

on the abolition of regional spatial strategies



With the Localism Act 2011 comes the certain death of the most recent attempt to plan at the regional scale. We are told that by April 2012 or thereabouts the Coalition Government – not having much else to do, with only the collapse of the capitalist system to worry about as the tide of nuclear proliferation competes for attention against the melting Arctic and Antarctic poles – will abolish Regional Spatial Strategies (RSSs). Should we mourn their passing? Is the end of larger-scale planning? Forever?

The RSSs were weak and sickly children trying to do the work of adults. No matter how hard we had all tried, they were not fit for purpose and sooner or later were doomed to fail. With each 'roll forward' or 'partial review', they became more complicated and incoherent. They were getting worse.

At root, the problem was the regional geography on which they were founded. Some were the long-standing old economic regions dating from the 1960s, carrying forward some impossible geographies (such as the South West, which stretched from Lands End to Swindon). Others were the bastard result of quietly announced pattern-making solely for the convenience of the civil service which created quite daft geographies (the outstanding example being the South East, a banana-shaped territory stretching from Milton Keynes to Margate in an arc of unrelated and disconnected social and economic systems).

For planning purposes, not only was the geographical jigsaw of the regions odd, but their governance and resourcing were a chimera. Each had a Government Office for the Region, and they remained the bossy-boots in a distinctly English version of the Napoleonic system of Prefectures: the Government Offices had total control unless they chose on any particular matter to say they didn't. Some involved

themselves enthusiastically in planning at the regional scale, providing financial, logistical and political support. Some did the square root of not much at all. None of us on the outside knew what to expect, for it varied in space and time, and, anyway, we were supposed to believe that the regional planning effort was actually the responsibility of the Regional Planning Body (RPB).

The RPBs were really strange beasts. A very small team of stressed and overworked planners found themselves given some staff seconded from some of the local authorities in the region. If they were lucky, these would be members of the otherwise now workless county planning teams. Financial budgets were pitifully small. Governance was provided (when the Government Office stayed in the shadows) by a council of councillors chosen by local authorities in the region. This group of councillors, most of whom had spent their political careers fighting over local micro-issues, were now supposed to agree on the scale and distribution of growth at the regional scale.

Entirely as expected, this proved to be an almost interminable process of horse-dealing and bullying, during which the staff were required to devise increasingly surreal scenarios to show that while thousands of jobs were required, homes were an undesirable cancer that should be expunged wherever possible, or, if all else failed, dolloped into broadly defined pockets of the region where the political collateral damage would be least harmful, and where local squabbling about precise development boundaries could safely be predicted to take even more years.

Thus the system produced Regional Spatial Strategies that took many years more to produce than had ever been expected, and which contained hopelessly optimistic provision for jobs and shamelessly deliberate under-provision for housing.

To 'test' these Strategies at draft stage, the Government (not the Planning Inspectorate) appointed poorly paid consultants to conduct an Examination in Public. The late Professor Stephen Crow's chairmanship of the first Panel for the South East was masterful – probing, challenging, exposing, applauding, like a tutor at college. His

report was short, beautifully written, and as clear as a bell. Of course it was therefore vilified by the CPRE and others for being so candid about the need for housing, and about the need for some very big growth points in which to deliver it with supporting jobs and infrastructure. Stephen himself was personally criticised in a shameful way in the House of Commons.

After that it was downhill: most Panels produced anodyne reports which plucked a housing number from the middle of all the competing claims, and which smoothed away in diagrammatic arrows or asterisks in an ugly diagram, or buried for later study, any strategic development proposal (such as multi-modal

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freight facilities, or airports, or sea ports, or new towns) that was so precise as to be meaningful. The Secretary of State got slower in responding to Panel Reports, and in one case (the North West) the Government Office wrote a completely different plan which made the whole exercise thus far a waste of time, and in another (the South West) no decision was ever finally issued.

So it would be wrong to think of the programme of RSSs as being one of a learning curve in which all participants became more experienced, and the plans got more useful. It was almost exactly the opposite: participants became adept at manipulating a fundamentally flawed system for their own ends; and the plans which resulted were getting less directive, less intelligible, in fact less useful. Local politicians had defended their local turf when meeting at the regional scale, and the planning officers who serviced the system were outnumbered and outmanoeuvred.

At least the process provided some moments in which the bigger picture and longer view of a region might sometimes be discussed seriously, and strategic ideas might take shape. For example, and it seems silly to have to say it now,

but it was at an Examination into a North West RSS that it was necessary to argue hard for an east/west orientation across the Pennines to Leeds and Hull to begin to be asserted in acknowledgment of the new European geography, instead of the ancient obsession always with better links south to London.

There will be now be no statutory forum to discuss the shape, purpose and incidence of sub-regions, and the broad directions of spatial growth over 25 to 30 years ahead. There is no place to use regional housing and economic forecasts, or to explore their interplay. No more will a Panel Chairman do as Professor Crow had done, and worry about the wisdom of building more houses on the Lincolnshire coast when experts were saying so much of it was going to be underwater.

Henceforth we plan for smaller pieces of political territory and hope that common sense will bring town and country councils together to resolve their age-old game of push and shove. We hope the 'Duty to Co-operate' will stop bad behaviour between warring tribes, and that there will be a popular upswelling of enthusiasm for new homes once the wealth of the New Homes Bonus meets the cries for help from those who have no home at all, and from those who have a business for which there are no workers within 50 miles.

The RSSs we are about to lose were much better than nothing, but they were not the proud fruit of 50 years of town and country planning learning and practice. Better to look forward, confident in the knowledge that an island like ours cannot possibly work for long without plans for larger areas and longer periods. Organisations such as the TCPA will continue to create the times and places for the bigger strategic planning conversations to take place, until the cloud lifts.

Then we must be ready: what geographies? We only need strategic plans where there is to be strategic change. What governance? Elected members with constituencies large enough to make it possible to upset some localities. What resources? A small number of excellent full-time staff, with the sole purpose of making plans that make things happen, and use of the kind of computing power and graphic design skills employed by DATAR in France. What power? To assemble strategic development land at a fair level above existing use value. Got any better ideas?

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