

radical reform at last?



It has been wise to keep an eye on the Policy Exchange, the exercise yard for fresh Whiggish thinkers.¹ On 11 February, Mark Wilding in *Planning Resource* reported that its head of housing, Jack Airey, was being appointed as a Special Advisor – a SPaD or SPAD² – in the housing and planning team in the No. 10 Policy Unit.³

This news is significant. The appointment is to No.10, not to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). It exhibits the same centralising trend that three days later caused Sajid Javid to resign as Chancellor of the Exchequer.⁴

Second, there is a long-overdue 'Planning Reform White Paper' due. The content is not known. It originated months ago in the days of Prime Minister Theresa May. Briefings have hinted at a root and branch assault on the present planning system. It will have been refreshed by MHCLG for the Boris Johnson era, but it hasn't yet been published. The aforementioned Jack Airey (with Chris Doughty) has recently published for the Policy Exchange the 100-page report *Rethinking the Planning System for the 21st Century*.⁵ It is not silly to guess that Jack Airey will have a big impact on the draft that is sent over by MHCLG.

Wilding summarised the Policy Exchange report as recommending:

'that the government should make a 'clean break' with the existing planning system [...] axing 'detailed land use allocations' [and advocating] 'a review of green belt protections. Other radical suggestions to change the planning system in the report included the introduction of a 'binary zonal land use planning system'. Perhaps most controversially, the report recommended 'streamlining the role of local politicians'. The rules contained in local plans would be controlled by local authorities with appropriate political oversight, it said, but once a local plan is in place, determining individual planning applications should be an administrative process without political influence. [Councillors] should have no say over deciding applications for new developments.'

To cope with this excitement one must keep saying 'it's Johnson 2020, not Attlee 1945'. The administrative architecture of the planning system established in 1947 – much knocked about, bloated in places, and decimated in others – is the architecture around which all of us interested in planning have been climbing ever since.

It takes some getting used to the idea that no matter how wonderful the 1947 arrangements might have been, and how they provided the framework of reference from within which we view all proposed reforms, the world of 2020 has very little in common with the world of 1947. So any reformist, whether with Airey's faith in the market or not, must be open to fresh thinking about the management of the use of land.

The Policy Exchange paper has ideas that will sink because they do not chime with real politics. Planning applications will not be processed by robots, and Green Belt policy will not be abolished (alas!), but such contemplations are tinkering in the old-fashioned way. Planning committees will not be abolished for the same reasons that the department of state will not be abolished: the management of the use of land is something that must be done. It directly affects the health and wellbeing of the people, their economic social and cultural activity, and the wider environment. It is therefore intensely political and cannot be neglected or abandoned, or outsourced to multinational corporations, or foreign governments or their state-run enterprises. It is a serious political responsibility which, at all levels, allows politicians to shine and do great things (and to be exposed as nasty beasts when that is the case).

Even the argument to de-nationalise development rights – the cornerstone of the 'socialist' 1947 system and a target for Policy Exchange papers for some time – will not gain political support. The free market demonstrably cannot be trusted to behave itself, and, secondly, controls over the use of land drives its value, which is the security for the bank lending that is the foundation of the wider economy.

Airey writes from his specialty in housing, for that is his perspective. He mentions other uses but is not familiar with how they are procured and relate to where people live and our health in every sense ('need' is a word that is anathema to Airey – has he never been to school, been ill, been a father, been

Les espaces périurbains, entre ville et campagne

2012

En 50 ans, la périurbanisation a dominé en France un espace qui suscite aujourd'hui de nombreux débats. Sa diffusion métré - selon l'Insee, est dite « pionnière » mais concerne dès plus de 40% de la population part travailler dans un pôle urbain - est bien d'un espace le sien. Il s'agit de lots dits espaces hybridés entre ville et campagne, à la morphologie diverse (coursives, corridors...) et caractérisés par sa fonction résidentielle dominante. L'habitat individuel - pavillonnaire, lotissement - y est très représenté ainsi que le secteur de maisons propriétaires de deux salaires.

Consommateur de foncier agricole, vecteur d'artificialisation des sols, émetteur, producteur de formes urbaines dégradées et, par conséquent, « non durable », la périurbanité fait l'objet de nombreuses critiques. Parallèlement et en même temps plusieurs décisions de politiques publiques visent à réguler sa progression, le périurbanisme demeure toujours attractif pour des familles qui cherchent à accéder à la propriété et à traverser un quota de vie que la ville ne leur offre pas.

Comprendre ce tiers-espace, s'est interrogé ses caractéristiques socio-économiques et identitaires, les cadres d'usage qui le traversent, sa gouvernance et sa soutenabilité.

Tendance
 - Croissance des surfaces bâties
 - Augmentation de la densité
 - Développement des formes urbaines dégradées

Mobilité
 - Augmentation des déplacements
 - Développement des modes de transport individuel

Activités agricoles
 - Diminution des surfaces agricoles
 - Développement des formes urbaines dégradées

LES AVENIRS POSSIBLES DES ESPACES PÉRIURBAINS FRANÇAIS : 5 SCÉNARIOS EN IMAGES.

