

NEW LABOUR, NEW PLANNING

New Labour has pledged to modernise the British state. But as **Paul Mobbs** reveals, this 'modernisation' is all too frequently a cover to keep ordinary people's concerns out of the planning process, and to further skew it in favour of the interests of large developers.



Pic: Duncan McKenzie

The modernisation agenda

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 the effects and significance of these changes for local democracy and accountability.

The idea of modernisation is not wholly Tony Blair's. A lot of the proposals now being promoted actually arose out of a body established under the Tories – the Deregulation Task

Force. Some people consider the modernisation of the planning system to be mere tinkering – and it has certainly created little media interest. But in reality the changes – supposedly to make the planning system more 'efficient' – have been specifically targeted, with two major objectives:

- To speed up the decision-making process, which for the average person objecting to proposals is already weighted in favour of the developer; and

- To develop a regional agenda, whereby many decisions, which would

previously have been 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 made up of six consultation papers launched at different times. Not surprisingly, most of these papers get little publicity.

You might think that consultation could only be a good thing. But it is clear that the policy of running many consultations together is really aimed at overloading the smaller civic and environmental groups – forcing them either to spend large amounts of time or to ignore them altogether and lose the chance to contribute. By comparing the drafts with the final documents, it is also clear that the government is intent on pursuing a specific development agenda with as little change to its 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 and Heathrow Terminal 5, takes too long. The only option proposed for reform was to restrict the rights of ordinary people to take part in such inquiries by making them 'qualify,' as large membership-based groups, for participation.

The consultation paper featuring these proposals was not put on the Internet, as all other planning consultations were, and received little publicity. Despite this wall of silence, these proposals could – if implemented – have major implications. 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]. It's likely the trend would 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. 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. The Government is intent on restricting the role that ordinary people 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 also 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 local priorities and the needs of national and international corporations. But today, for polluting developments and proposals that would generate a lot of traffic, even 'planning gain' (developers' money for local projects) is often not enough to convince local councillors to say 'yes'.

A solution, first 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 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. Although the RDAs are supposed to have regard for sustainable development, the new strategies are still focussed on large regional regeneration projects, usually based around 'inward investment'. And 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 the 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 has been little effort to bring in democratic accountability. All members of the RCs are appointed, the majority by local authorities. Local authority dominance also means that the RCs are split down party lines and therefore 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. The main impact of these has been 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 publicly, 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 into regional development strategies. Has there ever been a 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 to challenge this agenda is to publicise it, and to put procedural and legal obstacles in the way of its promotion at every opportunity. We must extend the campaigns we currently run against local developments to include the setting of the development agenda at the regional level.

The location of the Free Range Network's regional development website is: www.gn.apc.org/pmhp/rangers/regdev/

The DETR website is at: www.detr.gov.uk

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