

# on 'local people' taking control



Some time before May next year, at what could be short notice, we will be involved in a general election. For those with an interest in town and country planning an interesting drift is under way in Conservative thinking which is either fabulously brilliant or quite wrong-headed.

It is the idea that the existing statutory plan-making system at the regional level might be abolished and, instead, that 'local people' should be left to decide on the quantity and location of new development (which, in this context, seems to mean housing, as the new unelected Infrastructure Planning Commission is going to decide everything else really big and important).

The idea isn't billed as a planning matter (there is no heading for 'planning' on the Conservative Party website), but is one that has been brewing for some time. I've been watching it since July 2006, when the then Shadow Communities and Local Government Secretary Caroline Spelman said that instead of imposing top-down (housing) targets, Government Ministers should scrap the entire regional tier of planning controls. In her comment on Kate Barker's interim report on the planning system, Spelman said: 'Labour has imposed top-down housing targets, set in Whitehall and administered by unelected, unaccountable and unwanted regional government. If the Government really wanted to simplify the planning system, the first step should be to abolish the whole bureaucratic tier of regional planning.'

Shadow Chancellor George Osborne subsequently weighed in, saying that 'the top-down, regionally driven approach of Gordon Brown has led to the worst of all worlds: the wishes of local communities ignored, fewer homes built, and a failure to provide the necessary infrastructure. We propose a different approach that devolves power to local communities and gives them an incentive to promote the right sort of environmentally sustainable development.'

The thread re-emerged when former Secretary of State Michael Heseltine presented Tory leader David Cameron with the report of a Cities Task Force in June 2007. His recommendations included the argument in favour of 'transferring power from quangocrats to democrats': 'The funding and powers of the 'government puppets' – Learning & Skills Councils, Regional Assemblies, English Partnerships, the Housing Corporation and Regional Development Agencies – should be transferred to local city government. These quangocrats currently control over £11 billion in regeneration funding (by contrast, council tax raises £22 billion); but the public have no way to influence the way that money is spent.'

Eric Pickles, the current CLG Shadow Secretary, promises to 'give more powers and freedoms to local councils, and make town halls more



Above

If 'local people' are to be left to decide on the quantity and location of new development, we would have to invest in providing them with the information they would need to make their decisions – and to understand the consequences of not planning properly for what is needed

accountable to local people, and abolish Labour's quango state, for example by scrapping the unelected regional assemblies. Our aim,' he says, 'is to empower and embolden people to take action themselves, whether as individuals or as members of independent organisations, voluntary groups and social enterprises.'

Grant Shapps, Shadow Minister for Housing, says: 'We need more homes – but they must be built in a way that protects the environment and provides the infrastructure to support local communities. That's why local people need to decide where new homes should go, instead of Whitehall bureaucrats. And that's why we will use incentives to encourage new homes to be built, rather than letting unelected quangos impose unsustainable development on communities.' Now Jacqui Lait, Shadow Planning Minister, is trying out the idea with various specialist audiences.

To make this 'local people' vision work, the Tory concept trailed by Grant Shapps is to bribe local people to do the right thing, by ensuring that they receive community and/or personal financial benefits. There is no great breach of principle here. It is already begun on a modest scale, with the Housing Delivery Grant, huge planning application fees, the promise of a Community Infrastructure Levy, Housing Growth Points, and more. The Tories seem merely to be saying: 'Let's stop beating about the bush... how much money do you want to persuade you to allocate housing land in your area?' A fresh approach to public policy, worth exploring in the UK.

There is no irony here – why should communities that accommodate lots of change have so little infrastructure? Why does the South East outside London have 'Third World' public transport, or have to get Lottery Funding for a new theatre, for example, when shrinking towns in the North are larded with public expenditure programmes? There's a balance to be struck, and it is a balance that could be altered.

Something else that would be needed would be an obligation, accepted by the government of the day, to invest in providing 'local people' with the information they would need to make their decisions – candidly, why we need so many homes; where we need them; and on what terms we need them so that people can actually live in them. They would need to understand the impotence of government in trying to limit most of the factors driving housing need, and the consequences of not planning properly for what is needed. They would need (and should be provided with right now) an ample supply of generous briefing packs, maps, diagrams, and animations to make the data accessible and impactful, all frequently updated and hugely accessible to all.

This is not an impossible dream – I have seen such sustained vigorous civic education programmes in Japan, for example – but it is alien to our secretive, dissembling and controlling modes of conventional government. If you want to upend

the *status quo*, and trust the 'local people', help them understand what they must now handle!

Last, what would be needed would be a requirement that all major local council planning decisions on housing and employment were subject to a true and rigorous independent Statement of Community Involvement, proving that *all* had been consulted, and not just the noisy ones.

This could all be *very* clever. 'Local people' would find they have not only been given the power to decide these matters, but have also been given the responsibility to carry the consequences. Wouldn't it be clever, when the homeless go on the march and

### **'The Tories seem merely to be saying: 'Let's stop beating about the bush... how much money do you want to persuade you to allocate housing land in your area?' A fresh approach to public policy, worth exploring in the UK'**

the Minister in London can say: 'It's nothing to do with me, mate, it's Borssetshire District Council that stitched you up!' Surely, the District Council, having no-one else to blame, would *have* to respond?

But hold on. Would it be so clever when employers tell the Prime Minister that they can't recruit staff and are moving to another country, and the Minister can tell the PM 'it's not our fault, Dave; the local people didn't want the UK to remain a world leader in genome research', or whatever it is that is really well established in Borssetshire district. Would it really be clever if it meant nothing happens in Shameless District, because they don't vote and they are too far gone even to mobilise to burn the place down? Would it really be clever to abdicate responsibility for leadership on an issue that affects the national interest and which (in a little land like ours and on a basic subject like the supply and location of housing) is merely the sum of a myriad local concerns?

More questions than answers at this point in the political cycle.

● **David Lock CBE** is Chair of planning and urban design consultants David Lock Associates. He is a Vice-President and Trustee of the TCPA, and Visiting Professor at the University of Reading. The views expressed here are personal.