point of qualitative change. But I will try to not let that view impinge excessively on what follows.

Many academics seem to have been increasingly detached from the wider system changes, perhaps feeling a sense of being sidelined by the onrush of reforms. Of course we continue to plough our specialist furrows, and maybe chat quietly at conferences or seminars about fears for the future. Some senior academics (the names Healey and Hall inevitably come to mind) continue to engage across a wider spectrum, if in very varying ways. Some academics seek to remain near to the changes (including some represented in this issue). But much of the running in the 2000s planning reforms has been made not by planning academics, but by a small group of economists closer to government (or at least Treasury) thinking. Opposition to the reforms, such as it has been since 2001, has been concentrated in NGOs, and to a lesser extent in local authorities, not in academic involvement or thinking. The creation at the end of 2006 of a new body, Planners Network UK, aimed at bringing critical thinking to bear on planning, may start to stimulate more response – time will tell.

The symposium held in September 2007 in Oxford was intended to take a first step to increasing understanding of the situation as it has evolved. We wondered why, when work across many subfields of planning is being carried on with some vigour, there has been little discussion of the wider issue of the overall direction in which the recent governments have been taking planning. To what extent does the change in planning match a general New Labour agenda (say parallel to those in education or health) and how far is it particular to planning? How far does it represent continuity with past political agendas or framings of planning (from the 1990s, or the 1980s, or the 1970s – take your pick)? In so far as some or all the programme is new coined, how can we characterise the blend, the taste, the trajectory? Do the reform drives represent some coherent ideas set or ideology, or are they emerging from a divergent mix of sources (the garbage can beloved of political scientists)? These were a few wider issues we identified.

We decided to tackle the job from two directions. One drew on wider debates within the social sciences, which have been in full flow almost since New Labour emerged (the first three papers here come from that stream). These have a scene setting or contextualising role, though the three authors have engaged to an extent directly with planning, and so their papers also constitute fascinating outsider perspectives on current planning. The link in the case of Wilks-Heeg I discuss later. Here I make a few comments on the papers by Finlayson and Watson, as the approaches they take may be less familiar to many readers. Watson's paper takes the case of New Labour's housing policy to draw out the implications of the reorientation of their overall economic policy, particularly the focus on individual responsibility for savings, pensions and property ownership – the individualisation of welfare. The tangles of New Labour's housing policy were already getting more visible in late 2007, and since then almost all the horns of the government's dilemmas have been getting sharper and more intractable. One might say this lets planning off the hook. Planners always argued that it was unreasonable to expect planning to have more than a partial

role in solving UK housing problems - land supply and planning gain being the prime tools, both only ever partly in planners's control. Now it has become clear to many others that the problems lie mainly in the financing and producing of houses, alongside non spatial regulatory state policies, rather than in the planning system. But these underlying economic drives to reconstitute housing policy are unlikely to disappear, and so Watson's discussion remains very relevant to understanding the decade long push of housing policy, so critical for grasping planning's real role in each period, whatever shifts the current economic crisis may generate.

For Finlayson, the creation of "the new terms and tools of a governing rationality" [p16] and of "a new cadre of autonomous professionals" [p17] are there to carry through centrally set objectives for planning – making sustainable communities, managing complex agency systems, promoting growth and profitability, and so on. Planning sits within this "modernising" rationality, as New Labour has developed this over its years of power. Finlayson is at pains to stress that this set of thinking and working tools have not emerged "clean" from neoliberal or social democratic pure forms, but have been invented as the governments in their interaction with planning have developed their legislative arsenal (now two major planning acts) and their many headed push for "culture change" in planning. This seems a helpful way to understand the accretion process of these years; any new government directions after 2010 are likely to have a similarly evolving and contested character, and will very likely build on much of the accumulated rationality of New Labour.

The other part of the attempt here to characterise New Labour and planning comes from within planning – the papers here by Inch, and by Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, are from this stream, and we supplemented these after the seminar with the kind help of Lloyd and Peel, Taylor and Wilson. Before drawing some themes from all the papers, I will first comment a little on the many missing issues we have not begun to cover.

Filling out the picture of New Labour and Planning

The unevenness of the picture begun here is quite clear. Where is the full consideration of the changes in the planning system in process and legislative terms, where the articles on planning for housing, the economy, regeneration, retailing, transport, land, urban design and much more? Time, space and much else excluded these, and I want to make some gestures towards them, in note form as it were, here.

