

Planning, regions and academia

In a recent article on the way planning is confronting the “growth agenda”, Graham Houghton made some interesting comments on the weakness of support for the regional planning work being done in England up to 2010. He states that “those promoting Labour’s policies have spectacularly failed to provide a counter-narrative with which to defend the previous 10-20 years of planning reform, including the rise of regional planning since the early 1990s”.ⁱ Whilst this was directed at the planning community as a whole (he refers to “the professional press” in particular), academics were surely part of this failure. This set me thinking about what the academic component of this weakness consisted of and what might be the reasons for it – I accept here that there is much validity in the judgement.ⁱⁱ Graham’s work, especially his two books with others published in 2004 and 2010ⁱⁱⁱ, did give at least implicit support to regional work during the 2000s, but it cannot be said that there was a broad based body of UK academic work which had helped to develop practice in this area of planning. This line of thought then links up with wider questions about the recent role of planning academia in Britain (possibly especially England), and about how we should understand the abolition of the English regional project in 2010. It will be important to draw conclusions about past failures or weaknesses, if we are to work towards the development of more helpful linking with British planning practice over the next few years, post localism, and dealing with the real immediate pressing concerns.

Why little support?

The first reason must be that few academics made this their area of interest in the 1990s and 2000s, after the return of regional level planning and governing after 1990. Planning academia is, as is well known, a small community compared with the extensive fields of geography or most physical or social sciences. Within that small grouping, most academics do focus on planning in Britain, but concentrate on thematic areas of environmental, regeneration or design planning, with other sub-fields like housing and transport having small supporting groupings. Regional planning, and even to a large extent local planning practice, has relatively few specialists. Regional development has had somewhat greater life, gathered together under the internationalising umbrella of the Regional Studies Association, but the link across to regional planning has often been weak – look at any RSA publication and this is clear enough. So the number of academics interested in and recently publishing on UK regional planning can no doubt be counted on two hands. During the 2000s at least, the number of practising regional planners was larger than this, and discussions within this grouping did take place, but with only occasional cross fertilisation with academic work.^{iv} This is surely one reason for the limited contribution which was made to this field, if we compare for example with the wealth of work on environmental sustainability, urban design or regeneration.

A second reason relates to the nature of much academic work in planning. It is increasingly the case, since the institutionalisation of research assessment conducted largely through peer review of journal articles, that much academic work is weakly linked to practice concerns. I am not of course saying that planning academics are wholly detached from practice – all

would argue for the practical importance of their work, direct or indirect. This journal is testimony to the communication that does take place, and performs a valuable bridging function. But the languages in which much work engages with international theoretical zones of discussion create barriers, and may not be earthed back to domestic planning concerns: a review of papers at many planning conferences would I think support this judgement. The links to geographical theorising, increasingly strong in most planning schools, now often staffed by those with geography specialisations, not planning trainings or backgrounds, reinforce this tendency. I am not arguing here about the value of this work, but simply indicating it as a reason for the often weak engagement with arguments about the reform of planning systems and policies.

Why abolition?

However, this is only part of the story. To get further, we need to understand the nature of the 2010 abolition of all regional working in England. It is not that this resulted from some considered discussion of this field. In fact it came to some extent out of the blue, taking the period of 2008 to 2010 as a whole. The Conservative Party only moved to this position haltingly and gradually from around early 2009, with still little certainty that all three legs of regionalism would be removed (regional spatial planning, regional economic work and government offices coordination). So although there was a debate to be engaged in during that say 18 months, and academics engaged little, the window was not large. This was against the background of the contested reforms put through by the government in 2007 to 2010, for single regional strategies and so on. Academics were by no means convinced of the value of such reforms, any more than many had been of the 2004 reforms. That is, the debates in this area and in fact in planning as a whole took place within a sphere of considerable disenchantment with the management of many planning aspects by government, right from 2001 onwards. It was this difficult and often fairly fruitless engagement with which most academics were familiar at this time, not any rational argument about the way to develop planning in some wider sense. If Labour ministers relatively sympathetic to at least the broad principle of planning listened so little to most academics (see the weakness for example of the Barker reports and the policy zones they colonised), why might academics have thought their voices could have much effect on evolving Conservative thinking?

This then brings us to an important understanding about the nature of the 2010 abolitions. They stem not from any within-planning discussion, but from political and ideological positions within the Conservative Party. Some commentators appear to be ready to rewrite history, with regionalism in its 1990 to 2010 incarnation presented as a set of failed policies - that this is a shared understanding. No solid evidence has been produced for this. A more balanced account of the strengths and weaknesses of regional planning over the past decade is needed, supported by an evidence base, partly in order to identify lessons for any future return to strategic planning. To contribute to such an understanding a review by experienced practitioners involved in regional planning is due to be published soon^v. This does not promote the equally dubious notion that the regional and strategic planning of 1997-2010 can be pronounced a strong success: the many problems and stresses are well known. A more modulated judgement is needed. What *was* more definitely a failure was the “strong

regionalism” project of New Labour (in fact of limited parts of those governments), that is to say the political failure to embed English regionalism. But this did not *have to* bring down the “weak regionalism” of RDAs, RSSs and so on.

