

wait till the smoke clears



A great battle has taken place (the general election), and the winning side (the Tory/LibDem Coalition) has commissioned its most ferocious and fearless knight (The Rt Hon. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government) to scour the battlefield and finish off any survivors. The aftermath of battle is the time for retribution: the accumulated grievances of the victors are avenged (the 'imposition' from 'above' of 'John Prescott's houses', and the obligation to let gardens be built over, for example); collaborators are dispatched (the NHPAU, the Infrastructure Planning and Sustainable Development Commissions); whole divisions of the defeated army are disbanded (the Regional Planning Bodies, Regional Development Agencies, and the Government Offices in the regions); and the people are told that at last they are free to do whatever they want (the Big Society). It may be a shocking metaphor, but it may help us to understand what is happening.

The continuing post-election period in which Ministers have been rampaging through the English planning system has been a scary experience for all. Extravagantly overstated and aggressive announcements and declarations have tumbled over each other, untutored by the civil servants, unmodified by expert counsel, and blissfully free of any kind of public consultation or evidence base. Lacking much sense of direction, and showing disregard for trifles like interim arrangements, the orgy of slashing and hacking is nevertheless showing signs of approaching its end.¹ For it is approaching the ridiculous stage to which laughter is the only fitting response.

The turning point was probably when Mr Pickles announced that 'Under Labour, it would appear that more damage was done to the housebuilding industry than the Luftwaffe did'.² Think about it. It really would be funny, if it were not people's homes and jobs and schools and the environment in all its life-supporting and life-enhancing aspects that were at stake.

But the end of this phase must be getting near. It is not possible for 62 million people to share the UK without some arrangements for the use of land and for infrastructure. So we must hold our nerve, and focus on building new planning processes which catch the breeze – in terms of political rhetoric – but which get the proper job done.

Holding our nerve is proving to be particularly stressful with regard to strategic planning. Everyone (no doubt even Mr Pickles) knows that that we must have some 'supra-local' planning activity (a coinage of on-the-ball quango-ista and new town enthusiast Peter Studdert of Cambridge). It being obvious that we need strategic planning, and that we need it now, the urgent temptation is to grab at a passing straw in the present maelstrom, and to try to attach a strategic planning role to it.

One such passing straw was a rumour that the Coalition might give re-birth to county councils, and raise County Structure Plans from the grave. This straw soon crumbled: district and unitary councils (many of which are run by Coalition parties) would not yield up their planning powers to counties, some of whom had deeply upset them anyway by pitching to the last government to become unitary councils in their own right (Devon and Northamptonshire are two examples). Mr Pickles has also declared that the new system of Core Strategies must be proceeded with,³ indicating no imminent demise.

A more recent straw arises from the Coalition's commitment to Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs).⁴ On 29 June Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg launched a £1 billion Regional Growth Fund to help areas and communities at risk of being particularly affected by public spending cuts. He also set out plans for LEPs that will bring together councils and business 'on an equal footing with one voice' to replace Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). In a joint letter sent to councils and business leaders that day, Business Secretary Vince Cable and Communities Secretary Eric Pickles asked them 'to consider forming new local enterprise partnerships that can provide strategic leadership in their local areas and create the right environment for business success and economic growth.'⁵

Vince Cable said: 'We want a structure that reflects the genuine interests and commitment of

enterprise, local councils and other stakeholders like universities and colleges. Local enterprise partnerships will provide that vision and then take on the task of renewing local economies and tackling local barriers to growth. Today we are asking them to tell us about their vision and I'm looking forward to what they've got to say.'

The joint letter⁶ says: 'We have been concerned that some local and regional boundaries do not reflect functional economic areas. We wish to enable partnerships to better reflect the natural economic geography of the areas they serve and hence to cover real functional economic and travel to work areas. To be sufficiently strategic, we would expect that partnerships would include groups of upper tier authorities. If it is clearly the wish of business and civic leaders to establish a local enterprise partnership for a functional economic area that matches existing regional boundaries, we will not object. We will welcome proposals that reflect the needs of every part of England, not least areas that are economically more vulnerable. Government is keen to work closely with and through capable local enterprise partnerships which meet these criteria.'

We are told that the new LEPs will tackle issues including planning and housing, local transport and infrastructure, employment, enterprise and supporting business start-ups (other roles currently carried out by the RDAs will be re-absorbed nationally, contradicting the 'new localism', but it is a bit churlish to draw attention to this right now).

On 13 July Mr Pickles called for local authorities and business leaders to submit proposals for LEPs, ahead of the White Paper on sub-national growth. At the time of writing there is a great rush among local authorities to forge new alliances and tie up some business friends to make a bid. They have been given about six weeks – over the summer holidays – to sort themselves out.

So the question has arisen – if LEPs are to have this blessed status as the inheritors of the RDA legacy, and are to be given such a broad remit that might even stretch across a whole region, are they not in reality the agencies for the strategic planning that we need to fill the void between the new national planning framework that has been promised, and the newly refreshed 'new localism' Core Strategies that are still required?

I don't think so. The cash that LEPs will get to spend on themselves, let alone on project work, is entirely unclear. The CLG website carried a version of the letter saying there will be no set-up money, but that sentence was omitted from the version actually posted out. The political rhetoric is dramatic in asserting that vast savings of money will come

from reforms. Be under no illusion, this is a money-saving project, not a money-spending one.

The mission to 'tackle' planning, housing, local transport and infrastructure is too big a task to be done so lightly, and cannot be delivered cheaply. So if the deal is to say goodbye to RDAs and Regional Planning Bodies because they were unelected and unaccountable (two of the mildest criticisms of them), in order to have our strategic planning run by unaccountable and unelected LEPs, isn't a deal at all.

Don't clutch at the LEP straw to find a peg for strategic planning. Wait. The smoke of battle will clear soon enough. It took the Thatcher Government about 14 months to start rebuilding the planning system that they had so eagerly wanted to destroy after their great election victory in 1979. With our housing and development industry at a standstill, unemployment rocketing, international competitiveness declining, and social cohesion about to melt down when the cuts become reality, it may take even less time than that. Not planning is not an option for a place like ours. Be ready to help when we get to post-election reconstruction.

● **David Lock CBE** is a Vice-President and Trustee of the TCPA and Chair of consultancy David Lock Associates. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 On 22 July the Government announced the abolition of the Regional Offices. In the CLG press release of that date, Eric Pickles said: 'Let me be clear: The Government Offices are not voices of the region in Whitehall. They have become agents of Whitehall to intervene and interfere in localities, and are a fundamental part of the 'command and control' apparatus of England's over-centralised state'
- 2 House of Commons, 10 Jun. 2010. *Hansard*, 10 Jun. 2010, col. 444. www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201011/cmhansrd/cm100610/debtext/100610-0001.htm – a point addressed powerfully by former Chief Planning Inspector Chris Shepley in 'Shepley on... slow action on homes policy'. *Planning*, 16 Jul. 2010, p.9
- 3 Speech by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to the Local Government Association, 6 Jul. 2010. www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/newsroom/lgaconference2010
- 4 The Government's Coalition Programme – the foundation of the Government – states: 'We will support the creation of local enterprise partnerships – joint local authority-business bodies brought forward by local authorities themselves to promote local economic development – to replace Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). These may take the form of the existing RDAs in areas where they are popular'. *The Coalition: Our Programme for Government*. HM Government, May 2010. www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/409088/pfg_coalition.pdf
- 5 'Councils and businesses to rebalance local economy'. News Release, CLG, 29 Jun. 2010. www.communities.gov.uk/newsstories/localgovernment/1626435
- 6 See www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1626854.pdf