

PRESIDENT ANN SKIPPERS' SPEECH TO THE RTPI PLANNING CONVENTION 2010

Ann Skippers – President's address to the RTPI Planning Convention

Tuesday 29th June 2010

Ministers, Distinguished Colleagues, Ladies and Gentleman.

Last year the presentation by our Young Planners had an enormous impact.

Not only was it the first such presentation at the Convention by this group of talented young professionals, it took us by surprise in its clarity and forthrightness about the future of planning. And this year's presentation, and I hope now it becomes a regular fixture on the Convention's programme, has not let us down. I suspect what we have just heard reflects many of the concerns some of us are feeling as well as uplifting us and reminding us of the enthusiasm and hope we feel for the future.

I must admit that when I first became involved with the RTPI as a student, many years ago, I never imagined that it would fall to me to be on this stage today at such a time of political and economic upheaval. At such a critical time for our profession.

And although organised a long time in advance, as these things are, I don't think we could have come up with a better theme for this year's Convention – Planning, Shaping the Future.

Today, of course, we welcome the new Minister for Decentralisation, the Right Honourable Greg Clark MP, to our Convention. Greg, without doubt, has one of the biggest of all the jobs to do in the new Government.

And we welcome back the new local government and planning Minister, Bob Neill MP, who was here last year taking part in the Convention in his Shadow ministerial role.

Colleagues, rarely perhaps can there have been a time in the RTPI's long history when we are so keen to hear directly from the Ministers – and perhaps they from us too.

I spent some time last Friday with Greg Clark as the RTPI hosted a tour in London showing the Minister examples of good planning.

To his credit the Minister had said he did not want a conventional first meeting with us around a table in his Whitehall office – he wanted us to show him examples of real planning. And that's what we did.

For whatever anyone thinks at a personal level, when David Cameron and Nick Clegg exchanged vows in the garden of Number 10 a new era began for us all.

The verdict from the electorate led to the extraordinary and historic creation of a Coalition administration which has cast aside the conventional way of how things are done. And as we all know, at the same time we are facing the worst economic recession for generations and a difficult and painful budget. May you live in interesting times as the Chinese have warned over the centuries.

But what is our response as planners to be?

The challenge for the RTPI is no less than this: How do we respond to such change beyond issuing press notices, heated words and manifestos of our own? How do we respond to a new government elected on a manifesto that sets out a clear overall direction of travel for the planning system within the philosophy of new localism and the Big Society?

But as well as a time for challenge; it is also a time of opportunity.

The Conservative manifesto confirmed:

'The planning system is vital for a strong economy, for an attractive and sustainable environment, and for a successful democracy.'

And only last week Bob Neill stressed the importance of local, long term planning.

So just what is the RTPI's position?

Before the election, the RTPI's Board of Trustees agreed a Manifesto for Planning. This 5,000 word document is probably one of the most comprehensive statements ever to come from the Institute on the long term aspirations of the RTPI and the profession.

It summarises the RTPI's position on the leading issues facing planners. It emphasizes the opportunities for the RTPI and its members to help the Government develop a planning system that is fit for purpose.

After all, let's not forget we are a profession that is used to change. Change is our business. As the RTPI heads towards its centenary in 2014, we look back at our history and know that we have always been a profession which has wanted the best for its communities, for the society we serve.

And we work with ministers and civil servants to influence what they want to do.

Let's not forget we faced enormous change in 1990.

And then again in 2004.

Each time, as a profession, we influenced that change.

Each time, as a profession, we made it work.

Each time we argued for the need to retain the vital skills and expertise of planners to get the job done.

Each time, and most importantly of all, we delivered for our communities.

This time will be no different.

We will continue to make the case for planning. To show how important a foundation it is for investment; investment that is needed in infrastructure and services, in creating new jobs and in building new homes.

We will continue to make the case that planning has a vital role to play in tackling climate change.

We will continue to make the case that planning can deliver the aspirations and dreams of our communities.

And we will continue to make the case for planning at every available opportunity.

So I'd like to say a few words about what I'm going to call strategic planning, especially in the aftermath of the letter from the Secretary of State, Eric Pickles, which was one of the factors that caused us to set up a broad based grouping to argue the case for strategic planning with the Planning Officers Society.

In many instances we are on the same wave length as the Government and we are better placed than almost any other profession in delivering their agenda.

So let me be clear. The Institute strongly advocates the need for a level of planning that co-ordinates development, investment and infrastructure between different areas, provides a wide range of environmental policies, especially to mitigate climate change and ensures that the needs of the wider community are properly addressed.

We believe there is great potential in the principle of localism.

But we are urging, and will continue to urge, the Government to ensure that planning at the larger-than-local level is embedded in the system.

Let me also speak directly to the Ministers we have here today because I think there may be some confusion over our position.

The RTPI is neither arguing for the retention of the current system nor for the target culture, which we campaigned against for many years.

The RTPI believes in fresh thinking and is looking at ways in which localism can deliver, enabling greater democratic thinking and planning in the future.

However, in the meantime it is crucial that proper transitional arrangements be put in place so that this inevitable period of uncertainty does not result in the loss of impetus, a fall-off in commitment from those involved, or the loss of skills and innovative work built up over many years.

The RTPI will work constructively with the new Government. We wish to help develop a system which really works, one that is supported by good practice. A system which meets the Government's planning agenda, that addresses the needs of local communities, that continues to benefit the economy and the environment and which really shows planning at its very best both now and long into the future.

