

Valedictory Speech Ann Skippers

19 January 2011

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May I start by thanking everyone who has supported and helped me over the last year. I've been incredibly lucky to have received a warm welcome everywhere I've been.

A big thank you is also due to our staff who have admirably kept the show on the road in very difficult circumstances.

And I cannot let this moment pass without acknowledging the special contribution that my husband Clive has made. So thanks to everyone who has made this year such a special one.

To be President is a privilege and a very humbling experience. I have learnt so much about planning and planners, and also a great deal about myself.

The future of planning and the Institute

Over the next few minutes I would like to try and capture some of the things which have surprised, frustrated and inspired me this year, and to offer you some thoughts about the future of the Institute.

And the future of our Institute is important because it's the only way spatial planning, good planning, will be achieved.

It is through the Institute that planners have a voice, a voice that speaks to Ministers, to the public, to our colleagues in other professions. It is through the Institute that the outcomes of planning stand a chance.

We know what the future of planning is shaping up to be. With every government there is reform and a desire to make things better, to improve whatever system is in place. There is nothing wrong with that.

But there is a need for the principles of planning to be re-stated, to remain intact. The fundamental objectives of planning and its values don't just stop and start with every new Government. There is no beginning and end to providing shelter, eradicating poverty, providing a safe and secure environment, providing equal opportunity for all.

There is no beginning and end to our quest for a sustainable future.

Stronger and bolder policy stances

This year we have developed stronger and bolder policy stances. We have never before had such success with our political engagement. This is in no small part due to Tino's [Tino Hernandez, RTPI Head of Marketing and Communications] and expertise and that of his team.

But it's not about reacting to every last whim of the Government. It's not about making headlines in the newspapers, or stealing the limelight on radio shows. Not yet. We will achieve those goals by having our own strong vision of spatial planning and by developing our own strong sense of identity.

The bold tactics which we have put in place this year need to be accompanied by a deliberately bold strategy. We must be confident in our abilities and have confidence in our values to continue to stand up for planning. No matter how difficult or frustrating it becomes, we must continue to stand up for planning.

Think back to our larger than local campaign on strategic planning after the demise of regional spatial strategies had been signalled. We didn't ask for the status quo, we pointed out that some form of spatial coordination at a strategic level is essential.

Our collaboration with thirty, thirty, organisations ranging from RIBA and ICE, to Shelter, the WWF and RSPB as well as the TCPA and POS and the British Property Federation, didn't just result in positive headlines and a meeting with Eric Pickles, but a new way of working. By demonstrating our leadership, we reaped the benefits of working closely with others.

I very much hope that this collaboration will continue in the future. We have a window of opportunity to continue this work because there are other issues of a strategic nature common to all our interests that warrant our attention.

And this group is unique because of the breadth and depth of expertise brought to the table. Many politicians I've met this year have signalled their willingness to hear from the group. This group presents a major opportunity for us.

It is in any case impossible for us to work in isolation. And why would we want to?

Support and enthusiasm

And if the success of our political engagement surprised me, another surprise was the support and enthusiasm for what we are doing on the ground amongst our members.

Many of my speeches and meetings in our regions have been about planning reforms. From Greg Clark's first major speech as a Minister at our Convention in June to his more recent speeches when he mentions the RTP1 and indeed quotes from one of my speeches to our latest work on the Localism Bill. If our members know what we are doing then generally it seems we have their support.

This leads me on to one of my frustrations this year.

Frustration and risk

Despite our best endeavours our members do not know what we are doing, are still not fully aware of the breadth and depth of our activities.

I think the biggest risk to the RTPI is *[its own internal]* inertia. We must continue to shape strong and consistent policy positions, to be reliable and trustworthy partners to our sister institutes and other organisations.

We must be prepared to take what may feel like a few risks – how about separating the roles of chair of the board from the president, or having a two year presidential term in line with other planning institutes around the world?

We must still improve communications – for example between GA *[General Assembly]* and EXBO *[Board of Trustees]*, the committees and networks but above all our regions and nations and our members. We must ask ourselves if we were setting up the institute today, what would look like?

And not change simply for the sake of change but change because it will stand us in better stead. Because it will enable us to do more, to prioritise now resources are scarce, to value the expertise of our members much more, to conduct our business more effectively.

