

Planning change and its purpose: the planning system as a modern ‘ship of theseus’

Article

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the planning system as a modern ‘ship of theseus’: planning change and its purpose.

Gavin Parker and **Mark Dobson** consider Labour’s initial planning reform agenda and reflect on how it fits with the changing identity and purpose of planning *[article summary]*

Introduction

Our starting point is in a seemingly simple question: ‘is the planning system in England the same today as it was in the past?’ And with a follow-up, ‘if it is deemed to have changed then why does this matter?’ Whilst these might appear to be merely philosophical questions (which indeed they are, as we discuss below), we see that *how* those questions are understood and answered hold important consequences for how the planning system is reformed and positioned in political and media discourse. Firstly, **what are we actually seeking to ‘reform’ and why?** What do we really want from planning and what is needed to achieve it? We write this just days after the Labour party was elected to form the new UK government, and the advent of a new administration of a different hue seems as good a time as any to ponder such matters.

Formal statutory planning in the UK is often said to have started in 1909 via an Act of Parliament with a rather perplexing title: ‘Housing, Town Planning, etc.’. Whilst that origin point is disputable, it is also open to question whether much of what it means to plan in the here and now lies in the ‘etc.’ – an increasingly long list that reflects widening system objectives and associated processes. A question of *breadth*, of *emphasis* and of *definition* remains an ongoing problem for planning. While some see things widely, others do not; some have particular priorities and others see planning as simply performing a regulatory function, or more recently and primarily a means to deliver housing, or indeed ‘growth’.

Others prefer to say that 1 July 1948 – the coming into force of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 – is the more significant date to pinpoint. Tracing a beginning is tricky and indeed, scattered before, between and after 1909 and 1948 are numerous other statutes, amendments, common law precedents, policy changes

and minor adjustments. Such alterations of scope, direction and priority have transformed formal planning in England, let alone the UK. The impact of adjacent policy and structures which shape the way that land is used, and development is enacted, has also added to the transformation of the operational milieu of planning. After such serial tinkering and a changing environment ever more reform has been provoked in what seems a never-ending quest. This gives us leave to pose the question: 'what is left of this Ship of Theseus?'

The ancient tale and philosophical conundrum, commonly referred to as the Ship of Theseus, or Theseus's Paradox, originates in the story of an ancient ship laid up as a trophy or memorial to a past glory.¹ In order that the vessel remains as a display, the ship's parts are gradually replaced by new ones over time, until there is nothing left of the original. So, is it still the same ship? Does it matter? Well, as a metaphor for the planning system it provides a useful hook to consider where we have been and where we are going – are we replacing parts to reform the same ship or repurposing it?



Theseus and Ariadne, c. 1540² [credit: CC BY-SA 4.0]

Old parts for new, or, new purposes needing new parts?

Identifying planning as a problem is a tactic deployed by many administrations (often without providing any clear specification of a particular part or acknowledging the wider role / aims of the system) and this necessarily involves distancing governmental action from planning outcomes. This situation is all too often aided by ambiguity or compartmentalisation. Instead, government needs to own planning, believe in it, and use it, rather than deny or dissemble it. So, let's begin with questions of *definition* first. When 'planning' is discussed publicly very often what we are actually being asked to consider remains obscure – what part of the 'ship' is in question? In most instances, only one part of it and, all too commonly, considering one function or issue at a time – housing being the clearest example. Such selectivity sits very uneasily with the fundamentally synoptic nature of planning.

A wider debate over sustaining multiple priorities and their reconciliation is part of a mature and necessary public discourse. This speaks to the question of *emphasis*, and points to how to use past and present tools and mechanisms found in and around planning since at least 1947. Moreover, it is to establish what the priorities are. Yet, simultaneously, questions of *breadth* need to be kept in view. There is little doubt that the scope of planning has broadened to include growing concerns over climate change, net zero, biodiversity loss, nutrient neutrality, water neutrality, 'etc'. These new parts are being bolted on to already broad matters and highlight that more is being asked of the 'ship' as social and political awareness progresses about the need to deliver a sustainable future via planning policy.

