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Not wholly belonging: British planning's uncertain European connections

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ABSTRACT

This article takes a long view of British planning's connections with continental Europe, locating Brexit within historic uncertainties about the country's international outlook, interests and position. In 1948, Churchill portrayed Britain at the intersection of three 'great circles': the British Empire, the wider English-speaking world (principally the USA) and Europe. This notion is drawn on to show how the strong earlier European links of British planning were seriously disrupted or severed by twentieth-century wars. These drew both country and planning approach closer to its 'distant friends' within the other 'great circles'. As former imperial ties faded and the USA relationship became less special, Britain looked again to Europe but without shedding these habitual links. Even after Britain joined the European Communities in 1973, its strongest international planning connections remained with the USA and its former Empire and Dominions. In the 1990s, the EU promoted spatial planning but Britain remained largely aloof until the 'New Labour' governments of 1997–2010. Yet growing Euroscepticism saw this relative enthusiasm fade, with Brexit reviving uncertainties, now about whether EU approaches should be jettisoned and a more deregulated planning system created. The article predicts (or at least hopes) that current anti-Europe thinking will itself fade.

KEYWORDS

EU and planning; British planning history; Brexit and planning; international circulation of planning knowledge; Churchill's 'great circles' and planning

Introduction

When I cross the 20 short miles of water between England and France and enter Europe, I cannot but feel myself an Englishman. I can never quite suppress the sensation that I come from the offshore island and that I do not wholly belong to the Continent.

Colin D. Buchanan, Churchill lecture, Paris, May 1969.¹

This admission, by the leading British planner of his generation, contrasted with both his own deep awareness and admiration of many aspects of European urban planning and the high professional regard for his own work around Europe. In other respects, however, it was entirely unremarkable. A national sense that Britain, especially England, although so close to mainland Europe, was 'with' but not 'of' it had long been familiar. In part, this was because Britain's 'Europeanness' competed with other international co-ordinates that shaped its national outlook on the world. Although Buchanan did not explicitly make the link, Winston Churchill himself (in whose honour the lecture was named) had in October 1948 portrayed Europe as just one of the three 'great circles' at whose

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¹Buchanan Papers, B/BC/0136.

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intersection Britain was uniquely positioned.² The others – its own Empire and the wider English-speaking world, principally the United States but increasingly being joined by self-governing British Dominions such as Canada and Australia – were also very familiar to Buchanan.

Although Britain's imperial connections had certainly been far more important to Churchill in 1948, the Empire remained an important part of Buchanan's make-up, as a person, an engineer and a planner.³ He had been born in imperial India, into a family (actually Scottish) of colonial engineers. His own career began in the same way in 1930s Sudan (where he also spent most of his war service in the Royal Engineers). In 1969, however, it was the other 'great circle' that was the more active presence in Buchanan's thinking. A few years before his Paris lecture, preparing *Traffic in Towns*, the 1963 government report that won him international renown, he had spent eight weeks in the United States studying its experiences (Figure 1).⁴ Urged to study it by the minister who had appointed him, he had gone prepared to find many of the answers for which he was searching. Yet his reactions to the realities of it were decidedly mixed. The final *Traffic in Towns* report endorsed some American features for British adoption but his experience of visiting the country also made him think differently about what he saw in Britain and Europe. As he added in his lecture, reflecting on his doubts about his Europeanness, '... [b]ut when I go to America, I cease at once to be merely English and become a European intensely aware of the whole European cultural legacy of which I am a privileged inheritor.'⁵

These rather hesitant 'European-but-only-by-process-of-elimination' sentiments seemed to encapsulate the historic uncertainties of many British people at that time about their European identity. Yet they were also consistent with a steadily growing (if still far from overwhelming) 1960s momentum that the United Kingdom should join the three European Communities (ECs) as they then were.⁶ After two rebuffed applications in 1963 and 1967, a third one would see the UK join the ECs in 1973.⁷ Especially after a UK referendum in 1975 emphatically confirmed that entry, it was generally assumed that remaining doubts about UK membership would eventually fade. Yet its 2020 withdrawal from what was by then the European Union pointed to a changed set of international priorities. It has revived discussion about the country's relations with the wider Anglophone world, the more successful and economically promising of its former imperial 'family' and other, new emergent economies. Such links largely concern trade in goods and services but seemingly must also affect other international exchanges, including the circulation of knowledge and expertise. In a rapidly urbanizing world facing mounting environmental worries, the exchange of thinking and practices concerned with how cities and regions are planned and managed will clearly be a significant part of this. It is intriguing to consider how post-Brexit Britain will now participate in this global trade in planning ideas and practices, as the wider rhetoric of 'global Britain' would seem to imply. And, alongside this, will it see an eclipsing of former European connections?

A long view of British planning's uncertainties

At present the answers must remain matters of speculation rather than evidence-based research. Yet it can at least be a historically informed speculation, which gives the point of departure for this essay. The international exchanges of planning knowledge that are following the UK's exit

²Churchill, "Conservative Mass Meeting ...," 418.

³Buchanan, *I Told You So*, 1–4, 11–18.

⁴Ward, "Colin Buchanan's American Journey ..."

⁵Buchanan Papers, B/BC/0136.

⁶The European Communities were the European Coal and Steel Community (established 1951), the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community (both established 1957).

⁷May, *Britain and Europe ...*, 29–65.

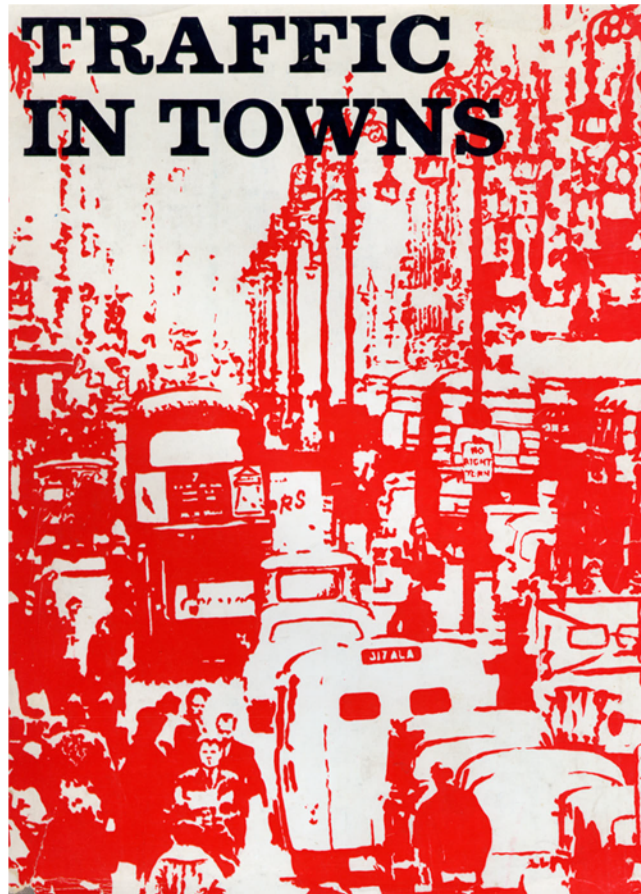


Figure 1. Cover of the *Traffic in Towns* government report of 1963 which established Buchanan's international reputation. Although conceived with learning from the United States strongly in mind, the personal impact for Buchanan was to underline his European-ness and help restore an Anglo-German connection in planning thinking. Source: Author's collection.

from the EU are not being written onto a blank page of history. Since well before and after the UK's European accession in 1973, there has been much inward and outward movement of planning knowledge between Britain and other countries. Some of the connections, at times most of them, have been European. Yet at other times European links have been weakened or even abruptly severed, usually when British attention and engagement had shifted to one, other or both of the remaining 'great circles'. Although time alone will tell, 2020 seems to be another moment of disruption and focus shift.