2040

LE CORRIDOR

Le Corridor est un scénario de développement qui vise à structurer l'espace périurbain français en corridors de développement. Ce scénario est basé sur la préservation des espaces agricoles et naturels, tout en permettant un développement urbain structuré et durable.

LA NÉBULEUSE

La Nébuleuse est un scénario de développement qui vise à créer un espace périurbain français plus dense et plus structuré. Ce scénario est basé sur la préservation des espaces agricoles et naturels, tout en permettant un développement urbain structuré et durable.

LE RIVAGE

Le Rivage est un scénario de développement qui vise à créer un espace périurbain français plus structuré et plus durable. Ce scénario est basé sur la préservation des espaces agricoles et naturels, tout en permettant un développement urbain structuré et durable.

LA RÉSERVE

La Réserve est un scénario de développement qui vise à créer un espace périurbain français plus structuré et plus durable. Ce scénario est basé sur la préservation des espaces agricoles et naturels, tout en permettant un développement urbain structuré et durable.

www.datar.gouv.fr
rubrique temmes 2040

We need a framework for strategic decision-making – ‘Peri-urban spaces between city and countryside’, one of DATAR’s fabulous graphical representations of data

made redundant?). He hasn't got his head around infrastructure at different scales (he talks as if it is something that is needed for a housing estate) or how it comes about. His language is sometimes strange – he keeps saying planners specify every precise use on every 'plot'. I don't understand what that means.

That we all have to plan ahead to a degree is, one would think, obvious. Everyone has to make arrangements for the future as best we can. Not by forecasting it precisely, of course (that way lies the madness of cost-benefit analysis, but Airey's fair target is probably the silly way that we calculate how many homes are to be built in Dorsetshire when we have no control over any elements in the equation), but by using the best information we can grab at the time. Planning is an art, not just a science, and no-one should pretend otherwise.

If Airey has problems with different scales of change, he also has difficulty with timescales. We can see much more than he thinks when we look ahead over, say, 25-30 years (tomorrow's adults are today's babies – we know their names and where they live!).

But for all that, this article really is not a blanking piece. Jack Airey's basic argument is right about what's wrong. He may not have his narrative right,

or his blaming properly placed, but while we might have protected the countryside and built some fine New Towns through comprehensive place-making (and carried out some spectacular urban regeneration by throwing vast sums of public money at it), overall England hasn't got much better for many people. And he has thrown a light on the need to start a new way forward.

Liveable England is a small physical space. We have a large population (56 million and rising⁶) of immense diversity and creativity. Much of our population is stuck through not being able to connect with successful places and stimulating people. Land use management issues at different scales need different answers.

Big infrastructure requires the design of a broad national strategic framework

A **framework** is not a blueprint for a finished thing, but a flexible diagram at strategic scale, to be built, re-built and adjusted, as adaptation to climate change and other circumstances require. The main 'hardware' features are:

- Strategic ports and airports, and the motorways/expressways and fast railways to serve them.
- Rising stars – towns and cities in auspicious places in the framework (these will be at

interstices in the framework; the more the connections, the more the rising will be).

- Towns and cities that are stuck or falling will be in less auspicious places that are not so well connected. In a framework of good connections, not everywhere needs to be hot, because hot is never that far away. And not everyone likes it hot at all stages of life.
- The framework will have a green and blue tapestry as a backcloth, with appropriately varied arrangements for long-term stewardship as required (such as creating National Parks or maritime reserves, or paying farmers for public benefits).

This framework will identify broad areas of the tapestry where development pressures in otherwise auspicious locations will need to be restrained – because (for example) there are areas prone to flood, or a scarce resource might need to be protected for future use, or an exceptional habitat or heritage feature protected.

The people can be trusted to understand real-life geography and what big parts of the framework of connectivity are missing or are dysfunctional. The people can understand justifiable constraint, and the advantage of letting rising stars rise.

It is an awkward but obvious truth that not everywhere can be levelled up, or down, to reach the same condition of anything. It is not what people want, anyway. *Vive la différence*. The key is to connect places so that people can easily reach hot and cold places, either as visitors, passers-through, or for different stages of life.

‘There is so much more to be said, but we really must accept that the system is broken and needs radical change’

Who explains England, and designs the framework, and carries the people? This work needs to be backed at Cabinet level, and commissioned by government from a respected outward-looking institution rooted in geography, with budgets of scale to use technology to facilitate the discourse. It might be the National Infrastructure Commission (if they came down to earth, and put effort into carrying the people with them) or the Centre for Cities⁷ (if they could see that larger towns and cities are but part of the framework, and that the future is in the framework as a whole, not just in its greedy big blobs).