Planning is not the problem. It is a very big part of the solution.

Eric Pickles is already known for his fondness for saying he has three priorities: Localism, Localism, Localism.

Earlier this month, in this very venue, he also said: 'If you want people to feel connected to their communities. Proud of their communities. Then you give people a real say over what happens in their communities. And the power to make a difference'.

We very much hope the Secretary of State recognises the role planners can and do play in this process on a daily basis.

I believe localism, despite any reservations we have about it, can potentially be a very exciting agenda for planning. An agenda that we should embrace.

But the question on our lips is how will it work?

Localism does not have to equal nimbyism, but it could. And that's the challenge we have. To ensure that localism is inclusive, that parts of our society are not disenfranchised, that parts of our communities are not left on the outside of the circle.

And with the ability to create a vision for an area and to make decisions comes responsibility. An enormous responsibility. A responsibility to act in the community's best interests, a responsibility that is not swayed by short term gain or popularity, a responsibility to act with integrity.

We know that local people have an interest in their local area, we know that they galvanise together, will join forces when something matters to them. We understand and welcome the power of local initiatives and what groups and individuals within communities can achieve.

In so many ways, we are the profession for localism. We have deep roots into all communities. We have a whole raft of community engagement experience and skills. Day in, day out we work with communities.

Planning Aid, invented by a Conservative government in the 1970s is a great illustration of this. I am delighted that Bob Neill has agreed to visit a Planning Aid project.

Planning Aid is a truly unique partnership with government.

Over the years many thousands of RTPI members have volunteered their time freely to help the service. It represents good value for money and has helped communities in immeasurable ways.

So let's look at the Pickles test.

Planning Aid helps people feel connected to their communities.

Planning Aid helps to bring pride to these communities.

Planning Aid is instrumental in giving people a real say what happens in their communities.

And Planning Aid enables people to make a difference, a real difference.

Localism is nothing new to the RTPI, our members and the communities we serve.

We know we will be facing a new planning bill very soon.

Some of you have even said to me that the thought of coping with more changes is more than you can bear. Some of you have told me that you are worried about losing your jobs. I was speaking to a guy called Simon who had lost his job, spent many months applying for planning jobs all over the place and then suddenly landed on his feet and got his dream job working as a conservation officer. Simon never gave up because he passionately believed in planning and the contribution he could make.

And I in common with many of you became a planner because I was interested in the world around me, I care passionately about creating places of high quality and every day we strive to make the world a better place.

On behalf of the profession we will be scrutinizing that Bill, page by page, line by line. We may not agree with everything in it, but we will engage positively in the consultation process and we will do everything we can to make change and influence where change is necessary. Indeed, we have begun to do this already.

And nothing challenges us more than climate change. At last year's Convention we successfully launched our 7 Commitments - Planning to Live with Climate Change - which was commended by the Government as a model for other professions to follow.

Since then a great deal more work has been done.

Our compendium of good practice on climate change is already widely used by members and is available via our web site.

Climate change must be at the heart of everything we do as an Institute. And it must be at the very centre of planning education.

I am delighted to announce today an exciting new online project which will be launched by the end of this year. This will provide members with a series of new active learning resources - including one on climate change.

These resources will be cutting edge and enable all members, through a dedicated web site, to keep their skills up to date in an innovative way.

We recognise these are difficult and worrying times.

Limiting subscription increases and providing value for money services which are of most use to our members are essential for any membership organisation and particularly so during a recession.

Our popular Planners in the Workplace service is designed to support members throughout their careers and help them develop as planners, as managers and as leaders in the workplace.

Through Planners in the Workplace, available through our web site, we offer a range of support services, including support if you are one of those unfortunately adversely affected by the recession. We are at the threshold of an important time for our world. As well as dealing with the issues facing us here in the UK, let's not forget the impact we have further afield. The challenges of a global economic recession, climate change, of poverty and rapid urbanisation across the globe.

The eyes of the world are watching the new Coalition Government. The world is watching to see what the UK will do. And in this as we face planning reform, I say to you all, do not lose faith, do not turn your back on planning.

Planning is a marvellous thing. Let's stand firm, let's send a very clear message to the Government that we to help you, to take this opportunity to put UK planning on the map once again, to be at the forefront of good planning practice.

We are entering a new era of planning. A brave new world of planning.

Being a member of the RTPI is something to be very proud of.

I have been to that dinner party and been proud to say I am a town planner and after the initial smirk the person admits that actually it sounds very interesting, more exciting than their job and they didn't realize that's what we did. I've been into schools and colleges and heard from students on planning courses, IT courses, even hairdressing courses about how much they care about the environment, their locality, their place, their future. Without exception they say how exciting planning is.

We are entering a new era of planning. A brave new world of planning.

It's almost a hundred years since the RTPI came into being.

In just 4 years time, we will celebrate our centenary.

It's a long history.

It's a proud history.

We have been through a great deal.

A great deal many changes.

Times have changed and so has the RTPI.

And if the planners of the past century have shown anything it is this...that by and through their actions and their endeavors they have sent a clear message back through time and history.

Whatever challenges lie ahead – we will meet them.

Whatever opportunities there are – we will grasp them.

At my inaugural speech I promised to stand up for planning. And that is what the RTPI will continue to do.

So let's stand firm and stand up for planning, confident in our abilities and skills to help communities achieve their dreams, to help Government achieve their aspirations and to help make our world a better place.