This essay advances a more nuanced viewpoint, however, suggesting at least some continuity even within this disruption. Brexit might be a unique event but it perpetuates Britain's historic uncertainties about its orientation, in both political economy and geopolitical senses, to other parts of the world. For planning, post-Brexit uncertainties have involved revisiting contentious historic questions about the proper role of the state and purposive governmental action relative to the freedoms of private capital and unfettered markets, largely (up to now at least) seeking greater privileges for the latter. They have also involved seeking precise ways and means to realize this new

thinking, combining maximum market freedom with a politically acceptable minimum of governmental control within reformed British planning policies and planning system. In doing this, there has clearly been a search for international planning models other than from Europe that appear more in tune with the new ‘mood music’ of Brexit. These will, it is being hoped, furnish specific practice examples to encourage or reassure those interests advancing these new approaches, candidates for possible adoption, emulation or adaptive application.

So, what were the historic uncertainties that long preceded (and possibly pre-seeded) Brexit and how have they been apparent in the field of planning? Probing the changing balance of these various exchanges highlights the main trends and forces affecting the flows of planning ideas, policies and practices back and forth across the Channel and the North Sea. What impact, for example, did the national enmities that marred European history in the later nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries have for flows of planning knowledge between the continent and Britain? And what impact did they have for the flows that involved the other two ‘great circles’? More specifically, did the UK’s ECs/EU membership from 1973 see its exchanges of planning knowledge within Europe become more intense with greater impacts on policies and outcomes relative to its other international connections? It is important of course not to presume that the larger contours of European and global relations will automatically become inscribed onto transnational mobilities of planning knowledge. To avoid prejudging such matters, international movements of planning ideas and practices are better understood as pragmatic responses to contingent circumstances.⁸ This allows the possibility that they might develop independently of the larger picture, in ways that reflect their own specific logics.

Before attempting to answer these questions, however, it is also necessary to define ‘Europe’ for this essay, something which poses its own problems. It is largely understood here as the west-central part of the European mainland, where the vision of a supranational European entity emerged and took earliest and strongest root. Yet until the post-1945 moves towards a united Europe, identifying with Europe was necessarily manifest on a bilateral or international rather than a truly supranational scale. It involved engaging with and elaborating on national or city practices in planning that appeared best to express how European cities and regions should evolve and grow. Even today, when the EU has given tangible institutional form to that supranational European vision, it has not ventured far into the field of spatial planning on a supranational scale.⁹ Sovereignty over planning has remained at the national level. Since the 1970s, however, there have been European policies, particularly those on regional development and environmental protection, which have directly impinged on planning policies and practices in European member states.¹⁰ The EU has also, since about 1990, encouraged common ways of thinking about and acting on urban and spatial planning across Europe. It has also promoted some common guidelines that have had some persuasive effects on the planning policy actions of member states. Yet, despite some erstwhile aspirations for a grander, supranational role, in planning terms this remains very much a ‘Europe of nations’.

British planning’s pre-1973 international connections

Well before this and indeed before modern planning itself emerged, knowledge about urban development, design and related matters had circulated between the European mainland and Britain. By

⁸Healey, “Circuits of Knowledge ...”

⁹Faludi, “Centenary Paper ...”

¹⁰Dühr, Colomb and Nadin. *European Spatial Planning ...*, 177–250.

subsequent standards, however, it moved at a slow pace. It was as urbanization accelerated during the nineteenth century that flows of knowledge became faster and more intense.¹¹ This happened largely because of huge and near simultaneous improvements in transport and communications, especially so in West-Central Europe.¹² The rapid urbanization and dense network connections within this international region made it a highly innovative setting in which modern urban planning could grow. Accelerated international exchange, and the subsequent syntheses, hybridisations and iterations of the diversely sourced knowledge thereby assembled and nourished the emergent thought and practice of planning.

By the early twentieth-century, therefore, a recognisably international, largely European, movement focused on planning was appearing. Britain, however, was rather a late participant in this movement.¹³ Crudely stated, this was because it had grown too accustomed to the notion that it led and other countries followed in its wake. At its Victorian prime, during the second half of the nineteenth century, Britain was seen as world leader in urban public health, sanitary engineering and, increasingly, worker housing and planned community development. By 1900, however, Germany and the United States were undermining Britain's international economic and strategic supremacy.¹⁴ As they did so, that wider sense of British superiority in other fields also began to fade. The country's experience in the 1899–1902 Boer War in South Africa particularly highlighted the poor health and physical condition of many recruits from urban areas, further eroding complacency.¹⁵ Early advocates of town planning continued to remind Britain's opinion formers and leaders of the implications of failing to heed these truths about urban life.¹⁶

Yet these changes did not prevent Britain entering the new field of planning with some confidence about what it could offer. The recently developed garden city model with its multiple conceptual possibilities and practical realisations was soon being vigorously promoted around Europe and the wider world.¹⁷ Alongside this, however, niggling national insecurities finally prompted Britain's urban reformers and decision-makers to take seriously what other countries, initially their European neighbours, especially Germany but also several others, were doing. Henceforth it was almost possible to conceive of British planning's balance of trade accounts in which it was both significant exporter but now also, from about 1900, significant importer. The relative balance of imports to exports has certainly varied over time but, more importantly here, so too has geographical focus. Some geographical shifts have been minor, as from one country to a neighbouring one within in the same world region. Yet sometimes the shifts have been much more profound, from one 'great circle' to another. Although many of these have been well documented by researchers, including the present author, it would be inappropriate here to attempt a full exposition of these geographical shifts which are, instead, summarized in Table 1.

This emphasizes the main features of the flows of planning-related knowledge into and from Britain from the later nineteenth century until it joined the EEC in 1973. Focusing first on the 'Europe' column, the salient features are that the initially strong engagement of British planning within Europe This occurred primarily on a bilateral, nation-to-nation basis, the new Anglo-German nexus being most salient for British planning.¹⁸ It also occurred multilaterally, through new

¹¹Ward, "Is There a European Planning Tradition?"

¹²Caruana-Galizia, and Marti-Henneberg, "European regional railways ..."

¹³Sutcliffe, *Towards the Planning City ...*, 163–201.

¹⁴Elbaum and Lazonick (eds.) *The Decline ...*

¹⁵*Report of the Inter-departmental Committee ...* esp. 1, 19–20; 2, 220–234.

¹⁶E.g. Horsfall, *The Relation of Town Planning ...*

¹⁷Stern, Fishman and Tilove, *Paradise Planned ...*

¹⁸Ward, "What did the Germans ever do ..."

Table 1. Main flows of planning knowledge between Britain and its 'great circles' prior to Britain becoming a member of the European communities in 1973.