The planning process, the planning system and governance

In this package is a wide spectrum of change:

Local governing transformation, with new authorities, new fragmentations, many original "local delivery vehicles", new collaborative arrangements between authorities (city regions, unitaries emerging), increased governance tendencies away from elected authorities (LSPs, LAAs, advice on plan making, development control shifts etc) (cf Allen and Cochrane 2007). Governance by networks is now seen as standard, rather than optional as before 1997 (Klijn and Skelcher 2007).

Regional trajectories, with the regional planning and strategising landscape unrecognisable from that of 10 years ago, and about to change again dramatically with

the new arrangements proposed to steer statutory strategic planning from at the latest 2010 onwards (cf Marshall 2008).

New central – regional – local relations, including most significantly between the parts of the UK. We pick up features of the Scottish transformation of planning, where national and central infrastructure planning is being reinforced, city regional planning strengthened, alongside much else. The changing of planning in Wales has been equally noteworthy (). There have been some significant similarities, it has been argued, between English and Scottish approaches to planning reform, as well as some divergences (Allmendinger 2006). Northern Ireland’s planning is, in 2008, to be reviewed, with a view to “fundamental” reform. May we predict that this will mimic many aspects of change in England and perhaps Scotland – and does our confidence in this prediction suggest something about systemic influences on planning in the British Isles in the 2000s – and that these may be said to be “underlying” New Labour?

Planning for housing

Perhaps the vanguard of reform, to be more market driven (PPS3 issued in 2006), to respond to (some) climate change concerns (more conserving on energy, not so clear on flood plain construction), to be much more conscious of good design (CABE and much more). Alongside this barrage of advice is the government’s determined ordering of the release of ever more land for housing, now across most of England (and perhaps in the other territories too – or is this still a differential dynamic?).

Planning for economy

A relatively market friendly regime survived through from the 1980s, in the form of PPG4. This, across most of the country, gave a broadly supportive framework for much employment generating development in most places. But the new PPS4 (issued in draft form in December 2007) will increase the pressure on both strategy making and development control processes, weakening the remaining ability of local authorities to say yes to some proposals and no to others, whether on social, economic or environmental grounds. Planning for retailing may tend in the same direction depending on the outcome of the review of PPS6, after a decade when the picture was again one of continuity with the 1990s policy regime.

Planning for Transport and Infrastructure

Much in this field has been subject to a roller coaster of hopes and dashed hopes, from the more environmentally friendly first term to the road, port and airport development enthusiasm of the 2000s. Institutional change has been significant, although the basic building blocks at local level remained the same for the decade. The proposed Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC) marks a radical break, with a much more centrally geared agenda to be put in place than at any time since war time planning periods. The drive to make an integrated spatial planning has been at the base of most regional planning, and has definitely included transport planning, but has, in the view of most practitioners, failed to gain central government support, at least in England. Whether the new IPC and Regional Development Agency (RDA) led system will change this, and so form a very different transport and other infrastructure planning regime, remains to be seen (perhaps a policy field on the cusp in that area). Failure to

reform the land and planning gain system in 2007, with the dropping of the Planning Gain Supplement proposal, signalled a continuation of the local infrastructure funding regime evolved since the 1980s.

So in these selected areas we can see a mix of continuity and change. The area which has the highest profile in planning, housing, is clearly the leading sector of change here, and significantly it is the field where Finlayson and Watson shine more light, from their particular perspectives. The area of process, democracy and governance has also been subject to massive change, with, it can be argued, very major shifts to more central and market/business control. These shifts, some would argue, easily exceed in their extent the much more contested transformations of the 1980s, when Urban Development Corporations took over some key areas of the planning system, and local authorities were dramatically weakened. From 2010 most major development issues in England will be controlled by a mix of the IPC, the RDAs, the key ministries, the Homes and Communities Agency and the Planning Inspectorate, with many if not most areas of major change directed not by local authorities but by special local delivery agencies. This will be a new landscape of power over planning, which can be compared with distinct ones in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In the other fields surveyed, change has been so far much less dramatic, and it is suggested that the moment of major rupture is probably occurring at the present time – English planning on the cusp. However such a conclusion, and its evaluation and interpretation, must remain very much provisional, without the detailed consideration of experts in each field.

Cross-cutting Themes arising from the Papers

Here just three aspects are touched on.

