

New Labour and the Planning Agenda

Subtitle:

New Labour has pledged to modernise the British state. But in whose interests is this modernisation taking place, and what does it mean for ordinary people and the accountability of decision-makers.

The modernisation agenda

Let's face it, the planning system is flawed. But it could get significantly worse if the government proceeds with its incremental 'modernisation' of the system. As Leon Rosselson said of the Labour Party in one of his songs, "*we'll change the country bit-by-bit, so nobody will notice it*" [1]. This could easily be seen as *New Labour's* policy on the planning system. So far none of the major campaign groups have picked up on these changes and their significance for local democracy and accountability.

The idea of modernisation is not wholly Tony Blair's idea. A lot of the proposals now being promoted actually arose out of a body established under the Conservative administration – *The Deregulation Task Force*. Some consider the modernisation of the planning system to be tinkering. It has certainly created little media interest. But the changes have been specifically targeted. They are aiming to make the planning system *more efficient*, which appears that efficiency means two things:

- Speeding up the decision-making process, which for the average person objecting to proposals is already weighted in favour of the developer; and
- Developing a regional agenda whereby many decisions which would be taken in public by local councillors are taken remotely by appointees to regional planning and development boards.

Consultation-itis

Since New Labour came to power there has been an avalanche of consultation papers. For example the white paper on modernising local government was not presented as one consultation paper – it was made up of six consultation papers launched at different times. This makes it very difficult to get a clear idea of where policy is going before the final version is launched. But these haphazard and poorly advertised consultations are being used as a justification for implementing the proposals when concern or opposition is expressed later.

Some of these consultation papers never even got publicity. There have also been own goals from the environmentalists' side. When DETR sneaked out a consultation on new guidelines of incinerators and landfill in late 1998 Friends of the Earth, who were given a copy, deliberately chose not to tell anyone else about it.

It is clear that the policy of running many consultations together is aimed at overloading the smaller civic and environmental groups – they either spend large amounts of time on them or have to ignore them. By comparing the drafts with the final documents, it is also clear that the government is intent on pursuing a specific agenda on development with as little change to their plans as possible.

Streamlining public inquiries

Last year, a consultation paper published by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR) [2] - *Streamlining The Processing Of Major Infrastructure Projects* - heralded the end of public participation in large planning appeals. The DETR claimed, with little evidence to support it, that the processing of major infrastructure projects, such as

the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, power stations, Terminal 5, etc., takes too long. Therefore they highlight the need to reform the planning inquiry system for major projects. *But the only option proposed to do this is to be restricting the rights of ordinary people to take part in such inquiries by making them 'qualify,' as large membership-based groups, to take part.*

The proposals were announced by Planning and Regions minister Richard Caborn on the 18th of May 1999. This controversial consultation paper was not put on the Internet, as all other planning consultations were, and received little publicity. Not surprising really - it is part of a deliberate strategy to simplify the approval procedures for the development of national and regional projects. One of the targets highlighted in the consultation paper is the development of nuclear waste stores. The need to provide a 'fast track' approvals system was highlighted by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate in 1998 [3], and amplified by the report of the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee in March 1999 [4].

But, it might not stop there. The original '*Modernising Planning*' proposals published in 1998 [5] highlighted a much wider scope of projects that could be covered by the reform of the public inquiry system:

"Major infrastructure proposals include, for example, certain roads, rail links, new or extended airports, power stations, reservoirs and the largest waste disposal incinerators, waste disposal sites and minerals sites. Included in this list are the very largest 'inward investment' proposals. Such projects are "major" in the sense that their economic and environmental implications are regional or national. Their size means it would be unsatisfactory for a single local planning authority to give a planning approval since the impact of the proposal extends beyond the boundary of the local authority. Instead, such projects tend to be approved by Government Ministers, usually after a form of local public inquiry."

It is clear that some in government wish to extend these proposals to other controversial projects such as landfills and incinerators - which are currently suffering a serious public backlash because of the increasing concerns about health effects.

The Government are intent on restricting the role the ordinary member of the public can play in large public inquiries, and will bring forward new regulations this year to enact this – certainly for national projects such as radioactive waste stores, but possibly for regional industrial parks, landfills, incinerators and major road developments.