Period	Europe	USA	Empire/Commonwealth
1840s–1914	Strong ↔	Limited, mainly GB →	Limited, almost wholly Britain →
1914–19	Badly disrupted	Strengthening, still mainly GB →	Strengthened, largely GB →
1920–39	Resumed ↔	Strengthened, increasingly ↔	Strengthened, mainly GB →
1939–45	Badly disrupted	Strong ↔, increasingly USA →	Strong, mainly GB → but some ↔
1945–60	Resumed ↔ but mainly GB →	Strong ↔, increasingly USA →	Strong, still mainly GB → but some ↔
1960–73	Increasingly strong ↔	Strong ↔ but mainly USA →	Strong, still mainly GB → but more ↔

Key: ↔ Knowledge flows mainly two-way, otherwise main direction shown → Sources: See reference footnotes.

international (but in the early twentieth-century largely European-centred) organizations promoting planning and related policies.¹⁹ These reflected liberal internationalist sentiments that had been growing steadily during the later nineteenth century.²⁰

Both types of links, especially the bilateral engagements with German planning, were badly disrupted by World War I. Yet a few years after the war ended, contacts resumed and the Anglo-German planning mutual learning nexus re-emerged, seemingly as strong as before 1914.²¹ After 1933, however, when the Nazi party took power, British planners and decision-makers became more cautious in their connections. World War II was to prove far more disruptive to Anglo-German links than after 1914. After 1945, although West German planners were eager to learn from British post-war reconstruction and planning, the compliment was certainly not returned.²² Other than important early post-war initiatives to re-establish German planning on an ideologically sounder basis than during the Nazi years, British policymakers and planners showed little interest in West German experience until the early 1960s.

Although there had been a common interest across Europe in reconstruction planning in the immediate post-war years, with Britain seen as a leader, this mutual interest soon faded. The weakening of what had been Britain's most important European link was also indicative of a more general drift of British planning interest away from the continent. An important exception was, however, Sweden, which since the later 1930s had attracted much British interest. As Swedish planning embraced more Anglo-American planning thinking during the 1940s, the links with Britain, especially regarding new towns and community planning, strengthened and became two-way.²³ From the mid-1950s, there was also a passing interest in exchanging planning knowledge, mainly related to new towns and industrialized housing, with the Soviet bloc.²⁴

Yet these were relatively minor or short-term interests. The main international connections of British planning during these years lay outside Europe, within the other two 'great circles'. Much the most important of these by 1945 involved the United States which had close cultural ties with Britain that in many ways trumped its geographical closeness to continental Europe, particularly as transatlantic communications improved.²⁵ As well as the common language, British and American planners had soon discovered their common preference for common sense, pragmatic approaches to their subject. It contrasted with a fondness for theoretical elaboration both saw amongst practitioners in continental Europe. This common feeling had been apparent even at the earliest

¹⁹Geertse, *Defining the Universal ...*, 2–95; Allan, *A Hundred Years ...*, 25–48.

²⁰Iriye, *Global Community ...*, 9–18.

²¹Ward, "What did the Germans ever do ..."

²²Deeming, *Reconstructing the City ...*; Diefendorf, *In the Wake of War ...*, 244–251.

²³Hall, *Urban Planning in Sweden ...*, 213–217; Hall, *Stockholm ...*, 91–111.

²⁴Ward, "Soviet Communism ..."

²⁵Clapson, *Anglo-American Crossroads ...*

meetings of British town planners and American city planners before 1914.²⁶ It strengthened further during World War I as British knowledge about worker housing and garden city development was adopted to facilitate American war production. Over the interwar years, the links took on a more reciprocal character. By the 1930s the British planning movement was drawing on American examples. Especially admired were the regional development initiatives of the New Deal, particularly the Tennessee Valley Authority and greenbelt towns.²⁷ The major new parks development and modern road systems of New York soon also became models for British emulation.

British experience during World War II contrasted sharply with a continental Europe temporarily subjugated to Hitler's 'New Order'. Relying at that time on the support of its Empire and Dominions and increasingly the mighty United States, wartime experience reinforced the British sense of uniqueness in Europe. This general sense was certainly paralleled within planning. In particular, the notion of a common Anglo-American planning approach became more deeply embedded.²⁸ It was particularly apparent in the immediate post-war years in Britain's reconstruction and New Town programmes which drew on American thinking about neighbourhood and community. In contrast to Britain, however, the collectivism of the New Deal and wartime periods quickly faded in the United States.²⁹ Yet it gave way to a future vision that became even more beguiling to many in Britain, namely a land of growing private affluence and consumerism. By 1960 the United States was seen as the best indicator of what the more affluent, motorized future would be like, a drive-in world of freeways, shopping malls, spacious suburbs and urban renewal. As such it offered an important experience for Britain's (and Europe's) planners, if not to emulate then at least to understand and come to terms with in their plans.

Compared to the United States, Empire was a less obviously formative engagement for the British planning movement, involving another, though different, balance between geographical and cultural distance. Yet, despite the seminal importance of the European connections, there was a clear imperial dimension in the formation of the British notion of 'town planning' before 1914.³⁰ India, Canada and Australia all had significant early parts in the story. Between the wars (when the Empire reached its greatest extent) many other imperial territories experienced aspects of British planning. The self-governing Dominions (increasingly styled as the Commonwealth) made their own choices. These were still substantially based on British planning but with a noticeable shift, especially in Canada and Australia, towards American approaches.³¹ Allowed less real discretion, colonial populations and other imperial territories were generally obliged to receive exported British planning knowledge, legislation and expertise. The expansion of planning in the Empire partly reflected the growing emphasis, especially from the 1930s, on colonial economic and social development (and the rising significance of the Empire for Britain's trade).³²

World War II showed how much Britain depended on the support of its Empire but it also highlighted the difficulties and costs of maintaining it. Although apparently restored fully intact after 1945, the Empire was never quite the same again. Post-war pressures for independence from colonized nations grew, first mainly in South Asia but soon across the whole Empire.³³ By 1973, most

²⁶Simpson, *Thomas Adams ...*, 119–167.

²⁷Ward, "Cross-national learning ..."

²⁸Ward, "Searching for effective ..."

²⁹Clapson, *Anglo-American Crossroads ...*

³⁰Home, *Of Planting and Planning ...*

³¹Ward, "The International Diffusion of Planning ..."; Garnaut, "Towards Metropolitan Organisation ..."; Hutchings, "From Theory to Practice ...".