Taking all this into account, the politician's business rests largely on identifying problems and claiming they have fixes. A really nice example was made clear during the planning reform debate of 2020-21. In his foreword to the *Planning for the Future* White Paper, the then prime minister Boris Johnson attempted to characterise the English planning system as something constructed in the past and for the past:

'... a relic from the middle of the 20th [century] – our outdated and ineffective planning system. Designed and built in 1947 it has, like any building of that age, been patched up here and there over the decades. Extensions have

*been added on, knocked down and rebuilt according to the whims of whoever's name is on the deeds at the time. Eight years ago, a new landlord stripped most of the asbestos from the roof. But make-do-and-mend can only last for so long and, in 2020, it is no longer fit for human habitation.*³

This of course was part of the opening of an attempt to 'radically' alter planning, which ultimately foundered. Rather than add to the words written about that formulation and why it didn't come into being, this essay looks forward to the changes likely to be pursued under the Labour administration and from the perspective of what and how we want planning to perform. Firstly, a philosophical excursion about the *identity*, if not the soul of planning; pausing along the way to observe that change is constant – it is also necessarily part of a continuity. **If we want to really change planning, then maybe it's the purpose rather than the structure that needs attention first.**

The Ship of Theseus and the planning system

Before rehearsing current mores any further, we should remind ourselves that the *purpose* of the ancient ship and not only its parts changed in the eyes of the Athenians. In the ancient tale, it was no longer to sail and adventure. It became a memorial and a static display, preserved to remind the Athenians of past glory – much as HMS Victory at Portsmouth is. This is important because although the ship was physically altered, more importantly the function of the ship changed. It was to prompt memory, and it became even more important to preserve the ship because of its past rather than because of any thought about practical function.

There have been competing philosophical positions rehearsed about the Ship of Theseus. These we apply in relation to what matters in the here and now, and as applicable to the future of the planning system. This is in terms of the *identity* and materiality or make-up of the system and which are linked to its *purpose*. Some would argue that an object can stay the same as long as it continuously exists under the same *identity*. If we take the Boris analogy in the quote above for our own, a property that has a new extension, then later a wall rendered, then later still an internal remodelling to open plan, and so on, until every part of the place has been altered; can still be understood as the same property. However, if a house is totally

demolished and rebuilt at the same time, it will be seen as a new house. Thus, the identity afforded it by society relies to some degree upon continuity, but more importantly it rests upon a more enduring idea.

The material constitution of a thing is not the same as its *identity* which lies in what we conceive as the ship, not only its materiality. Again, identity has a relationship with function. Another significant strand of theory further considers the ship not as a 'thing', nor even a collection of objectively existing parts (think individual policies), but rather as a structure that has *perceptual* continuity. We can see that it (the planning system) remains recognisable and broadly functional – in this sense at least Boris was right – we can perceive a continuity of the system even if it has changed in many ways and is too often misrepresented.

Given these viewpoints we could attempt to argue that the planning system is still the 'same' planning system despite alteration, because it has a continuity and serial change has been gradual, and also to some extent the public understanding of the system has been maintained. Cognitive scientists warn however of *externalism*; the assumption that what is true in our minds is also true in the world. Chomsky has effectively argued that this assumption can be challenged, given that human intuition is often mistaken.⁴ This point gives rise to several interesting points of connection to planning as an endeavour and the politics that surrounds it. For one thing, notions of object and its existence have a multitude of different meanings rather than one absolute meaning. Different meanings can be held simultaneously by individuals or groups in society – one might, if rather facetiously, say that this interpretivism is precisely what planning lawyers feast upon.⁵ Knowledge and evidence play a critical role and of course the point resonates in an era of conviction politics and a post-truth political environment.

Planning change, changing planning and the purpose of planning

Much of the political rhetoric that has been used to justify planning reform in England over the past few decades has been heavily based upon, if not centred around, claims that it is 'no longer fit for purpose' or adds little or no value. Such arguments have been advanced by governments, professional / industry groups and think tanks by drawing implicitly or explicitly on its age; that it is an antiquated relic of past

people and achievements. In such a discourse the answer is to create a ‘modern’ system that is fit for *purpose*. Modernisation and progress being defined according to numerous tropes associated to growth, as we have discussed elsewhere; speed, efficiency, certainty, delivery are the favourites.⁶

Immediate indications regarding planning reform announced by the incoming Labour government appear to align that agenda again in a worrying loop, putting growth at the centre of our planning system, a focus on making more land available and pressing for decision-making speed to ‘unlock’ significant housing and infrastructure development. Indeed, **it is striking how similar the Starmer administration’s first signals about planning are to that of the Johnson government** quoted above:

‘Growth is now our national mission. There is no time to waste... Nowhere is decisive reform needed more urgently than in the case of our planning system... Our antiquated planning system leaves too many important projects getting tied up in years and years of red tape before shovels ever get into the ground... I am taking immediate action to deliver this government’s mission to kickstart economic growth; And to take the urgent steps necessary to build the infrastructure that we need, including one and a half million homes over the next five years. The system needs a new signal. This is that signal.’⁷

The known commitments or promises announced at the time of writing, were to reform the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and consult on a new ‘growth-focused’ approach to the planning system – including restoring mandatory housing targets. As well as to:

- end the ban on new onshore wind in England and bring it back into the Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIP) regime;
- give priority to energy projects and to other infrastructure sectors as part of planning system reform;
- create a new taskforce to accelerate stalled housing sites;
- support local authorities with more (additional) planning officers;
- put growth at the centre of the planning system via changes not only to the system itself, but to the way that ministers use powers for direct intervention;

- make the *benefit* of development a central consideration if the secretary of state intervenes;
- facilitate universal coverage of local plans, and make regular reviews of greenbelt boundaries mandatory;
- prioritise brownfield and ‘grey belt’ land for development to meet housing targets, and
- embed ‘golden rules’ to make sure development will deliver affordable homes, including more for social rent.

