

Reforming planning – 1 An underlying conflict

Post war planning controls were brought in to speed development, encourage the right type of development in the right places, and to protect the heritage and best parts of our landscape. Private interests owning land were to be more strongly controlled by government deciding how land can best be used. There were high hopes of a better world from the substantial increase in state control.

In practice the planning system has left many frustrated by its high costs, delays and complications. The truth is there is no easy way of reconciling neighbours who have different views of their neighbourhood, no single answer to what is worth preserving and what modern developments look good or are appropriate, and no convincing way of controlling what everyone does do with their land, whatever the law may say.

Let's take a common simple disagreement within a community. Mr X lives on the edge of a beautiful Home Counties village adjacent to fields. He paid a premium to buy the house with the views, and called his home Field View House to reflect his priorities. His neighbour, Mrs Y, bought some agricultural fields and wants to make a living from them. She did not have enough money to buy a farm, as even agricultural land values are high and rents low as a proportion of the capital value if you just let the land out to a farmer. Mrs Y recognised the shortage of things for the young people of the village to do. She proposed a Go Kart course on her field, with her organising the events. Strong village opposition resulted in planning permission being refused, to the relief of Mr X who did not want loud karts revving past his garden. Mrs Y is now pursuing a planning application for a skateboarding park. In the meantime she has offered the land on a short lease to a local farmer, who is using it to fatten pigs. Mr X now has a view of corrugated pig shelters and a once greenfield that is now a dust or mud hole.

The planning authority is caught between these two very different views of what the edge of the village should look like and how working land should be used. They cannot stop agricultural uses as it is currently demarked as farmland. They can prevent the owner from gaining permission for new business uses, and do prevent housebuilding in many such contexts.

In such a situation what should the planners do? Who should make the decision about what Mrs Y can do with her land, and what rights should Mr X have to enable him to enjoy the peaceful use of his garden? How far should the law go in laying down answers, and how far should landowners be free to do as they wish with their land?

The EU wants to rely on the WTO as the UK leaves to be an active member and supporter of the WTO

The EU spent hours arguing over migration policy, with Italy opposing the draft Council conclusions. Finally they reached agreement with a few face saving formulas for the disputants.

Mrs Merkel got language into the document about countering “secondary movements of asylum seekers between member states” The German Interior Minister is demanding a stop to migrants moving from Italy across the German border to take jobs, benefits and housing in Germany. I don't see how this weak phrase solves that problem, nor see how the EU with freedom of movement and Schengen rules could prevent a lawful refugee from moving from country A to country B if they wish.

Italy got language in about exploring how migrant centres could be set up outside the EU to process applications. There is no commitment to implement such a policy, no special budget, and as yet no idea of where and how this could be done. It may be enough for the Italian PM for the summer, but Mr Salvini will need some tangible answers. Italy wants an end to boats arriving with many migrants now.

The end of the Council presented a friendly face because no-one had lost or been slapped down. Instead the issues drift on to another Council. The one positive out of it for all of us was a new found enthusiasm for the World Trade Organisation. The EU agreed unanimously to commit to “a comprehensive approach to improving...the functioning of the WTO” and to promote the “strengthening of the WTO as an institution”. As the UK shifts from reliance on EU membership to direct reliance on WTO membership for all trade matters, it is good to know the EU takes its membership of the WTO seriously and wants to work with the UK and other like minded members of the WTO to cut trade costs and remove more barriers.

The EU Council decisions

The EU Council endorsed the new proposals for European Parliament seats after 2019. The 73 UK seats disappear, with an overall reduction of 46 seats. Germany at 96 (n/c), France at 79 (plus 5) and Italy at 76 (plus 3) will be the largest in the new Parliament out of a total of 705. It shows that some of the planning for the UK exit soon is progressing.

The 27 agreed a line on Brexit which is far from friendly to the UK. They are

only holding out the hope of some “political declaration” about the future relationship, yet seem to expect the UK to sign up to the very one sided Withdrawal Agreement they have in mind nonetheless. To make that worse they are still insisting on some “back stop” for the Irish border, which is their way of trying to get the UK back into the Customs Union we voted to leave. The UK would be wise to point out we have no need to sign any Withdrawal Agreement unless there is a really good proposal for the future which would offset the penal terms of their Withdrawal document.

The Cabinet will be seeking to hammer out a more detailed proposal on the future relationship at their meeting at the end of next week at Chequers. I trust they will recognise the so called New Customs Partnership is badly holed, and was rejected by the Brexit Cabinet Committee when last examined. They should also veto any idea of ending up in a version of the customs union and or single market just for goods. The EU is the big winner from the current goods arrangements, so the UK has no need to pay to continue those arrangements, and must ensure it takes back control of its laws and trade policy when we leave.

I repeat my advice to the government. Table a comprehensive free trade agreement for goods and services. If the EU is well disposed, then negotiate over it. If the EU is not, then just leave without signing any Withdrawal Agreement. The government says all is going well with plans to leave with No Deal, so lets make sure the EU know that. So far the EU has turned down every constructive UK suggestion. They have even managed to turn a very generous UK offer on defence and security into a UK demand they cannot meet!

Visit to Kendrick School

I visited Kendrick School today to talk to the management team about possible school expansion.

The School is considering expanding from 3 form entry to 4 form entry. This would still leave it smaller than Reading Grammar for boys which has five form entry.

I would be happy to support such a move. We live in a fast growing area where we need more school places. The grammars should be free to expand as well as the other secondary schools. It seems unfair that a boy has a better chance of grammar entry than a girl in our area, and unfair if places do not expand as the potential number of pupils expands.

I look forward to seeing the results of their work to produce a bid for money for the necessary building works to allow expansion.

I wish the school continuing success.

What is the UK's worst nationalised industry?

In the 1970s when as a young man I first became critical of nationalised industries, I identified their main features of them I did not like. They were bad for their customers. They usually overcharged them, with high rates of price increase. They failed to innovate or hit high standards of customer service. They were bad for their employees. You had a high chance of losing your job if you worked for the nationalised steel or coal or rail businesses, as they went through redundancy programme after redundancy programme. They were bad for taxpayers, as they racked up huge borrowings and losses which required taxpayer subsidies and write offs on a large scale.

The current nationalised business which comes closest to some of these features today is the nationalised provision of roadspace. It is a monopoly supply, provided mainly by Councils with the biggest and most successful roads supplied by the national government. They are provided free at the point of use, but there are huge charges on motorists who pay many times over the cost of the provision through special taxes on motoring. The cost of provision for taxpayers is also high. The monopolist rations the supply, creating congestion and inconvenience. The Highways executives often occupy the road for weeks on end for improvements or alterations, and do not seem to have a sense of urgency in getting roads back into use. Some of the works they call improvements intensify the congestion and sometimes pit different kinds of road users against each other in unhelpful ways.

This year has seen misery about potholes, where some of the local highways authorities have been slow to respond to money available for pothole filling, and slow to respond to the general public mood to improve the quality of the surfaces. Potholes are particularly trying for cyclists. Let's hope local highways departments take up Mr Grayling's proposals to put utilities away from the main highway, to build better local strategic networks, and to tackle congestion more vigorously.