³²Overseas Development Institute, *Colonial Development ...*

³³Darwin, *The End of the British Empire ...*

former colonial possessions had become independent but remained part of the wider British Commonwealth, allowing a continuing voluntary engagement with Britain. Planning played its part in aiding this transition while seeding a continuing post-colonial connection. In part, the shift was reflected in a noticeable increase in the years after 1945 in more individual migrations of British planning talent to parts of Britain's Empire or Commonwealth. Yet planning was also part of a conscious preparation for a post-colonial future. It became common for British colonial authorities in the period before independence to commission major plans, often linked with ambitious development projects. From 1952, for example, a new town was planned under the colonial administration at Tema in the Gold Coast (from 1957 independent Ghana) as part of a major new port development.³⁴ Many comparable efforts were made elsewhere. A few British planners even specialized in such late colonial work or found it a lucrative late career bonus.³⁵

By the early 1960s, however, there could be no denying that British Empire was withering away as a significant world entity.³⁶ While the Commonwealth might offer a degree of continuing 'soft power', its trading significance for Britain, though still significant, was shrinking in the long term. Its geopolitical salience never looked anything but quite minor when compared to British strategic relations with the United States and Europe. In this context, a stronger international relationship with the new European community formally created by the 1957 Treaty of Rome started to seem more desirable (and was increasingly being encouraged by American leaders).³⁷ The obvious post-war success of several European nations, especially West Germany and France, in creating prosperous economies, was also important.³⁸ It triggered some British interest in adopting aspects of the national economic policies and planning that had seemingly worked so well for these countries over the post-war years.³⁹ Moreover, despite the more obvious fascination at that time with the United States, this nascent turn towards Europe was also to some extent reflected within British town planning. Thus, beneath its more obvious American references, Buchanan's seminal 1963 report, *Traffic in Towns*, rekindled something of the historic Anglo-German nexus.⁴⁰ The connection was evident in his admiration of German pedestrianization of central areas, associated traffic restraint and emphasis on high-quality public transport.

Moreover, when he gave the 1969 Paris lecture with which this essay began, Buchanan's consultancy firm were working on a major traffic study for the French city of Arras, regarded as a possible model for more widespread French adoption.⁴¹ Meanwhile, Paris regional planners were also engaging with Britain's experience planning new towns.⁴² Much was learned from the British development model, the public sector development corporation, but far less from the original garden-city-derived British concept of relatively small self-contained towns. Instead, the French interest was in new towns planned as fully-integrated elements in wider urbanized regions. This conception was never realized on any scale in Britain but became important for the Paris regional *villes nouvelles* created from the late 1960s. Significantly, perhaps, there was some involvement by British planners in aspects of their planning.⁴³

³⁴Provoost, "Exporting New Towns ..."

³⁵Town Planning Institute, *The British Planner ...*

³⁶May, *Britain and Europe ...*, 27–46.

³⁷Brinkley, "Dean Acheson and ..."

³⁸Blackaby, *British Economic Policy ...*

³⁹NEDC, *Conditions Favourable ...*; Shanks, *Planning and Politics ...*

⁴⁰Ward, "What did the Germans ever do ..."; Ward, "Colin Buchanan's American Journey ..."

⁴¹Buchanan Papers, B/BC/0779.

⁴²Merlin, *New Towns ...*, 3–59; Buchanan, "Preface to English edn, *Ibid*, xi–xii; Tachin, "L'Image des Villes Nouvelles Britanniques ..."

⁴³Portnoi, "Shankland and Cox at Cergy ..."

A member of Europe – but looking elsewhere

Alongside these modest indications during the 1960s of this shift by British planning towards European connections, were others tarnishing the United States. Race riots and the decay of inner-city neighbourhoods in the big American cities suggested they might better point to Britain's future problems if they followed the same path but not their solutions.⁴⁴ It might therefore have been expected that British accession to the ECs in 1973 would also have seen British planning shift in a more Europe-oriented direction. But, in fact, this was to take much longer to occur.

In one sense, this was not surprising. The Treaty of Rome had granted none of the Communities powers or functions that directly involved urban and regional planning.⁴⁵ Policies such as that for agriculture had implications for planning, as in a more general sense did the cumulative spatial impact of allocations of European funds. Yet, as Britain joined, signs of change could be discerned. At the 1972 Paris meeting of the heads of national governments of member and incipient member governments, including Britain, two significant new directions for European policies were initiated. Both turned out to be important for European involvements in planning.⁴⁶ The first, initially seen as part of trade policy changes in preparation for a single European market, concerned environmental protection. The second, related to regional development, specifically concerned with the uneven economic and social development of Europe's regions.

Both dealt with issues of concern to Britain but the second was soon championed by it virtually as a precondition for its accession. Ardently pro-European though he was, the British prime minister, Edward Heath, realized that Britain would become a major funder of the European Economic Community's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Yet the lesser significance of agriculture in the UK economy and long reliance on food imports from its Empire and Dominions meant very little of those CAP funds would return. Britain would immediately therefore be a very large net contributor to the EEC. One potential way to offset this lay in Britain's regional problems, exploiting the Treaty of Rome's stated but not activated concern for balanced regional development. A new EEC regional policy that gave financial assistance to ailing regions would inevitably bring real financial benefits to Britain from Europe. Italy had previously pushed such a policy without success but now Britain's strong additional advocacy tipped the balance.

After some delay, the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) was created in 1975, although with a smaller budget than Heath had wanted.⁴⁷ It was not a truly European regional policy, merely an allocation of funds to national governments to pursue the kinds of regional policies they wanted. However, this suited Britain, especially since it received 28 per cent of the first ERDF budget allocation while contributing only 17 per cent of costs, a net national benefit exceeded only by Italy. Over time, the ERDF blossomed and became more truly European in its conception. It also became the main base on which Europe's interests in urban and spatial planning grew. Yet these later interests owed nothing to Britain's initial rather mundane concerns, motivated entirely by matters of finance.

During the first two decades of UK membership of the Community, there were also few signs of growing affinities between European and British planning thinking, policy or actions. Paradoxically the 1970s and 1980s brought almost completely opposite outcomes, of growing British affinities

⁴⁴Fox, *Metropolitan America* ... 137–189.

⁴⁵Dühr, S., Colomb, C. and Nadin, V. *European Spatial Planning* ... , 191–208.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 271–273; 325–327.

⁴⁷https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/index.cfm/en/newsroom/news/2015/03/european-regional-development-fund-turns-40; May, *Britain and Europe* ... , 53–54; Faludi, "Centenary Paper ... " 8.

within the other two ‘great circles’. British policymakers accordingly sought diagnoses of and answers to inner metropolitan decline, then fast becoming its main urban planning problem, largely in the United States. A major British research project 1977–81 concluded that continental European cities did not (yet) have such problems comparable to those of the two main Anglophone countries. Continental cities were seen as being at an earlier stage of evolution than their American and British equivalents.⁴⁸ By the 1980s, the notion of a common Anglo-American policy model of urban policy was widely recognized.⁴⁹ Although it had originated largely in the United States, it was by then something to which urban planners and policymakers from both countries were actively contributing.

At the heart of this model lay a shared belief that public planning should embrace private sector and market-based approaches. In both countries, during the Thatcher/Reagan era planning became part of a wider rolling back of government spending and market regulation. Instead of relying on public sector leadership and funding, partnerships with the private sector were favoured with public sector investment used to ‘leverage’ maximum private sector funds. British urban policy and planning took approaches from the United States such as city marketing and funding approaches deploying public sector funds to guarantee the viability of privately led development projects (Figure 2). American regenerations of redundant seaport areas in Boston and especially Baltimore inspired similar British efforts.⁵⁰ The biggest of these, the London Docklands Development Corporation, begun in 1980, was on a more ambitious scale than any American example.⁵¹ Inevitably therefore the transatlantic flow of knowledge and experience became two-way. An important policy concept that appeared first in Britain in the early 1980s, inspired by the pattern of rapid industrial growth that had recently occurred in Britain’s last remaining major colony, Hong Kong, was the Enterprise Zone.⁵² Offering a simplified, pre-zoned planning regime and financial incentives to attract new business development, it soon found favour in the United States.⁵³

Other European countries regarded these shifts with interest but drew mixed lessons from them. While some European city leaders, notably in Rotterdam, were similarly impressed with the Baltimore example, they did not so readily shed their previous commitments to a stronger public role in planning as had occurred in Britain.⁵⁴ The showpiece of British urban regeneration in the 1980s, the London Docklands, was regarded with particular ambivalence in continental Europe. While the scale and ambition of the project were widely admired, the project seemed to many observers, to epitomize the worst aspects of Anglo-American political economy from the Thatcher-Reagan era. Some of Britain’s European neighbours equated Docklands with Thatcher’s unconcealed dislike of the greater state intervention and market regulation that then prevailed elsewhere in Europe. As European port cities embarked on their own regeneration, their planners took care to minimize detrimental impacts, such as privatization of waterfront space and social exclusion, that had blighted many early redevelopments in London Docklands.