The first is that of **the overall characterisation of the relationship of planning and New Labour**. Given the uneven and provisional coverage here, it may seem unwise to say any more on this than appears in the papers. However, my reading is that there is a significant range of views on the issue, and that we can already discuss this, to stimulate initial hypotheses. This variety is notable and is a key feature of what is presented here. The interpretive variety is much greater than a survey of views on Thatcherism and planning in say 1989 might have produced (though some varied views certainly existed then too). Two broad tracks are visible.

Finlayson sets off one track, arguing that there is a particular rationality at work, which plays across planning as across New Labour. This rationality cannot be characterised by one term, but by a cluster, including the process of building a depoliticised force field and an emerging taken for granted hegemonic view, which is different from its building blocks in social democratic and neoliberal traditions. That is, he is saying this is not just a hybrid confusion, but a new construction with its own fresh features and complexities. He argues that this plays into planning, which is seen as not just another policy field to be changed, but also as part of the machinery of the changing, a tool. Watson is implicitly, I think, going in the same direction, with his dissection of housing policy, where planning is seen as so important in constructing the new long term landscape, bringing together much of the congealing New Labour rationality. Lloyd and Peel paint a picture of change in Scotland which perhaps looks

this way, though with caution and caveats. Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones have a quite distinct viewing platform – almost from within one part of the government agenda. They manage in a short space to present the main sense and direction of the government policy drive in planning, as they see it: plural certainly, but pointing in certain specific directions and not in others.

Wilks-Heeg's treatment of local government change, if read across to planning (as it is extremely tempting to do) would take us on the same path, indicating some systemic and underlying structural push, as it were behind the many hundreds of actors' decisions, to make a success of some parts of Labour's agenda and "fail" on others (local democracy, regionalisation, local taxation reform etc). The read across to planning would be that, just as in local government, some parts of Labour's planning agenda have moved forward and have been or are being realised, however haltingly and unpredictably, whilst others have consistently hit the buffers, lacking either firm formulation or effective implementation: and the parts moving forward have been those weakening democracy (certainly at non-central levels) and boosting business power. Inch also leans towards this "there is a definite direction" view, even if he insists it is complex, and contains tensions.

This issue of tensions is worth reflecting upon further. Every paper is in varying degrees agreed that the governments' agendas have been plural, reflecting differences within the ministries and between them, varying political pressures over these years, and so on. But is this to be taken in the strong form of "contradictory" elements within the approach to planning, perhaps in some Marxist or pseudo Marxist form as reflecting the nature of land and development planning in a capitalist economy of the present type? Or is it to be taken as a descriptive device, to say things are always complex? Or is it meant more fundamentally, to suggest that there has been no basic common direction in the New Labour - planning relation? If the last, this takes us further towards the other position visible in some papers. This is that, although there is certainly a strong drive to prioritise the economy and competitiveness inside planning, this meets other also very strong drives. Wilson demonstrates the enormous importance throughout these years of international environmental obligations in UK planning. A treatment of housing might well stress the pressure of electoral and social concern as a powerful force independently of competitiveness considerations, which matches the importance of housing as an election issue through the twentieth century (though with major tenurial, financial and spatial form variations). Other sectoral examples could be found, from our "absent papers". These might then chime with Taylor's argument on the essential continuity of a social democratic approach to planning since 1947, embedded in the form of the economy – state – land relation. Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones's paper has hints of this sense of multiplicity too.

These two characterisations are distinct, and lean in rather different directions, on the relation of planning with ideas and ideology, and particularly on the way we imagine the era we live in, and the way we present to ourselves the forms of national and international power, and the forms of action of democratic and non democratic forces (to use crude shorthands). Therefore they show up the differing fault lines of world views we hold now, which then colour our interpretation of contemporary history. How far such fault lines are open to argument is itself debatable, but it is probably at least useful to bring them out into the open, to look at their shape.