In this scenario the Labour government has proffered ‘repairing’ the ship using old parts. This would include, for example, New Towns; a return to spatial planning, and reverting to previous versions of the NPPF. It would also need some new additions (for example, ‘the Golden Rules’), but the destination for this ship, thus far outlined, does not break with the depiction of the ‘outdated’ and ‘slow’ planning promoted by the Conservative-led governments of the past 14 years.⁸ This is unfortunate and, in our view, misses some significant opportunities. Indeed, the current formula presents an ongoing challenge to the wider identity, future and purpose of planning.

Whilst the reform discourse presents planning as being stuck in the past, planning has continually changed over time. It is surely obvious to even the most casual observer that the system has not remained static and attempts to present it as such mask an agenda that boxes planning into a narrow growth orientation – with an accompanying view that the planning system has not changed *enough* to fit this particular agenda. The selective memory at work here often omits that it is government itself that has been responsible both for the multiple changes over time and with the overburdening of the system – and all this while questions of true purpose, of identity and of the communication of its value to the public have been neglected.

Planning as an idea and vehicle for change

For some the true identity of planning is enduring, stretching back to the visions and approaches championed by thinkers such as Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes, and Lewis Mumford, to name a few. Even while the tools, mechanisms or policies

change with different governments and issues, the role of planning is to apply the needs of society to spaces and places. Of course, change is at the heart of it, and whilst those prominent figures would scarcely recognise aspects of the intricacies and complexities of the modern planning system today, they may still discern the intent, even though it has been damaged and undervalued. Surely planning as an idea or project is not purely or even primarily about servicing a narrow economic agenda. The story of Theseus' ship reminds us of the importance of maintaining and looking after those things we value, even if their original materiality morphs over time. What counts more is the essence and purpose, and the identity that the public respond to – are they being presented with a relic or a functioning object?

Given such change and recourse to previous 'materials', we return to our analogy of Theseus' ship and are left to conclude that it is the *purpose*, or the *identity* of planning, that needs to endure; and it is this question first and foremost which requires prioritisation: 'what is the ship for?'. Then attention can be paid to the specific parts – new or used – which can be usefully reassembled and organised as part of a rehabilitation. It occurs to us that maybe the new government needs to re-read the vision set out in the Raynsford report. In particular the recommendation for a more considered and principled approach to planning:

'any review of planning in England must explore the founding principles of the system and test whether they have relevance for the problems we face today... it is not beyond our country's means to introduce new and improved guiding principles, structures, relationships and processes to the planning system with the potential to deliver real economic, social and environmental advances'.⁹

If radical change is to be contemplated then setting the course is fundamental, but this requires knowing where we are going. What is the destination and why? The means can always be adjusted, but it is pretty clear that this purpose – the ends – *must be* oriented towards sustainable transition, and to do this land has to be used wisely and with long term thought. **The TCPA has recently made a renewed call for 'a new statutory purpose for planning based on UN Sustainable Development Goals'**.¹⁰ Whilst a positive step, this call still remains quite vague and indeed reflects the problem that planning appears to have many purposes and

its role in reconciling many objectives is actually an identifying characteristic. Moreover, this is also why the NPPF guiding principle of balancing social, environmental and economic objectives through the (ostensible) presumption of sustainable development has been ineffective, because it has been interpreted, applied, and basically twisted to suit the growth agenda. Hence the need to rethink and reassert sustainability, not least to ensure that social goals are met.



United Nations Sustainable Development Goals – a new purpose for planning?