Other indicators suggest a gap between planning in Britain and the rest of the Community (except Ireland) that, far from narrowing, was perhaps even growing in the 1970s and 1980s. Britain’s private planning consultants, for example, some of whom had begun to gain important planning commissions in continental Europe during the later 1960s, now found other international

⁴⁸Hall, “The Inner City Worldwide.”

⁴⁹Barnekov, T., Boyle, R. and Rich, M. *Privatism and Urban Policy* ...

⁵⁰Ward, “Port Cities ...”

⁵¹Brownill, and O’Hara “From planning to opportunism ...”

⁵²Wetherell, “Freedom Planned ...”

⁵³Mossberger, *The Politics of Ideas* ...

⁵⁴Ward, “Port Cities ...”

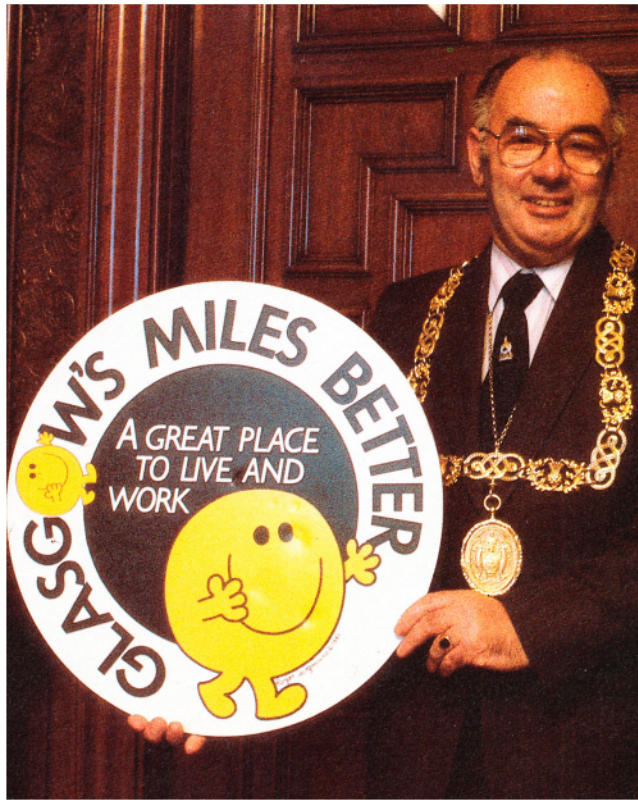


Figure 2. This famous marketing campaign for Scotland's biggest city, begun in 1983, was a striking example of the strong Anglo-American affinities in urban regeneration at that time. It was directly inspired by the iconic 'I (♥) NY' campaign of 1977. Source: Struthers Advertising.

options. The lucrative possibilities in the oil-producing countries were especially attractive. Following the quadrupling of the world price of oil in 1973–4 these were newly flush with funds and eager to embark on major new urban developments. Many (though certainly not all) had also lately been parts of the British Empire with continuing business connections and well accustomed to using British expertise. Prominent amongst them were Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Nigeria, each of which commissioned British consultants to undertake major planning studies during these years.⁵⁵ There were also efforts to export expertise to countries which had not formerly been part of the British Empire, although generally with less success (Figure 3).

Particularly in demand was British experience planning new towns and traffic planning in urban areas. In 1975, the British government launched a public sector international planning consultancy unit supplying this experience, particularly in these and similar non-Commonwealth settings.⁵⁶ Yet it soon foundered, largely because of opposition from British private consultancies, which had been immediately wary of this new body. They were themselves by then becoming well entrenched as exporters of British planning expertise in these same markets. That their major competitors in these wider international markets were often French public sector planning consultancies became yet another factor inhibiting closer links over these years with planning in Europe.

⁵⁵Ramos, *Dubai Amplified ...* esp. 77–105; Orillard and Ward "Exporting new towns ..."

⁵⁶Orillard and Ward, "Planning the World's New Towns ..."



Figure 3. Extract from 1983 international marketing campaign by the Thatcher Conservative government to promote the role of British consultants in planning and related fields. Aimed particularly at oil-rich countries, it proved most successful where these were former territories of the British Empire. Source: Author's collection.

The new dawn and Britain's 'peak Europe'

One essential precondition needed to bring British and European planning closer together was fulfilled as the European Community itself became more concerned with spatial planning and, alongside it, urban policy. In a general sense, the need to co-ordinate the cumulative spatial impact of allocations of European sectoral funds for its different programmes simply became ever more pressing as the very size and complexity of the European budget itself grew. As membership of the European Union (as it became in 1993) grew, so too did the pre-existing spatial disparities which were now contained within it. The single European market was also created 1986–1993, finally stripping away all obstacles to free movement of goods, services, capital and labour throughout the whole enlarged EU.⁵⁷ Without more action to promote balanced European development, therefore, long-term mass migration from poorer to richer member states would be inevitable. Accordingly, the EU established a major fund to promote economic and social cohesion. With it came an urgent need for more strategic spatial thinking and some at least indicative planning guidelines at a supranational Europe-wide level.

A particularly important (if somewhat abstract) response to this need came in the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP).⁵⁸ This began in 1989 at an informal meeting of planning

⁵⁷Dühr, S., Colomb, C. and Nadin, V. *European Spatial Planning ...*, 253–269.

⁵⁸Committee on Spatial Development, *ESDP European Spatial Development Perspective ...*

ministers of member countries held in Nantes.⁵⁹ Because planning remained a national government matter, the ESDP was prepared as an intergovernmental initiative of member states not as a supranational EU responsibility, although the EU was closely involved. Despite this acknowledgement of national sovereignty, however, the UK Thatcher government, remained unenthusiastic about either planning or Europe and especially anything that, like this initiative, put the two together. It was typical of British attitudes at that time that no UK minister even attended the Nantes meeting. The British approach softened a little during 1990–1997 under the Major Conservative administrations but the foot-dragging desire not to be involved in the ESDP persisted. Opportunities to give a lead to the process were spurned. At one meeting the British planning minister drew real hostility from fellow European ministers by dismissing planning as merely a ‘necessary evil’.⁶⁰

This lack of sympathetic political will for most of the 1990s inhibited any closer engagement of British and European planning thinking or action. Yet the British planning profession, afraid of being outflanked by other expert groups, woke up in 1992 to the growing significance of Europe for planning in Britain.⁶¹ The Royal Town Planning Institute commissioned an investigation which reported in 1994, urging more proactive engagement. The ability of the planning profession to act alone was, however, rather limited. How far the British government had been the brake on both the ESDP and closer engagement with planning in Europe became clear after a Labour government under Tony Blair was elected in May 1997.⁶² It was not simply the change of political rhetoric that signalled Britain’s new relationship with Europe and the EU. For the ESDP the impact was sudden and extraordinary, with the new British planning minister enthusing about it and impatiently demanding its finalization, which occurred in 1998.

