

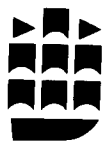
# THE POLITICS OF TOWN PLANNING

Gordon Cherry



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*Gordon E. Cherry*



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## EDITORS' PREFACE

There is a demand among the general public as well as from students for books that deal with the main issues of modern British politics in such a way that the reader can gain a reliable account of how an issue arose, of its institutional context and then, but only then, to have argument about what should be done.

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We believe that relevant books are wanted, neither wholly committed books nor those that pretend to scientific objectivity. This series continues work that we began with Fontana Books, in their 'Political Issues' series. Some similarities will be obvious, particularly in our injunction to authors to write at the highest possible level of intelligence but to eschew all jargon and technicalities. Students of politics should accept, not worry, that they have a public role.

*Bernard Crick and Patrick Seyd*

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The source material for *The Politics of Town Planning* has been collected over a number of years, during which time there have been many people whose help, direct and indirect, I must acknowledge.

To my academic colleagues, both staff and students, at the University of Birmingham, I owe a considerable debt of gratitude for having stimulated my thinking in town planning and planning history more than they could imagine.

I also acknowledge the help given at interviews with Lord Duncan-Sandys, the Rt. Hon. Peter Shore, MP and the Rt. Hon. John Silkin, MP. I am grateful to them for the courtesy of their time and their helpful observations on town planning and their place in it. (Mr Silkin helped me particularly in respect of his father, Lord Silkin.) In correspondence, the Rt. Hon. Sir Keith Joseph, MP kindly drew my attention to a paper he had earlier given to a Civic Trust Conference.

Sir Wilfred Burns, Chief Planner at the Department of the Environment, has kindly read and commented on certain passages, particularly those relating to contemporary planning questions.

To Professor Bernard Crick, general editor of the Series, I am indebted for help and guidance. Needless to say, however, the views I am presenting are my own and, unless so accredited in the chapter references, should not be attributed to anyone else.

A final word of thanks is due first to my daughter Shelagh who has helped me with the preparation of the Index; also to my secretary, Miss Sue Elias, who has typed my manuscript in impeccable style.

Gordon E. Cherry  
Centre for Urban and Regional Studies  
University of Birmingham  
July 1981

## INTRODUCTION

This book, which seeks to illustrate the political dimensions of British town planning throughout the twentieth century, has two main objectives. The first is to show how town planning, first as a movement and then as a State activity, took root and developed in ways deeply affected by a variety of social and cultural influences. We shall see that while the strategic aims of town planning, encountered in its academic discipline and in its professional ideology, retain a fair degree of consistency over time, the actual operation of town planning practice is in greater flux. This is because the activity of town planning, mediated through political processes and operated through a variety of institutional arrangements, responds and adapts to different expressions of political values and social preferences which change over time. Political ideas change in respect of town planning and the role of the State; during this century all three main political parties can claim to have had a major influence on the course of town planning events. This becomes clear as we recount the history of modern town planning through political action and the influence of politicians, both of local and central government.

The second objective is to learn from the historical developments so that we may more readily understand the nature of contemporary town planning and the political forces which are acting upon it. This obliges us to consider particularly the present state of the British planning system and its limitations in meeting, at all effectively, community aspirations and environmental objectives. The place of town planning in urban and regional governance is consequently examined.

This historical narrative begins in Chapter 1 where the factors surrounding the origins of modern town planning are described at the turn of the last century. The eight decades of this century are



divided into two; Chapter 2 deals with the period to 1939 and Chapter 3 covers the years from 1940 to the present day. These chapters constitute a marked departure from conventional town planning histories, written in terms of professional achievements and the activities of professional practice. The political history cannot, of course, pretend to be complete; the research has not yet been done, and in any case the sheer volume and complexity of the war time and post-war Official Histories so far published suggest that it would not easily be condensed into one short book. But sufficient will be shown to indicate the main threads of the political dimension to date, and the circumstances in which they weave into the tapestry of our social affairs. These early chapters can be read almost as a history of town planning in a political context. But they are intended to be more than that, for they outline the history of the political controversy of this century as to whether there should be such a thing as town planning at all, and if so, what forms it should take. Planning was not something which followed from the existence of planners; rather it became an activity with political legitimization as a consequence of demand.

Chapter 4 summarises the political attitudes and convictions which have underpinned British town planning. We cannot claim to see any unified set of political doctrines, rather a number of separate and often contradictory political themes, which over a period of time, for widely differing reasons, have appealed to various individuals and groups. The strength with which these themes or convictions have been held has given an essential framework to town planning legislation and commitment to various courses of action.

Chapter 5 looks at planning and politics in practice: how the system actually works as a consequence of interactions within and between the three-fold elements – the political, the professional/bureaucratic and actors in the community. Each part is illustrated with examples and shows the planning system at work. The chapter concludes with a review of recent planning issues, confirming planning as an interactive system in matters of housing, metropolitan strategies, regional planning, transportation, conservation and environmentalism.