[credit: United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe]

Based on this reading, we make two principal inter-related points by way of conclusion. Firstly, that it is beholden on government to elaborate the *purpose* of planning, and secondly that they do so in a way that carries the population with it. On the first point, we hope that a Labour government can take on this task, rather than continuing with the familiar repetition of the trope of planning servicing and/or obstructing growth. In particular, we regard the way the system has been set-up and operated since 2010, has allowed a neglect of the social sustainability dimension and instead relied upon a trickle-down economics approach to secure sustainable

development. **We might expect a centre-left government to seek a progressive approach towards what at least might be termed as good, fair or 'just' growth.**

Perhaps a bigger challenge, and our second concluding point, is that the new administration has claimed they want to see an end to the culture wars.¹¹ However, the rhetoric that the planning system is only there to serve growth plays a gross disservice to its role and potential, and only plays to one audience and system purpose. The apparent stance being struck is quite likely to perpetuate division rather than address it. Moreover, this approach fails to tackle the deeper mistrust of the system (and of developers) that has grown up over the past 14 years. To overcome the toxic environment that has emerged with the culture wars and restore public trust, as it relates to planning and land use matters, one part of the solution is that the wider purposes and principles of good planning must be (re)asserted and communicated effectively to the public. Not least the role of planning in assisting to create more sustainable places for people and the planet.

In opening the first session of the new Parliament, the King's speech announced there will be a new planning and infrastructure bill, with the familiar intention to 'speed up and streamline the planning process to build more homes of all tenures and accelerate the delivery of major infrastructure projects.¹²'. We remain ever hopeful that a renewed agenda for planning can be developed by the new government, but based on initial announcements we express our concern that more of the same and the same as before will dominate. That the ship of theseus had been remade many times over did not matter because its identity and purpose remained the same. Our concern for planning under (successive) reform agendas is that if we focus too much on the changing component parts only, then this obscures how the overall purpose of the system is either maintained or possibly undermined by such new tools, processes and emphases. That is, in contrast to our ship, that the new parts change the whole overall, and planning is piece-by-piece remade towards a new purpose of delivering growth. These are early days and there are still opportunities for Labour to reflect and reorient – and if so, please, please let's rebuild the ship with the kind of purposes needed for the long-term and complex challenges ahead.

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Notes

¹ According to Plutarch's *Lives*, the Ship of Theseus was the very one used by the eponymous founder of ancient Athens. See: M Mesku: 'Restoring the Ship of Theseus: Is a paradox still the same after its parts have been replaced?'. Webpage. Lapham's Quarterly, 21 Oct. 2019.

<https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/restoring-ship-theseus>

² School of Ferrara: *Theseus and Ariadne*. Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Alte Pinakothek, München, Germany, c. 1540.

<https://www.sammlung.pinakothek.de/de/artwork/jWLpaY0GKY>

³ B Johnson: *Planning for the Future White Paper*. Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, Aug. 2020, p. 6.

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/601bce418fa8f53fc149bc7d/MHCLG-Planning-Consultation.pdf>

⁴ J Franck, J Bricmont (Eds.): *Chomsky Notebook*. Columbia University Press, New York, 2010

⁵ The contrast between an increasing number of planning lawyers and a decreasing number of practising public sector planners is pointed out here: S Ricketts: '10 Reasons Why Planning Lawyers Are So Busy (And Maybe Shouldn't Be)'. Blog. Simoncity, 15 Jun. 2024. <https://simoncity.com/2024/06/15/10-reasons-why-planning-lawyers-are-so-busy-and-maybe-shouldnt-be/>

See also reference by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) to a 'precipitous rise of the private sector... in planning' at: G Csontos: State of The Profession 2023: The UK planning profession in numbers. RTPI, 2023, p. 17.

<https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/16015/state-of-the-profession-2023-final.pdf>

⁶ See, for example: M Dobson, G Parker: *Slow Planning? Timescapes, Power and Democracy*. Policy Press, Bristol, 2024

⁷ R Reeves: 'Chancellor Rachel Reeves is taking immediate action to fix the foundations of our economy'. HM Treasury. Speech given at 1 Horse Guards Road, London, 8 Jul. 2024. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chancellor-rachel-reeves-is-taking-immediate-action-to-fix-the-foundations-of-our-economy>

⁸ *Planning 2020: Raynsford Review of Planning in England – Final Report*. Town and Country Planning Association, Nov. 2018, p. 7. <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Planning-2020-Raynsford-Review-of-Planning-in-England-Final-Report.pdf>

⁹ Ibid., p. 3

¹⁰ *100 Days to Rebuild Britain: The TCPA's vision for the next Government*. Town and Country Planning Association, Jan. 2024, p. 2. <https://www.tcpa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/100-Days-to-Rebuild-Britain-Jan-2024-1.pdf>

¹¹ The Culture, Media and Sport secretary, Lisa Nandy reportedly in her welcome address to DCMS staff. See also: G Parker, M Dobson: 'Do the right thing': planning at the intersection of the 'culture wars'. *Town and Country Planning*, 2023, Vol. 92(6), Nov.-Dec., 381-386

¹² Press release for the King's speech at the State Opening of Parliament on 17th July 2024. See: [King's Speech to unlock growth and "take the brakes off Britain" - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/king-s-speech-to-unlock-growth-and-take-the-brakes-off-britain)