There were also other strong signals that British planning really was now moving in a European direction (Figure 4). In 1998, the architect Lord (Richard) Rogers was asked by the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, to lead an Urban Task Force. Its task was to examine how city decline could be reversed and a new vision for urban regeneration established, based on design excellence, social well-being, environmental sustainability and economic viability.⁶³ In doing this, the Task Force studied and admired cities and urban policies in continental Europe, particularly the Netherlands, Germany and Spain. The group also examined the United States but, like Buchanan some three and half decades earlier, drew decidedly mixed lessons from it. This time though, there was more immediate sympathy with this perspective in the government. Many American examples presented in the Task Force report, published the following year, were seen as negative lessons. The report’s most positive lessons from the United States related to funding and leadership of regeneration projects, with little to admire regarding American urban design or planning. By contrast, the admiration for European cities was fulsome.

The Rogers Report shifted the expert and policy discourse of urban regeneration, technically just in England but in effect, because of its authoritative nature, also across the UK as a whole. Amongst much else, it recommended annual secondments of those involved in English urban regeneration to work in other, principally European, countries, although this was never adopted as framed. Yet the ongoing EU knowledge exchange and mutual learning networks in urban policy under the URBAN (from 1994 to 2006) and URBACT programmes (from 2002) did draw in officials from many cities

⁵⁹Zetter, ‘The British Perspective ...’

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 288.

⁶¹Davies, Gosling and Hsia, *The Impact of the European Community ...*

⁶²Williams, ‘Constructing the European Spatial Development Perspective ...’

⁶³Urban Task Force, *Towards an Urban Renaissance ...*

The international dimension

Access to global information and knowledge allows us to plug into a much wider database of best practice in policy, design and research. There are therefore a number of good reasons why it is important to consider what we can learn from other countries:

- the EU has sponsored major research programmes on sustainable cities, quality of life and urban development. This knowledge base can be integrated into English design and planning practice;
- too much of our urban development process is stagnant, relying on outdated planning concepts and controls, inefficient construction methods and tired designs;
- in many cases, other countries are doing things better; Dutch masterplanning, German construction, Scandinavian urban management etc.

Our recommendation:

- **Establish a five year programme of international secondments – ‘Urban 2000’ – with the aim that at least 2,000 professional staff and trainees benefit from exposure to best practice. (40)**



Dutch housing design: Zaan Island, Amsterdam



German design and construction skills in evidence in Norderm

Figure 4. Extract from the Report of the Urban Task Force, *Towards and Urban Renaissance*, 1999, showing the encouragement to the British government and planning-related professionals to follow the EU and learn from European examples. Source: Crown Copyright Open Government Licence <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/>

in Britain and other parts of Europe.⁶⁴ The impacts of these programmes varied across Europe, being greatest in the poorest and more recent accession countries. On the URBAN programme particularly, British (along with French and Dutch) experience contributed more to other parts of Europe than Britain and other exemplar countries themselves gained. The impacts for URBACT have not been systematically evaluated but intuitively seem to have been more evenly balanced. The main point however is that these programmes helped to routinize the mutual interaction of British planners and other experts involved in urban policy with their peers in other European countries.

The reform of the English planning system in 2001–04 (with comparable effects for the other British nations) was perhaps the most tangible sign of a Europeanisation of British planning. Most striking was the adoption of the EU-favoured term ‘spatial planning’, a marked break with British tradition.⁶⁵ New types of plans were created, the most obviously European in its lineage

⁶⁴Carpenter, “Addressing Europe’s Urban Challenges ...”; Carpenter, “Variegated Europeanization ...”

⁶⁵Lingua, “Institutionalizing EU strategic spatial planning ...”

being the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS).⁶⁶ This transcended the boundaries of local planning authorities to create a regional framework that coordinated private investment and public sector planning (Figure 5). RSSs were needed because of the difficulties faced by local planning authorities when addressing strategic development proposals and major urban extensions. In style, an RSS, rather like the ESDP, was indicative than precise, setting out broader lines of growth and restraint in an area, rather than demarcating exact locations. The RSS system was welcomed, initially, by both property developers and third-sector agencies concerned with conservation, sustainability and social justice.

Soon, however, opposition grew from local communities and the authorities which served them. These saw the RSSs as inadequately responsive to elective democracy and too ‘top-down’. They were especially disliked because of their role in fixing housing targets for each local planning authority. In doing this, they seemed to undermine what many voters saw as the main value of local planning, namely restricting future development in their areas. Such sentiments were often most ardently felt, paradoxically, in the very areas where growth pressures were also strongest. Although planners in some regions, particularly it seems those where a need for growth and development was widely accepted, tried to make effective use of the RSS system, opposition grew. Increasingly groups that had initially supported the idea of RSSs recoiled from the reality of them when they saw the ill-feeling that they were generating.

This reaction happened in the second half of the 2000s, when wider ill-feeling about Europe and the EU, particularly on the Conservative political spectrum, was also steadily growing. Yet dislike of the RSSs, although largely coming from the same political source, was not widely linked with their European genealogy. Some critics certainly made the connection, however, so it did not help.⁶⁷ The Conservative-dominated Coalition government that succeeded Labour in 2010 accordingly lost no time in abolishing the RSSs. What replaced them under the 2011 Localism Act was a much more locally-based planning system.⁶⁸ It gave new opportunities for plans to be made autonomously by neighbourhoods, at a more local level than even the local planning authorities. By contrast, the regional level was almost entirely excised, replaced by a voluntary ‘duty to cooperate’. Other changes soon followed under the new government’s prolonged austerity regime, establishing a more limited, more prosaic vision of planning with much less of a place for Europe.⁶⁹ As far as planning was concerned, new Labour’s ‘new dawn’ in Britain’s relationship to Europe had now definitely had its day.

Brexit and after

And so it was soon to prove in other, more fundamental, ways. British dislike of the EU, effectively encouraged by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), grew stronger after 2010.⁷⁰ The Conservative Eurosceptic right feared the party could be outflanked if it did not compete with UKIP’s anti-EU stance. Meanwhile, the harsh austerity imposed by the 2010–15 Coalition government to reduce the government debt raised to combat the 2008 financial crisis increasingly stoked resentment of the EU’s funding demands from British taxpayers. This and popular fears about

⁶⁶Cullingworth and Nadin, *Town and Country Planning ...*, 101–108.

⁶⁷UK Parliament, House of Commons ..., *Abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies ...*, Evidence October 25, 2010, Q136.

⁶⁸Houghton and Allmendinger, “Spatial Planning...”

⁶⁹Lingua, “Institutionalizing EU strategic spatial planning ...”

