

Remarks to the New Zealand Planning Institute UK branch summer event

In thinking about what to say today I was reminded of a presentation I gave to the Auckland Regional Council in January with some ideas about how the new 'super city' might promote more sustainable patterns of development, partly through processes of urban intensification. An underlying premise of what I said was the useful factoid that Auckland has one sixth of the population of London spread across twice the land area. I ventured that not only might this account for the crippling problems of traffic congestion and terrible air quality the city routinely experiences, but that it also lies at the heart of the problem of thousands of people being excluded from the prosperity of the city simply through the sheer difficulty in accessing employment opportunities in the CBD and the lack of sufficient intensity to generate real economic energy at a district or neighbourhood level. I also suggested that, rather than being culturally alien to a settler nation – in other words, contrary to 'what people want' – as we found was often asserted, more compact and integrated patterns of development could readily be found in some of Auckland's most desirable, interesting and invariably older neighbourhoods such as Ponsonby or Parnell which, if applied elsewhere, could support sustainability outcomes without forcing everyone to live like Parisians.

Therefore, rather than talking about density and intensification, I suggested that planners and developers should frame the debate in terms of some of the outcomes greater urban intensity makes possible – walkability, conviviality, local character and difference, access to services, aesthetic beauty, neighbourliness, economic and climate resilience, cost of decent infrastructure, preservation of natural habitats, and so forth. But at the same time, planners had to remember that these features of places and communities cannot be wished into existence: they are an arithmetical consequence of having enough people of mixed income in a certain area to make them viable. In other words, you need rules! By way of conclusion, like a typical British consultant tourist, I said that the New Zealand planning system should perhaps move closer to the British one in this respect.

Well, I got what I wanted, but not in quite the way I wanted it.

I don't think I'm alone in the planning and development world in holding a degree of scepticism about the changes that have been introduced here in the UK, some would say hastily, by the new government, but it is early days and I think it is only fair to reserve judgement until the full and detailed package of changes emerges. I don't share the hysteria among some developers about the growing emphasis on community-led planning and the abolition of regional building targets because in Beyond Green we've been making the case for sustainable development bottom-up and practising methods like community design enquiries for years, and if it means we all work a bit harder to justify why development should exist at all and makes it more difficult for industrial-scale house-builders to vomit cul-de-sacs across the landscape then that's no bad thing. On the other hand I look forward with interest to seeing what the proposed "presumption in favour of sustainable development" looks like when density rules have gone and we have a transport secretary committed to ending what he called 'the war on the motorist', because if it turns out that "sustainable development" basically means 'development that local people don't oppose' then the prospects for a society that desperately needs homes, and for the planet, will be pretty grim.

So what might the new localism mean for those of us working at the coal face? It's too early to draw firm conclusions, but I'll venture three suggestions.

First, I think it will lead to greater local difference and so the practice will depend on where you work. There will be several blue-blooded districts in the leafier parts of England who may have the opportunity to development-proof themselves and become the ageing backwaters they aspire to be. There will, on the other hand, be many areas which see the benefits that decent development can bring and which go for growth in a much more committed and distinctive way than they might previously have done, and in these places planners may well enjoy greater autonomy and freedom to use their professional judgement in working with politicians, developers and the public to make good things happen. And I suspect life for planners will also be interesting in the short-run if perhaps disastrous in the long-run in some of our old industrial conurbations where markets are weaker and regional targets served less to compel development than hold it back, preventing the Traffords and North Tynesides of this world from stealing tax base from the Manchesters and Newcastles and wrecking their efforts at urban regeneration and housing market renewal.

Second, I think planners will need to become even more adept than they already are – and certainly more visible – as trained negotiators between public and private interests in the development process. It is clear that localism to this government absolutely does not mean local democracy or municipalism: schools are to be allowed independence from local authority control, council tax is to be frozen over councils' heads and referendums encouraged on future increases, elected police commissioners are to replace local authority-influenced policing boards, and while we may or may not get a new generation of elected mayors it seems pretty unlikely that they will get any of the tax-raising powers that their counterparts on the continent take for granted and which for most serious thinkers on the subject is the hallmark of meaningful local democracy. Rather I think local government is being cast as the midwife of a localism in which the main protagonists, for better or worse, are civil society and private interests.



That will entail some important process changes. I think that community-led planning will grow hugely in importance and there will be a premium on the ability for planners to use those processes to facilitate a meaningful and grown-up debate between developers and the public about the purpose of development in relation to everything from the local economy and quality of life to global environmental forces, and what that then means for its form and how it is delivered and managed. If that is done well then I think we have little to fear from, for example, a possible third-party right of appeal, although on the basis that you can't please all of the people all of the time I suspect everyone involved should factor in an expectation that many more applications will be appealed as a matter of course. Many of you will of course be familiar with this from New Zealand and I am sure you may have less sanguine views about it!

Third, I think it will become clear that the old development models are bust and that the archetypal housebuilder approach of 'plan aggressively, build cheaply and bugger off' won't work so readily in future. Developers will have to find ways to finance the upfront investment in collaborative planning and quality and longevity of design and building that will earn them the right to shape places in the eyes of the public. They will also have to stop regarding things like s.106 and CIL as taxes on the right to develop and be much more ready to enter into partnership with elected public authorities in business plans for stewarding and maintaining the integrity of places in the long run. Patient, long-term equity investment in places and buildings that support a vigorous civic life and keep getting better and growing in value with age is the only practical way of doing that and it is fundamentally alien to most developers. But it is central to Beyond Green's business model for strategic place-making and so from a vulgar commercial perspective we see this squarely as an age of opportunity rather than threat.

So, to conclude, it is early days but I think one should exercise pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will on new localism. If it turns out for the best, this will be a very interesting and rewarding time. If not, then perhaps some of you can consider organising a fact-finding trip to suburban Auckland so that ministers can see what happens when you equate planning with giving those who shout loudest what they want.