The regionalisation of development

According to the government, planning authorities make poor and bureaucratic decisions [6]. There has always been a clash between national priorities, the needs of national/international corporations. But today, for polluting developments and developments generating a lot of traffic, even planning gain (developer's money for local projects) is not enough to convince local councillors to say *yes*. A solution, which was muted by the Deregulation Task force, is now being considered by the DETR – *taking decisions on large developments at the regional level*. There are two significant factors with this:

Taking the decision at the regional level, often before the local people know what's going on, avoids public criticism;

Taking the decision at the regional level cuts out locally elected councillors, and so removes local political pressures.

The Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) – business led Quangos [7] that create policy on regional economic development and regeneration [8] – have begun the process through the production of regional economic development strategies in 1999. Although the RDAs are supposed to have regard to sustainable development, the new strategies are still focussed on large regional regeneration projects, usually based around 'inward investment'. All the strategies are heavily reliant on the continued maintenance and improvement of the trunk roads network.

The strategies of the RDAs are being augmented by the Regional Chambers (RCs) and Regional Planning Conferences (RPCs). RCs and RPCs are not legal bodies with specific powers – they are private associations of local authorities and industry lobby groups. But they are 'recognised' by DETR as representing the interests of the region, and are consulted

about the regional planning guidance produced by DETR. It was envisaged that the RCs would form the basis for elected regional government, but so far there is little effort to have even a semblance of democratic accountability. All members of the RCs are appointed, the majority by local authorities. Local authority dominance also means that the RCs have split down party lines and so are heavily influenced by political agendas.

Regional planning guidance, which is evolved by the RPCs and then confirmed/produced by DETR, is also being used to justify developments before they come forward at the local level. In the past the main impact of this was the setting of targets for house building. Now regional planning guidance itself is being redrawn to give it much wider power and scope [9]. Everything from road improvements to landfills and incinerators is being discussed at the regional level. There is little public input because few details are given publicity, but more importantly the 'examinations in public' exclude the public – only invited parties are allowed to take part (which usually means only local authorities, industry and government agencies).

The future

There has been no serious public debate about the effects of regionalisation on development policy, and especially the integration of business interests in regional development strategies. I cannot recollect any Parliamentary debate where it was voted that large business interests have more rights than the ordinary citizen, and so must be treated as a special case. But that is what *New Labour* are enshrining through the modernisation of planning. And they are doing so not only at the expense of the average member of the public, but also of small, local businesses who will be damaged by these new economic and spatial development strategies.

The only way we are going to change this agenda is to publicise it, and put procedural and legal obstacles in the way of its development at every opportunity. Unfortunately there is no national campaign on this issues at the moment. But the Free Range Network are sponsoring a website to publicise issues and supply people with information.

The one important thing that we can all do is become aware that these processes are underway. Ignorance of the regional dimension in the planning and development process leaves a huge gap in public administration that government and business *will* exploit. We must extend the campaigns we currently run against local developments to include the setting of the development agenda at the regional level.

References:

1. *The Battle Hymn of the New Socialist Party*, by Leon Rosselson. This was actually written about the period when Hugh Gaitskell was the leader of the party,
2. *Streamlining the processing of major infrastructure projects and other projects of national significance*, DETR May 1999. Ref. 99PP0152.
3. Health And Safety Executive Nuclear Safety Directorate - *Intermediate Level Radioactive Waste Storage In The UK: A review by HM Nuclear Installations Inspectorate*, November 1998
4. House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology in their report *Management of Nuclear Waste*, published on 24 March 1999
5. DETR, *Modernising Planning - A Policy Statement by the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning*, 1998.
6. Page 56, *The Government's Annual Report 98/99*, Cm4401. July 1999.
7. Created under the Regional Development Agencies Act, 1998
8. See also *Building Partnerships for Prosperity - Sustainable growth, competitiveness and employment in the English Regions* (the White Paper on Regionalisation). DETR December 1997. This defines the purposes of the RDAs in detail
9. See the consultation papers *The Future of Regional Planning Guidance*, DETR January 1998, and *Draft PPG11: Regional Planning Guidance*, DETR January 1999