⁷⁰Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted ...*

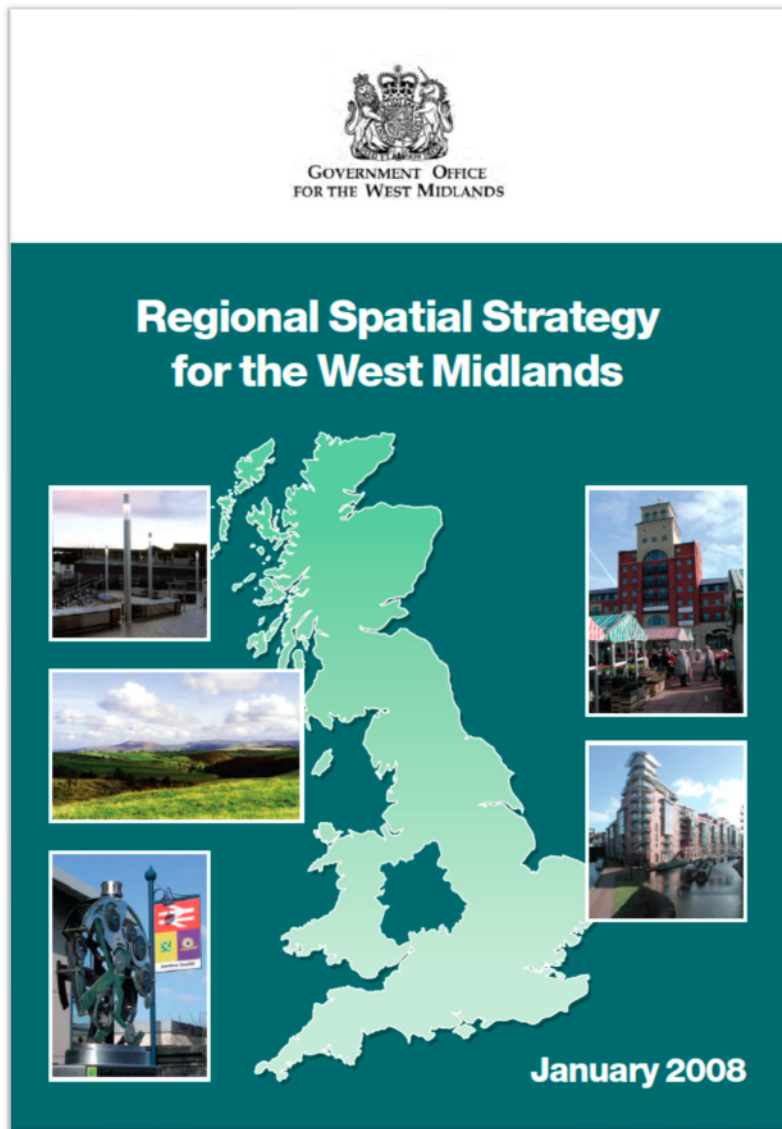


Figure 5. An example of the European-style Regional Spatial Strategies introduced under the 2004 Act to set out the main intentions for regional growth and restraint and provide a means of coordinating public and private investments. They were abandoned under the 2011 Localism Act. Source: Crown Copyright Open Government Licence <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/>

unlimited immigration from the EU, again exploited by UKIP and Conservative Eurosceptics, led to the 2016 referendum and, eventually, British secession from the EU in 2020.

After 2016, however, it became clear there was no consensus about what Brexit would actually mean for the direction of the British economy and government policy.⁷¹ The first post-referendum government led by Theresa May sought a mutually acceptable compromise but foundered on the Eurosceptic right's demand for complete severance from the EU. The succeeding Johnson

⁷¹Grey, *Brexit Unfolded* ...

government eventually found a way that seemed to provide that. Yet it only did so by seriously complicating relations between the British mainland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Pro-Brexit factions have also continued to disagree about how interventionist or otherwise domestic British government policies should be, although the emergency conditions during the pandemic shifted the terms of this debate, at least temporarily. Despite acknowledging the neo-liberal language of market freedoms, low tax and deregulation, however, Johnson adopted a surprisingly interventionist, populist line.⁷² This promised benefits to less prosperous regions whose normally Labour-voting electorates had supported him to an unprecedented extent at the 2019 election.

This paradoxical, rather populist, amalgam of interventionism and neo-liberalism is evident in the most intriguing scenario for post-Brexit Britain, encapsulated (with varying degrees of irony) in the headline slogan ‘Singapore-on-Thames’.⁷³ It has been particularly favoured in the most ardently Eurosceptic circles, whose members have looked enviously on the city-state’s low personal and business tax rates. Yet they have given much less emphasis to the Singapore government’s very active involvements in both economic development policies⁷⁴ and, even more, urban and environmental planning.⁷⁵ Indeed, the city state has successfully marketed its experience and expertise internationally in all these fields, especially so in Asia.⁷⁶ Already Britain during the ‘New Labour’ era had previously drawn on Singapore as a partial inspiration for London’s bold adoption of congestion charging in 2003.

But, amidst this rather muddled imagining, what has EU withdrawal actually meant for planning? The signals have been predictably mixed, in part reflecting recent political instability. In August 2020, the Johnson Conservative government proposed reforming the English planning system to make it more pro-development (Figure 6).⁷⁷ The most controversial aspect was reducing the role of discretionary local development control in determining planning outcomes. Since the 1940s, Britain has been exceptional (although Ireland is broadly similar) in giving primacy to development control in granting development rights. This contrasted with the zoning-based national planning systems typical elsewhere (including in most of the EU, the United States and many parts of the wider ‘anglosphere’), where development rights are legally specified in the operative local plan.⁷⁸ Paradoxically, the 2020 proposals would have made the English system more like most other national European zoning-based systems, with plans precisely demarcating areas of three basic types: ‘growth’, ‘renewal’ or ‘protected’. Only in ‘protected’ areas would there be no right or presumption in favour of development, with existing discretionary development control procedures continuing.

Other simultaneously proposed changes also had liberalizing, deregulating motivations. They included authorizing more ‘permitted development’ (changes not needing planning permission, typically between different land use classes and minor residential changes). Explicit anti-EU sentiments were also palpable in the proposed abolition of regulations ‘from Brussels’ specifying environmental impact assessments. Their replacement (so far unspecified) would be a simpler and clearer system, although apparently offering as much protection as the EU system it was to replace.

⁷²UK Government ... *Levelling Up the United Kingdom* ...

⁷³Bloom, “Talk of Singapore on Thames economy ...”

⁷⁴Yeo, “Economic Planning ...”; Tang, H. L. “Industrial Planning ...”

⁷⁵Centre for Liveable Cities, *A Chance of a Lifetime* ...

⁷⁶Singapore Co-operation Enterprise, www.sce.org.sg/.

⁷⁷Ministry of Housing ... *Planning for the Future* ...

⁷⁸Ward, “Why did Britain reject zoning ...”; European Commission, *The EU Compendium* ...