This connects strongly to the political reason for the Conservative position, the unpopularity in some areas, especially in southern England, of regional planning drives to deal with increasing housing allocation. This had a demographic and economic logic, in the patterns of movement in southern England, in part to rural areas and small towns, over several decades. This constituency also validated pro-car driving and related anti-sustainability positions, which have become quite clear since the 2010 election, even if these were silenced in the interest of remaining within acceptable public and electoral rhetoric. Such a constituency of opposition to development was one of the few genuinely popular Conservative positions in some areas, and thus gained support amongst some leading politicians. This then was able to merge with the underlying ideological position, which has hardly changed since the mid-1970s, whereby Thatcherite Conservatism is primarily de-regulationist, instinctively anti-planning at any level above basic permitting, in essence. The dominant carriers of ideology in the party, such as Oliver Letwin, are committed to this position, and support policy initiatives in this direction. Quite where this mix of long run ideology and immediate political drives would end up was not predictable until the party manifestos were written, or, given the coalition outcome, even later.

What to do next?

It may still be argued that academics or outside commentators (such as the RTPi and TCPA) were guilty of not defending, in a broad form over these years, the basic planning principles. Against that one can argue that most planners tend to think that the basic case for planning is accepted within Britain, as it is in most advanced democracies, and that this extends to an understanding that supra-local planning of one kind or another is essential. That may be a dangerous mistake, and one message of this reflection is that the need for such basic defence may now be critical: already there are signs of such work, with Yvonne Rydin’s timely book, *The Purpose of Planning* (Policy Press 2011). But to imagine that this pro-planning case was seen as so under threat in 2009 is to rewrite history.

We also risk overemphasising the role of the small band of planning academics, if we think that they might have intervened in the political-ideological cauldron that was (and is) the Conservative Party, to have a strong effect on the creation of localism 2011 style and the removal of regionalism 1990-2010 style. The political and ideological forces behind this change are real and have power. Planning’s *raison d’être* remains broadly as it has been for a century or more, but that does not mean that parts of the present government accept that reason to exist. So the case for planning’s supporters to rework that set of reasons must be strong. A collective effort by practising planners and any academics interested in the issue is no doubt the most effective way to develop the multiple facets that this reworking needs to have. The work by the TCPA on Reconstructing England is one encouraging sign that one organisation at the core of planning is seriously addressing this challenge. The RTPi work on A Map for England is another very valuable initiative^{vi}. This might mean that the next stage

of public debating on planning, coming up to the next general election and/or around the next likely round of planning reforms, would find “the planning community” in better condition to respond than at the end of the New Labour years.

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i Houghton, G. “Planning and growth” *Town and Country Planning*, 81, 3, 121-125

ii Naturally I share responsibility in this. Although I did write, with John Glasson, a book mainly on UK regional planning (Glasson, J. and Marshall, T., 2007, *Regional Planning*, Abingdon: Routledge), it is clear that historical circumstances did not make the timing ideal, as far as planning in England was concerned, even though the book retains its value, I understand, in international contexts. I contributed other publications including academic journal articles on regional planning, but the limitations of all such academic publishing discussed here apply to these in some measure.

iii See Houghton, G. and Counsell, D. 2004, *Regions, Spatial Strategies and Sustainable Development*, London: Routledge, and Houghton, G., Allmendinger, P. Counsell, D. and Vigar, G., 2010, *The New Spatial Planning*, Abingdon: Routledge. Other important books include Dimitriou, H. and Thompson, R. eds, 2007, *Strategic Planning for Regional Development in the UK*, Abingdon: Routledge, and Tewdwr-Jones, M. and Allmendinger, P. eds, 2006, *Territory, Identity and Spatial Planning*, Abingdon: Routledge.

iv See the ESRC sponsored seminar series organised in 1999-2000 at Oxford Brookes University, for one example, with the resulting book, Marshall, T., Glasson, J. and Headicar, P. eds 2002, *Contemporary Issues in Regional Planning*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

v Swain, C., Marshall, T. and Baden, T. eds, 2012, *English Regional Planning 2000-2010*, Abingdon: Routledge.

vi Centre for Urban Policy Studies, Manchester University, 2012, *A Map for England*, CUPS, Manchester.