Chapter 6 considers the major political questions before town planning today: its aims, its methods and the institutional forms of government through which as a State activity it becomes operative. It is timely to do this. Throughout this century until very recent years the State has considerably enlarged its hold on our

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community affairs. In the later 1970s there was evidence that in Britain, Western Europe and North America the seemingly inexorable trend was to be reversed. The future of town planning might be at a very interesting crossroads. Questions are raised as to how much planning will reside with the public sector, what forms of community planning can best be devised, at what levels of government these will be arranged, and whether town planning can be properly integrated into urban (and rural, and regional) management.

Chapter 7 examines the main conclusions of the political history and the contemporary political setting for town planning. This enables us to suggest a new set of approaches for academics, professionals, administrators and the community at large, which relate to the nature of the British planning system and its institutional framework. There are no suggestions as to the strategic directions of town planning policy, instead the focus is on the political dimensions of town planning practice, particularly at local level, and the ways in which the planning system needs modification if social preferences and general environmental objectives are going to be met.

For Margaret

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## TOWN PLANNING TODAY

Town planning is now a well known term. First used in 1906 (and in British legislation in 1909), it has entered into the language of governments the world over, and is now a distinctive academic and professional subject field, it affecting all of our lives. The ideas with which it has been associated have been exported to all continents; through them the State has sought to manage, guide and control the forces which shape and change our built environment. Ostensibly for community benefit (though the claim has not always been without challenge), restriction is placed on private action to develop land and erect buildings in order that the environment might reflect the intentions of public plans. Town planning has become an important weapon in the twentieth century armoury of State powers.

For an activity of such extent and importance, the term is surprisingly ambiguous. Indeed it has never been defined in British legislation, and there is a welter of other terminology which makes precise meaning obscure. This may be stimulating for academic debate but bewildering for the average citizen, so much so that it may be tempting to explain, albeit lamely, that 'town planning is what town planners do'.

Town planning was an adequate term so long as it meant town building, town design or the process of preparing schemes for town development. By and large this was the case in the first three decades of this century, but legislation in 1932 preferred the expression 'town and country', a phrase which presupposed an extension of subject content as well as a wider geographical scale of operation. Since then, a preference for latin rather than anglo-saxon has introduced 'urban and regional'. Meanwhile the Americans employ the term 'city planning'. Confusion is increased when 'planning' is

applied to other subject matter. Land-use planning or physical planning is roughly synonymous to town and country planning in Britain, but other expressions such as transport-, health-, education-, recreation-, and tourism planning have distinct meanings related to their discrete subject areas. We may also speak of social and economic planning, but here the term refers to public policy in a range of related activities. Phraseology is made more complicated, however, with the use of the single word: 'planning' is now an overworked word (and 'planners' a journalistic shorthand almost devoid of meaning) though certainly it represents an activity which has expanded enormously this century as the tentacles of State involvement have reached into most corners of our lives. Indeed, we would probably agree that it represents one of the primary governmental features of our generation.

Used singly, planning is therefore a generic term. It may be described as purposive action designed to achieve a future situation or set of circumstances. It may embrace many fields of activity. But it is also a word which can be added to a subject area to give more precise definition. One of these areas is town planning, which geographically has come to embrace towns, cities, rural areas, countryside and regions; attempts to summarise this collection under the single heading 'environmental' usually causes more confusion than it is worth. At first, town planning was an activity which in broad terms aimed at securing the right use of land, and establishing control over the processes of development in order to secure qualitative improvements in the environment. We need to be a little more definitive than this, however. The difficulty is that the range of town planning does not remain constant, and any definition will change over time. Thus we need a historical perspective.

Contemporary town planning grew out of the experience gained, and the institutional structures established during the decades of Victorian urban management – those many years when British cities were lit, paved, drained and sewered and when the population was increasingly protected from the worst excesses of bad housing, poor sanitation and environmental squalor. This was the longer term context, but town planning was given its particular character by the perceived crisis of the late Victorian city and the remedies then put forward for its solution.<sup>1</sup> Britain was already an urban country as early as 1851 (the census then revealed that for the first time more than 50 per cent of the population was classed as urban), and not only London but also the growing towns of the industrial north and midlands presented urban living and working

conditions, which increasingly fell to the State for improvement. The sanitary and related environmental hazards could reasonably be tackled through bye law control and health and other regulations. But one outstanding set of problems remained, and these related to housing.