There is no in-house capability to do the work in

central or local government institutions. Digital technology will help greatly. Fabulous graphics are essential – if only we could build our own government institute like the late, lamented French DATAR organisation – helping the understanding of the national space is worth a fortune when actual land use and infrastructure decisions come to be taken.⁸

Areas that can be seen to be facing great change – rising or falling – need a broad regional or sub-regional strategic framework, diving deeper into the geography of that part of the national network.

Such areas can be identified broadly in the framework layer above.

Planning at the local level

Planning at the local level seems to be the primary focus of the Policy Exchange report, although that isn't made very clear.

It is not possible for all local authorities to 'consume their own smoke' in housing and employment terms. The geography of England makes that impossible; many people want to be somewhere else anyway, and it was an undeliverable objective when set by the Cameron/Clegg Government. Delete.

Unitary Local Plans (i.e. real-geography agglomerations of administrative areas), prepared through an open and transparent process by accountable persons to a timeframe, are necessary to guide infrastructure investment, to cultivate sustainable forms of development, and to look outwards to maintain connections to the national or larger-than-local framework. The 'evidence base' should be limited in scope to what is sufficient for purpose. Work should not be halted for local election cycles.

Local Plans need look to 20-25 years ahead, not 10-15 as at present, and should (in future) be required to show their integration with the national and regional frameworks, which in due course will provide their overall purpose.

Airey's 'binary' planning is right to this extent: first, 'YES' areas. The focus should be to identify broad areas where strategic change will be welcome, and to provide a prospectus of the change that is hoped for and the rules of engagement. Most of these will be standard. Local Development Order processes and Supplementary Planning Documents and other techniques can set the rules of engagement, but they have become too much (sucking in specialist pleadings and biddings), and too complicated. Planning officers cannot be trusted alone to enforce the rules as there are not enough of them with the necessary skills and attributes, and a tickbox code process run by clerks as envisaged by Airey will yield tickbox development.

The reciprocal focus, for 'NO' areas, is to identify broad areas where strategic change is *not* welcome, with justifiable reasons.

There is so much more to be said, but we really must accept that the system is broken and needs radical change. We have had enough patching and tinkering. Airey is clumsy and provocative in a tribal way, but his basic thesis is correct. There is no point in trying to defend what has been made indefensible.

The task is to articulate the way forward, and how to make it happen. The challenge is the fact that we wouldn't have started from this point.

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, the Off the Fence article 'Planning for a new Prime Minister' in the July 2019 issue (pp.264-65) of *Town & Country Planning* – with several footnotes to the work of Jack Airey and others
- 2 See <https://order-order.com/2019/09/03/complete-definitive-spad-list-2-0/> for the current list as compiled by Guido Fawkes
- 3 M Wilding: 'Downing Street appoints planning special adviser who advocates 'clean break' with the existing system'. *Planning Resource*, 11 Feb. 2020. www.planningresource.co.uk/article/1673666/downing-street-appoints-planning-special-adviser-advocates-clean-break-existing-system
- 4 Javid said that Prime Minister Johnson told him to sack all his SPADs and defer to the No. 10 Policy Unit, which, he said, no self-respecting Minister could tolerate. See, for example, 'Cabinet reshuffle: Sajid Javid resigns as Chancellor'. *BBC News*, 14 Feb. 2020. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-51491662
- 5 J Airey and C Doughty: *Rethinking the Planning System for the 21st Century*. Policy Exchange, Jan. 2020. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/rethinking-the-planning-system-for-the-21st-century/>
- 6 The UK population is 66 million and rising
- 7 See the Centre for Cities website, at www.centreforcities.org/
- 8 The *Délégation interministérielle à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'attractivité régionale* (English: Interministerial Delegation of Land Planning and Regional Attractiveness) or DATAR was a French administration working for the Minister of Territorial Development. It applied decisions taken by the Interministerial Committee of Land Planning and Development (CIADT). It was created in 1963 by Georges Pompidou's government. In 2009, DATAR handed over its missions to the *Commissariat général à l'égalité des territoires* (English: General Commission for Equal Territories). Always loved its graphics – enjoy a visit to www.bing.com/images/search?q=datar+france&qpv=datar+france&FORM=IGRE

TCPA Seminar

the heart of the matter – long-term stewardship in new communities

Thursday 26 March 2020

TCPA, 17 Carlton House Terrace,
London SW1Y 5AS

Community ownership of land and the long-term stewardship of assets is one of the core Garden City Principles. In recent years, many local authorities have made commitments to apply the principle of long-term stewardship to their new communities.

As local authorities and their private sector delivery partners are getting to grips with delivering stewardship models, key challenges have been identified around the details of finance, governance and community participation. Building upon previous practical guidance on long-term stewardship, the TCPA has taken a step further and explored the technical detail and challenges being faced by those forming models for long-term stewardship in new communities.

This seminar will explore the findings of this project and hear from those involved in delivering stewardship models.

This seminar is part of the TCPA New Communities Group (NCG) programme of events, but is open to both members and non-members of the NCG.



To book tickets, see www.tcpa.org.uk/Event/tcpa-seminar-the-heart-of-the-matter-long-term-stewardship-in-new-communities