Figure 6. This 2020 White Paper set out the first post-Brexit proposals for the English planning system. Controversially proposing a more zoning-based approach, it drastically reduced the role of local discretionary development control, the bedrock of British planning since 1947. This provoked a major revolt from many conservatives and was subsequently dropped. Source: Crown Copyright Open Government Licence <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/>

Another paradox of the 2020 proposals was the dislike they immediately engendered in many affluent Conservative-supporting areas. Voters there especially valued the local discretion that development control gave their representatives to prohibit or moderate development pressures. The government soon retreated on these proposals, especially after it lost a formerly secure Conservative parliamentary seat largely on this issue in June 2021. Since then, the original intention for a new Planning Act has been abandoned. A dilute version of the 2020 proposals now features in the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill (LURB), currently before Parliament (November 2022).⁷⁹ The framing of this new measure has seemingly stressed growth's benefits, especially for less affluent areas where the Conservatives under Johnson won unprecedented support at the 2019 election. Gone is the frontal assault on discretionary development control which so frightened the affluent Conservative heartlands. Yet there remain suspicions in such areas that they will continue to be pressed by the government to absorb more new housing development than they would want.⁸⁰

Although not part of the LURB, it should be considered alongside another growth-oriented programme launched since leaving the EU. Begun in 2020, this involves creating Freeports.⁸¹ These are selected sea or airports (or comparable coherent distribution hubs) offering significant tax freedoms and highly simplified planning regimes, granting advance development rights for specified uses. As such, they are another aspect of liberalizing planning. The broad idea is an old one,

⁷⁹Sandford, *Levelling Up ...*

⁸⁰Twinch, "Tory infighting ..."

⁸¹HM Treasury, *Freeports ...*

based on ports having secure areas holding goods not (yet) subject to national taxes and thus particularly suited to entrepôt trade. Recently there has been a tendency to locate a wider range of economic activity within them, most spectacularly so the Jebel Ali Freeport, Dubai, claimed to generate nearly a quarter of Dubai's gross domestic product.⁸² Some 3500 examples exist around the world, including within the EU. Yet there have been worries that they can attract criminal activity, making many, including the EU, cautious about them. Even in 1980s Britain, when the Thatcher governments also designated Freeports, they were then pursued only tentatively before being dropped in 2012. However, the Johnson government was much keener, as is the current Sunak government. Seven seaports and one airport in England were designated as Freeports in 2021 and there are similar initiatives under consideration in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The disastrously short-lived Truss government tried to go much further in Autumn 2022, when it announced the creation of Investment Zones (IZs).⁸³ Like Freeports, these promised significant tax freedoms and very simplified planning regimes. Unlike Freeports, however, they would not have been confined to business development but might also be large housing developments. Much was made of how 'burdensome EU requirements' about environmental protection would be absent and 'the planning system will **not** stand in the way of investment and development' (original emphasis). Yet, despite frantic work by local authorities bidding to host IZs, less than two months later the Sunak government that succeeded Truss abandoned the entire programme.⁸⁴ Instead, the emphasis would shift from property development to research and innovation support for knowledge-intensive growth clusters. Environmental protections would not be so readily cast aside. Fears of fast-tracked large housing developments foisted on unwilling localities were again calmed.

Not wholly belonging anywhere?

So, the speculation about the exact nature of planning in post-Brexit Britain remains unresolved, symptomatic today of the larger confusions about the purpose of Brexit. Yet it is also symptomatic of the historic uncertainties about where British people and especially its leaders see their place more widely within the 'great circles' that Churchill described. Europe does not seem to be, currently, the great circle in which closer future engagements are likely to be sought or found, probably the reverse. Although Britain could still in theory opt in (and pay for) involvement in some EU programmes such as URBACT, it will no longer do so as of right simply as a member state. It may well be that the shared understandings and shared discourse of planning and urban policy that evolved between Britain and EU countries will fade as such interactions of its planners and related experts in official positions become fewer and less meaningful. If it does, that would be a loss that ignores just how much British planning has gained from Europe, not just since the 1990s or 1973 but over a far longer period, certainly since the mid-nineteenth century and arguably for centuries even before that.

It would also detract from the real contributions that Britain has made to Europe in evolving the promise and reality of modern urban planning. From Victorian municipal engineering and early social housing through the garden city and new town movement and planning for urban traffic to area-based urban regeneration, the British contribution has been substantial. One is bound to

⁸²Kelly, "International Lessons ..."

⁸³Department for Levelling-Up ... /HM Treasury, *Guidance: Investment Zones ...*

⁸⁴Brown, "Investment zone plans scrapped ..."

wonder whether the developer-led 'planning' that currently looks like being the hallmark of post-Brexit Britain could ever approach any of those in importance. As they are presently conceived, British 'new garden cities' have little of the international potential of the original garden city to project Britain's 'soft power'.

Since the most recent moves to liberalize planning in Britain echo many familiar themes from the Anglo-American playbook of the Reagan-Thatcher era, it is appropriate to consider the likely salience of this other 'great circle' for the post-Brexit era. Something of the larger sense of a special connection with its historic 'distant friend', the United States, almost always more important since 1945 to the British than the Americans, certainly remains. An even older sense of shared Anglo-American pragmatism in contrast to a perceived European overfondness for abstraction and theory forms another subtext that sometimes still shows itself in planning discourse. But there must be doubts whether there could be any early major revival of Anglo-American links in planning sufficient for them to take up the 'space' lately occupied by those with Europe. Even when the political euphoria over Brexit and dreams about what might follow were at their height, the notion that Trumpian America might become the model was, for most British people, a step too far. A more modest revival of Anglo-American planning links based less on populist, broadly neo-liberal, political ideologies and more on the two countries' shared traditions of progressive democratic pragmatism might be more likely.

The final 'great circle', that of Empire, still so precious to Churchill in 1948, is now a rather contested memory. It is cherished by some British citizens, a shameful and exploitative institution for others and a mixture of both to many. But Britain, in losing its European role, shows no real sign of re-finding its Empire. The concept of Commonwealth certainly derives some continuing 'soft power' benefits from the more positive parts of the British imperial legacy. Yet when, as now, declining generosity and increasing self-interest are shaping Britain's international aid policies, then British moral authority within the Commonwealth seems set also to dwindle. It must, however, be acknowledged that some parts of its former Empire retain some salience for Britain in the circulation of planning knowledge. The experience of the more affluent Commonwealth countries are often referred to when formulating aspects of British public policy, with planning-related matters occasionally featuring among them. Australia and Canada remain the usual 'distant friends' used for policy lesson-drawing in such comparative Commonwealth-gazing exercises. But their most bizarre recent aspect has certainly been the 'Singapore-on-Thames' fantasy (without, unfortunately, the impressive planning lessons that the city-state could offer).

None of these thoughts can be, of course, a reliable guide as to the likely future direction of either Britain or its conception of planning. Yet one of the more comforting conclusions to draw from the longer historical review of Britain's uncertain planning relationships is that what once seemed terminal disruptions did not turn out to be final. Connections have been remade, even after the most serious of breaches. The twentieth-century wars that severed or seriously interrupted what had once been Britain's most important international planning linkages with its European neighbours certainly did not mark their end. Despite all the noise and fury that has accompanied Brexit, it has been a less serious break than were the two world wars. Although anathema for those currently leading Britain to admit anything of the kind is likely, it appears inevitable that, sooner or later, there will have to be some re-forging of closer connections with Europe. Perhaps not with the EU but, for strong economic reasons, rejoining the single market (or something closer to it) seems a real possibility. This would probably involve accepting free(r) labour movement and EU environmental standards, both with real implications for managing urban and regional development. Single market membership would similarly bring close cooperation with European science,

research and educational networks. These in turn would make it likely that knowledge circulation and cooperation with the EU in the planning, urban and environmental fields would again become usual. This viewpoint essay therefore ends with the prediction (or perhaps it is just a hope) that Britain and specifically British planning will in time find other ways of not wholly belonging to Europe.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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