The second theme I will comment on is **the importance of the making of subjects (especially of planners)**. This comes out in Finlayson's discussion of forming "new persons": "it has made individual aspirations an object of policy in order to ensure that people come naturally to orient themselves towards the world as self-capitalising subjects able reflexively to integrate into a new economy" [p13]. This theme is also present tangentially, as in Inch's thinking on the implications of culture change and the new pervasiveness of private sector practices in planning (in public and private sectors alike), and, from another angle, Watson's picture of the new financialised individual life in which we all share, above all in housing and pension terms (including also all young planners looking at their futures), and Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones's argument for changes in planning culture. But it can be argued to be a critical part of the interface or intertwining of New Labour's world view and the practice of planning as it is emerging in the new generation of policy guidance. If we are all constituted as this sort of "ideal person", situated in a particular imaginary of lives in time and space (careers, family forms, houses, travel, activity and so on), then the agenda for planning takes a particular form, oriented especially to the consumption formulas which have become standard since the 1970s. These of course have very little to do with ecologically sustainable lifestyles, and so are problematic for any planning with ecological aspirations. But they are also critical in considering the mindsets of planners. Arguably one of New Labour's most central drives, though hardly one carried out consciously, has been the generation of the myriad of pressures which promote private sector planning over public – cutting funding for planners throughout government at central and regional level, prioritising limited parts of the planning task (above all faster development control and faster LDF production at the local level), forcing massive contracting out of planning work. International comparisons would be valuable here, looking at the structuring of planning in countries like the Netherlands, which may have equally neoliberal and market oriented policy regimes in many respects, but which support public sector planning in employment terms.

The third theme is **the centrality of politics**. This cuts across the previous two, and would be subject to very varied understandings, like them. However, the view was expressed in the symposium (by Kelvin Macdonald, someone with extensive front line lobbying experience), that the current positioning of planning was on the political battlefield as perhaps never before. Issues like international migration, flooding, climate change, house building, were all showing their sharpest political edges to planning. In very different ways several papers here, including Watson, Wilson and Finlayson, give support to this view of the heavy politicalness of planning. Whilst to say planning is political is merely to repeat a phrase enunciated a thousand times since at least the 1960s, what seems to be being said here is something different: that planners are finding it hard to take this on board in its full sense (hence perhaps the slightly greater ease of the lobby groups in today's ideas fight). Whilst we as planners, planning professionals and planning academics are all used to a sort of low key planning-politics merger, is the boundary of profession and politics under a new strain, causing a need for new learning, new structures of relations between roles, new personal understandings of what are the purposes of planning?

Future Directions for Research and Reflection

Much of the above implicitly points towards matters for development. I will just sketch four issues.

One is the need for some of us to keep wide focus viewpoints, which can catch as much of this wider picture as possible. If we only look at our own special areas, we risk not seeing what is really going on, in the relations between fields, in the interstices as well. Of course we are trained as planners to have this rather wide view, but I am not sure we really use it in this way. How to institutionalise the retention of such a wide focus view is a big question. Perhaps we need to build it into the regular meeting forms of the practice and academic worlds – such as the Planning Research Conference, which might always have a stream on “how do we characterise UK planning now?”. One way to keep this reflection live may be to “import” social scientists, as we have done here, given that planning schools these days have far less of these within their own ranks – perhaps a sort of “resident social scientist” in every university planning department, or at least invited to every planning conference. There must be other ways. PNUK might have a role in this.

Another area for development is to rise to Wilson’s challenge, where she argues that activity from below has been effective in Britain in raising environmental performance. If the view above that the government is moving in a definite direction, to a new hegemonic formula for planning, is correct, this need to keep open other tracks becomes even more critical. How can such innovative, “other track” activity be boosted? How can the enthusiasm of young planners around for example climate change issues not be stifled by municipal or consultancy control mechanisms? Do we need to reinvent zones of support for local creative action, in some form? Do universities have a role in this? How can this be built into education and continuing training?

Thirdly, we need to argue through what we think planning really is trying to do. In other words we should not just have wide focus analysis (as above), but also develop our own prospective talents, looking forward. On one of the interpretations offered here, New Labour knows now what planning is for, and it appears to contain quite another rationality from what most of us are teaching (at least in my own university). Partly this depends on getting a good focus on the big picture of change in the first point above. But it also means engaging with the understandings of New Labour (and other) ideologists on the purpose of planning – inviting them to planning events, trying to raise the quality of think tank work on planning and related fields. Again, quite how this is to be done in a field hardly flush with resources, is not so clear. No doubt some large evaluative research programmes on current spatial planning may help, but that is for the 5-10 year horizon. Working with sympathetic NGOs more closely is another possibility (if hardly a new suggestion).

Finally, we may logically call for others to fill in the many gaps here. We would be happy to collaborate in such an exercise, if there are readers out there who feel they would have the capacity to survey the ten year record on say planning for transport, the economy, regeneration or retailing. Extending these reflections in that way, and combining with the start made here, would we believe be an exercise well worth doing. Contemporary history is always a tough field, but it should be as valuable as “real” history, and British academia has considerable strengths in the planning history

area, some of which could overlap into this endeavour. Anyone interested in such further overview articles should contact myself or Andrew Inch.

References

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