The legacy of the nineteenth century was the accumulation of unfit dwellings, high overcrowding rates and the high residential densities in the big cities. Given also the endemic poverty stemming from low wages and irregular employment, the great challenge at the end of the century was the provision of working class accommodation: who should provide it, where it should be located, and at what rent? One solution was the building of cheap, cheery, salubrious houses on land in the suburbs, in association with the reform movements which stressed the importance of fresh air, space and sunlight. Low density housing with new forms of residential layout reflected these aims. The foundations of contemporary town planning were therefore laid: the purposeful selection of land for the protection of suburban house building according to new environmental and design criteria.

This early focus on housing provision (of a suitable kind, with an appropriate layout and location) has passed. But the core of British town planning retains its flavour: it can still be described essentially as an activity designed to secure the right use of land and to control, in the interests of the community, those myriad decisions to erect or change the use of buildings so as to guide the changing shape and structure of cities over time in accordance with a prepared plan. Modern town planning is a comprehensive exercise of analysis and prescription covering the regulation of environmental and community affairs far beyond its early remit. It is no longer simply a technical exercise of land selection and physical design. It has broadened into an activity of social purpose where the shaping of the physical environment is conducted within a web of social and economic objectives. Town planning, once seen as the product of the design professions – architecture and engineering – is now regarded just as much a social science.

Because of this, modern town planning is an activity which demands a thorough knowledge of those matters which bring about change in social and economic affairs. For example, there are demographic factors: birth rates, population structure (age and ethnicity), household formation and migration patterns; and social factors: changes in life styles and population preferences, in family structure and social relations, and in social values and attitudes, to

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be taken into account. Technological factors, innovations and scientific discovery also affect the environment and pose new social opportunities and challenges. Furthermore economic factors provide another area of change: rates of economic growth, structural changes in the economy, employment and unemployment, changing patterns of income distribution and consumption, and changes in work/time patterns. Finally, the social and economic environments are influenced through the institutions of government: the relative extent of involvement of the public sector, the fiscal policy, the political system, the instruments of government and the value systems of those instruments.

Town planning has therefore come to represent a means of public control over the development of towns, cities, their hinterlands and regions, and the adaptation of these to the changing conditions of modern life. Negatively it is concerned with the control of abuse and the regulation of those things considered harmful to the community; positively it represents social, economic and environmental policy to achieve certain aims unattainable through the unfettered operation of the private sector. It deals with the problems of contemporary urbanisation, not only remedying malfunction, but also creating the conditions for harmonious living. (Health, beauty and convenience have been long standing objectives in securing model cities.) It deals with the allocation of land for stated purposes; it seeks to relate economic planning to the physical structuring of cities; and it aims to enhance living conditions for the community as a whole.

### THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Town planning is undertaken by many actors. In Britain there is a planning profession (the Royal Town Planning Institute) whose members collectively represent the skills, expertise and proven competence in the subject field. There are of course other professional bodies engaged in related areas, and it would be unwise to draw demarcation lines too sharply between architects, engineers, land surveyors, landscape architects and others. All these professionals have been trained within a set of ideologies; they have their own ideas of ends or objectives which are right or wrong, desirable or undesirable, and they work towards these in ways which will gain them most credit from their peer group.

The civil servant also has an important role. British town planning represents a set of statutory obligations or permissive func-



tions carried out by local government with powers provided by the central State. Local authorities draw up plans; central government approves them. The local government officer and the civil servant (they may or may not also be professionals) carry out their duties as bureaucrats within their own value systems: to defend the established order of which they are part, and to ensure that action takes place within recognised, correct procedures. Neither the professional nor the civil servant are by collective temperament radical; they are usually cautious and conservative. They defend interests, they protect systems. This is not to say that they are never innovative, rather that they constitute one of a number of checks or balances which by and large make for an evolutionary, adaptive governmental system.

The professional claims to serve society, the civil servant to serve the politician. In the British system of representative democracy, the elected politician takes public decisions. He obviously has his own political values, and political ideologies clearly have much to say about planning. In planned-economy countries, public intervention in land use is a matter of political philosophy. In other countries public intervention is held to conflict with the laws of the land market. Questions of public housing, regional development, forms of central area rebuilding, location of population, New Towns and a whole range of other matters within the field of town planning have become matters for political debate.

Thus town planning is a political activity. It is a function of government, and the people who operate the system (professionals, civil servants and politicians) inevitably subscribe to values and ideologies which have a bearing on decisions and policies. These are made in respect of other people; some will gain from a decision but some will lose. Town planning is political also in the sense that it is an allocative activity: it distributes rewards, resources and opportunities throughout the community. In a century which has claimed to move towards a more equal society, town planning has been one of the agents in that process. Furthermore, it is political in that there is a dialogue between planner and planned, governor and governed. The decision-making process in town planning is a complex web of interaction between institutional frameworks of government and external pressures from the community. Government rarely fails to be responsive to outside lobbies and pressure groups (although there may be serious lags in time for the strength of pressure to register), and in recent years there have been attempts to institutionalise these in public participation.