

Levelling up, Strategic Planning and Local Government Reform

Michael Gove is now Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing, Communities and Local Government, with his department also renamed. He is also Minister for Inter-governmental relations – ie: with the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, so he has got a lot of work to do. The long overdue White Paper on devolution has now been abandoned and it is expected that any proposals for reforms to local government or other sub-national governance arrangements (what we used to refer to as regional government) will be incorporated in a Levelling Up White Paper. Meanwhile the Planning Bill which was ready to be published to implement many of the proposals in last year's Planning White Paper, has been put on hold, with the planning reform proposals which proved to be so unpopular with Tory backbench MPs, and which combined with central government setting high new build housing targets for many Conservative districts, led to the sacking of Gove's predecessor Robert Jenrick, now subject to a major rethink.

The Planning White Paper was largely silent on the issue of strategic planning at a spatial level greater than a single local authority and was mainly focused on further deregulatory measures – for example reducing local authorities' power to consider on individual development proposals, replacing it by a very crude zoning system of growth areas, renewal areas and protected areas, which would effectively remove public consultation on specific development proposals. This was rightly attacked by Labour as a 'developer's charter', but Labour frontbenchers, critical of the current system, failed to set out what an alternative Labour planning policy would be. Labour similarly have so far failed to set out a policy on local government reform and funding, including the reform of property and land taxation (actually) or for that matter on what Labour's approach to devolution and/or 'levelling up' would be. There is no recent statement of Labour Policy on planning, and the report of the Labour Planning Commission initiated three years ago by the previous shadow planning minister, Roberta Blackman-Woods, was never adopted as Labour party policy, with Blackman Woods retiring from parliament before the report was published.

<https://labourplanningcommission.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/planning-commission-report-2020.pdf>

Labour spokespersons, including Blackman Woods, have in recent years been very enthusiastic about the notion of 'localism' and the process of neighbourhood plans introduced by the Tories 2011 Localism Act, without understanding that to reduce spatial inequalities and level up both across the English regions, and within each region, localism is not enough and you have to plan at a spatial level above the local authority – otherwise each council just looks after its own, which may be OK in the better off areas, but hardly helps those more deprived areas who lack resources, and which in many cases have been hardest hit by cuts in government funding as well as by external factors such as BREXIT and the pandemic. In his first statements in his new role, Gove seems to have adopted the notion of localist planning and decided to abandon the system of national determined local housebuilding targets – this is of course keeps his backbench MPs and the Tory voters in the better off areas happy, but hardly helps delivering Levelling Up.

Much of the focus of the levelling up debate so far has been about shifting government investment from London and the South East to the North, notably in the so called former Red Wall areas which are now held by Conservative MPs, and by introducing more city Mayors. Labour has been similarly enthusiastic about more city and regional mayors, in the hope there will be more Andy Burnhams and Dan Jarvises, while the Tories are hoping for more Andy Streets and Ben Houchens. But just having more 'kings of the North' does not deal with the structural issues of inter-regional and intra-

regional inequality. All it does is introduce stronger regional voices outside Westminster to compete for nationally determined funding – and there are real issues of transparency and accountability and fairness in such a system. What we need is a mechanism for funding local and regional investment in infrastructure, including housing, transport and employment generation, which is based on criteria including assessment of relative regional and local requirements and resources rather than political deals which favour supporters of whichever government is in office at Westminster.

There are a number of attempts to tackle the structural issues, for example the UK2070 commission led by Bob Kerslake, the former chief executive of Sheffield who became head of the civil service and is now in the House of Lords : <http://uk2070.org.uk/>. At a more regional level, the London and Wider South East Strategic Planning Network, of which I am co-convenor, has been reviewing the challenges of the relationship of London to the wider south east and examining a range of options for improving both the evidence base for strategic planning across the wider region and governance arrangements to improve collaboration between local authorities and with central government and delivery agencies: <http://wseplanningnetwork.org/>. These proposals have been discussed with government officials such as the chief planner as well as with Labour Party advisers. To deal with the issue of inequalities between regions and recognise that there remain massive and increasing inequalities within London and the wider South East, we need a much more sophisticated approach than the current anti-London rhetoric of the 'King of the North' or the pro-London rhetoric of Sadiq Khan and the London world city lobbyists. We also need to recognise that all decisions about resource allocation involve winners as well as losers. There are political choices to be made, but let us base them on evidence and long-term planning rather than just short-termism, and photo opportunities.

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