

planning for a new prime minister



This column has remained assiduous in being silent on the subject of Brexit. The possibility of peeling away continental planning methods which have been overlaid on our own pragmatic system has been parked for the time being, as Parliament has agreed to replicate the EU overlay until the dust settles. By that is meant essentially the use of codes, and Environmental Impact Assessments, to inform well resourced local governments to make decisions and intervene in the market as necessary, overlaid on our system in which the government has elastic powers to exercise over nationalised development rights, but currently with only emaciated local governments as delivery agents.

More generally, there is nothing to say that has not been said a zillion times. The constant repetition of the same facile debating points – as if the majority of the electorate is still as stupid as it was in Cameron's cursed referendum of 23 June 2016 – is beyond tedious. The country is split on this issue, and millions have preferred to watch *Love Island* rather than Emma Thompson in the prescient *Years and Years*.

This column goes to print as Boris Johnson is declared new Conservative Leader and imminent Prime Minister. In the policy areas of town and country planning it doesn't matter whether the new PM is there for a week or a decade, or from which political party they have sprung; there is a social, economic and environmental crisis, with urgent and specific housing, transport, energy and plan-making work to be done. Very large numbers of people are suffering badly; society is unstable and getting worse. But large chunks of the planning agenda, and the pragmatic remedies of which it is capable, are in the centre ground.

This perspective is confirmed by the recent publication by Policy Exchange of *What Do We Want from the Next Prime Minister? A Series of Policy Ideas for New Leadership: Housing, Energy and Environment*,¹ with a foreword by Sir Lynton Crosby, and a series of related discussion publications. Key

points on housing are to: promote 'good design';² encourage 'downsizing' to free up under-occupied family homes;³ support 'big box' brownfield industrial land' as new neighbourhoods;⁴ replace the Help to Buy scheme with another way of helping first-time buyers;⁵ and establish a Department of Growth with responsibility to deliver 15 beautiful new towns on the edge of London.⁶

Yes, we have known how to achieve 'good design' since Conservative John Gummer's Department of the Environment 'Quality Initiative' of the 1990s, matured in the New Urbanism movement later championed by Labour's John Prescott in the 2000s. It is about designing development frameworks which set the public realm and the rules of engagement for the subsequent architecture of buildings on the resulting parcels of land. It took a long time for us all to learn that it wasn't the other way around. The Policy Exchange, and its progeny the government's Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission, will get there eventually, if they last long enough.

Yes, we know we need housing stock which can be adapted to meet the changing needs of society, not tailored boxes for each age group, income group, or lifestyle interest. Yes, we know that, having decimated the stock of office premises by the automatic permission to convert them to 'housing units' (sometimes windowless, gardenless pits of despair), further predation of the industrial stock is a dreadful general rule to follow. Eventually it will dawn that it is retail boxland that should become the centre of new communities (and roof-top solar power stations), as has been argued by planners and urban designers for years.

And, yes, new towns are an obvious step in principle, subject to strategic plan-making. They are championed here by Lord Wolfson,¹ citing the fine URBED winner of his 2014 Economics Prize. URBED's win was in essence Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of To-morrow* with modern language, better graphics, and no financial analysis. It had an up-to-date healthy disregard for Green Belts, invented in the 1930s but bloated in the 1970s when county councils realised they could be used to keep out people overspilling from large cities, which they still do.

On energy and the environment,¹ it is predictable that the Policy Exchange follows the path of Lord Gummer's Committee on Climate Change and presses

for a more ambitious programme to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by a distant 2050: by reducing the cost of electric vehicles to achieve 'mass adoption'; capturing and re-distributing value in trading carbon (not sure if this is 'centre ground' yet); and promoting the concept of 'natural capital' (not sure if this is 'centre ground' yet either – and beware that idea being used as Green Belts were in the 1970s, to keep out the yahoos; see above).

In the report's text on 'reducing carbon in the economy' this column is delighted to see the argument for investment in hydrogen-based fuel technology.⁷ As expected, nuclear still lurks in the 'energy mix', where the case is summarised by author Matt Rooney for 'small modular reactors'.⁸ With a name like that they sound rather cuddly, like a large neighbourhood Henry vacuum cleaner or, more realistically, a neighbourhood Staffordshire bull terrier.

