

Planning To Fail

By Simon Brett
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Planning to Fail?

Politics can be a challenging subject at the best of times. Sometimes, however, it's important to get stuck in! A planning bill is on the table that could radically alter the way decisions are approved. Simon Brett explains what it could mean. What is the planning bill?

The planning bill is new legislation which the government plans to introduce to alter the way decisions are made about Major Infrastructure Projects (MIPs). The purported advantages are that it will streamline the decision-making process and 'avoid long public enquiries'. A coalition of environmental and campaigning groups, including RSPB, Friends of the Earth, Campaign for Better Transport and more than a dozen others, representing a total of over five million people, are concerned that the bill will be undemocratic and effectively strangle the voices of communities.

At the time of writing, the bill is being debated in the House of Lords. It passed through the Commons in June 2008, although it was sufficiently controversial to spark a revolt from 17 Labour MPs. By the time you read this, it may be well on the way to becoming law.

Why is the bill controversial?

The essential issue at stake is the delegation of major planning decisions to an unelected committee or quango. Hazel Blears contends that this will make the process clearer and more transparent. The coalition, who outline their criticisms at www.planningdisaster.co.uk, believe it will be a backward step. They assert that, by rushing through MIPs, the Planning Bill will act as a spur to exceed environmental limits at a time when we need to be taking action to ensure that any development is conducted in a sustainable manner. They also contend that it will likely undermine town centres and urban regeneration, as well as threatening wildlife habitats.

Labour MPs who rebelled against the bill are concerned at the undemocratic nature of the bill. John Grogan, MP for Selby, said that the amendments would cause 'massive confusion'. "These are very tough and controversial decisions," he commented. "All the more important that they have democratic legitimacy." Both Jacqui Lait, Shadow Minister for Planning, and Dan Rogerson of the Liberal Democrats, echoed Grogan's concern. Rogerson offered the view that 'the final decision must rest with someone who is accountable'.

How will it affect me?

If the bill heralds such wholesale changes, how come we haven't heard more about it? It's difficult to answer that question. It may not be fair to suggest that the government has deliberately kept the implications of the bill quiet; on the other hand, they certainly haven't launched any campaigns to make people aware of the changes to the process. I learnt about it by chance, through an encounter with a member of Friends of the Earth. Perhaps part of the issue is that it can be challenging to understand how political decisions are relevant to our day-to-day lives.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect is that the bill seems to support a particular developmental ideology, and be designed to head off any objections to that ideology being pursued. It looks to be weighted in favour of a particular model of economic development, although the coalition mentioned above claim that there is 'no real evidence that the planning system is a constraint on productivity'.

Essentially, the bill means that if the planning committee decide to support the expansion of an airport, or the building of an incinerator, or the creation of a nuclear power station, in the locality, it will be harder to register disagreement and to have that disagreement taken seriously. The coalition also suggest that it will make decision-making less consensual, and lead to an increased likelihood of protests from people who feel disenfranchised by the system. Furthermore, there's a greater risk that areas of green belt will be sacrificed to make way for projects. And, again, less recourse for anyone who objects to proposals to register dissent.

In short, the bill looks likely to take power away from members of a community and grant it to an unelected committee. Many people in the Brighton area are already indignant that Starbucks have been allowed to open a branch in St. James' Street without being granted planning permission. It could be a harbinger for the way future development is handled.

What can I do?

At the time of writing, it's still possible to email Hazel Blears and make your views clear on the subject. It's not yet clear if and when the bill will become law. It's certainly a good idea to inform yourself; I recommend paying www.planningdisaster.co.uk a visit for an outline of the major issues raised by the bill, and a link to send that email to Ms. Blears. Keep an eye on Smart for any further (ahem) developments!

If you want to read about the bill from a government perspective, it can be found here:

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2007-08/planning.html>