But do read the argument carefully. It appears rather tortured. Other sources of electricity are shown to be flawed in some respect (for example windless days for windfarms, night-time for solar, and so on) and the cost of investing more in those technologies would be huge. Yes, if you want to keep your hand in the nuclear industry, smaller plants must be better than huge ones (in all ways except, one detects, in terms of security, environmental impact, waste disposal, and clean-up). The research and development costs will get less if we do lots of them. The author dismisses as 'infamous' the research paper by Professor Grubler on the French nuclear power investment from the 1970s to the 1990s, which showed successive plants cost more, rather than less.⁹ Some may read Grubler to be saying that the more you learn about nuclear, the more contingencies you have to allow for, and the more the costs will rise. The Policy Exchange paper dismisses that concept of 'negative learning-by-doing' and cites the falling costs of wind and solar to substantiate the case that the cost of smaller nuclear plant would fall. It seems obvious that nuclear investment does not follow like that.

The natural capital proposition¹ is for a 'Natural Capital Commission' to come up with a 'natural capital implementation strategy... similar to a local authority's Local Plan', for each river basin. Here we start to drift away both from the centre ground and from reality. Funding 'from various sources (for example carbon taxes, pollution penalties, 'net gain' developer payments) could be paid out in an auction system that reflects the strategic objectives in each river basin...'. This vision is for a 'wide range of stakeholders, from farms to wildlife charities, to receive payments through a cost-effective, market based mechanism'. Too many question marks arise

for us to deal with in this column, but this report and its substantial environmental parent report¹⁰ will be in No. 10, of that you can be sure. Suffice to say, for now, that there isn't even enough 'net gain' from development to deal with all forms of infrastructure, social housing and all the others things that are thrown at it. Pitching for a slice to pay a farmer to plant a forest is not a flyer. To adapt the words of the musical, I think they'd better think it out again.

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Notes

- 1 J Airey and B McAleenan: *What Do We Want from the Next Prime Minister? A Series of Policy Ideas for New Leadership: Housing, Energy and Environment*. Policy Exchange, Jun. 2019. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Manifesto-Place.pdf#page=13> Wikipedia tells us (at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Policy_Exchange) that the policy ideas developed by Policy Exchange, a centre-right think-tank, which have been adopted as government policy include free schools, police and crime commissioners, and garden villages. It describes itself as seeking localist, volunteer and free-market solutions to public policy problems
- 2 J Airey: *Building Beautiful Places*. Policy Exchange, 2019. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Building-Beautiful-Places.pdf> Airey is a geographer, has been at PE since summer 2018, and was Head of Research at Localis, the 'neo-localist' think-tank founded in 2001
- 3 J Airey: *Building for the Baby Boomers*. Policy Exchange, 2018. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Building-for-the-Baby-Boomers-Jack-Airey-Policy-Exchange-December-2018.pdf>
- 4 S Emmett, N Boys Smith and A Veneratti: *Better Brownfield*. Policy Exchange, 2018. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Better-Brownfield-LL.pdf>
- 5 The text on this issue in *What Do We Want from the Next Prime Minister?* (see note 1) is written by Sir Robin Wales, ex-Mayor of LB Newham, now a Senior Adviser at PE
- 6 J Airey and R Blakeway: *Tomorrow's Places*. Policy Exchange, 2019. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Tomorrows-Places.pdf>
- 7 J Burke and M Rooney: *Fuelling the Future*. Policy Exchange, 2018. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Fuelling-the-Future.pdf>. And see D Lock: 'Hydrogen fuel cells for cars – a better path to follow?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2019, Vol. 88, Jun., 214-16
- 8 M Rooney: *Small Modular Reactors*. Policy Exchange, 2017. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Small-Modular-Reactors-1.pdf>
- 9 A Grubler: 'The costs of the French nuclear scale-up: a case of negative learning by doing'. *Energy Policy*, 2010, Vol. 38(9), 5174-88
- 10 G Newey, edited by S Less: *Nurturing Nature: Policy to Protect and Improve Biodiversity*. Policy Exchange, 2012