This year there will be other challenges too. More support for our members facing redundancy, more support for our students and licentiates, more support for our members as they face difficult times.

RTPI as an international organisation

One of the biggest surprises for me this year has been just how important the RTPI is internationally. We are, after all, an international organisation. On a world platform we are held in high esteem. Our views and the stances we take, matter. And the pioneers of British planning are still, rightly, revered.

We must not be complacent about this; our influence would be very easy to lose. Rather we must build on this and see it as the great opportunity it is.

America

Early on in the year I had the opportunity to go to the American Planning Association's Convention in New Orleans. Past Presidents warned me that I would love the experience and get the bug and indeed I have. It was hard not to catch it. From the moment I entered the auditorium and saw 5000 planners sitting in the same room to their President Bruce Knight standing up and opening the conference with a breezy good morning and 5000 planners immediately responding by saying Good Morning Bruce back, I was smitten. Smitten with their positive attitude, smitten with their passion for planning.

But the trip to New Orleans was bittersweet. Dutch planners had been first to arrive after the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and they have stayed. Taxi drivers still refer to areas of the city as wet or dry. New or refurbished homes stand alongside those abandoned in the floods with the high water mark still visible on their walls and heartbreakingly the sign of the rescue crews with the date the property was searched and whether bodies had been found inside still visible.

And as we watch the news with more flooding in Queensland, Brazil and Sri Lanka over recent days, surely it reinforces our interdependency as a world.

Canada

The presidential year is often a roller coaster and after an inspirational time in New Orleans, the volcanic ash cloud delayed my return home. It was therefore with some trepidation I headed back across the Atlantic to Montreal for the Canadian Institute of Planners Convention.

This was another inspirational experience. It was here I become fascinated by one of their keynote speakers, a Canadian anthropologist and explorer called Wade Davies. He spoke about the richness and diversity of human life.

He told us a story about a woman in Borneo. He had given the woman a cigarette. The woman had taken the cigarette and shredded it distributing single strands of tobacco amongst her community. Of course this had rendered the product useless, but the woman had fulfilled her obligation to share; her action had fulfilled her obligation to her community.

This story reminds us about the human dimension of what we do.

Losing sight of the bigger picture

For it's all too easy to get sucked in to the day job. Most of us get caught up in minutiae and sometimes fail to recognise the bigger picture. We sometimes fail to see the impact we have and the possibilities in front of us just waiting to be grasped.

Planning is not only about the physical – a building or place we can walk around, a window we can look out of, a wall we can touch. It is also about how we experience a building or place. How it makes us feel.

I met a man in Newcastle called David. He'd fallen in with a bad crowd, got involved with drugs. One day he decided to get out and drove to Newcastle. For ten days David slept in his car. When I met David he was living in accommodation provided by a charity called the Cyrenians.

Although I was there to see the building which had won a regional award, as David led me on a tour he described the building as organic. He meant that the building and its ambience as well as the care and support of staff had played a role in his recovery.

What better illustration that the buildings we build, the places we create, affect peoples' lives.

Wade Davies, the Canadian anthropologist is right. Planning is about humanity. It's about how we treat each other. There are people living in tents after disasters, people living with no shelter. Whilst people may care most about what happens in their own localities, they are not indifferent to what happens beyond them. And as a professional institute we have a big part to play.

Inspiration

Every week I have visited somewhere different. Every day I have learnt something new.

Our members have inspired me. In every visit to our regions and nations I have been shown innovative practice. I have met inspirational people, inspirational planners. Our successes are down in no small part to their energy and determination. I have met people who are passionate about their work and care deeply about what they do.

We are not ones for giving up. Many of the projects I've visited this year simply would not have happened without a great deal of tenacity. And I want to urge us not to lose our nerve. Not to lose our nerve about saying what we really think, putting forward the philosophy of planning and its core values. Not whinging or criticising or blaming someone else, but offering ideas, exemplary practice, inspiration.

Where the magic is

Only yesterday I was visiting the offices of Taylor Young in Manchester. As I walked round their offices, I noticed a large sign pinned to the wall with a quote from Hannah Mitchell on it. Hannah was a work placement student who on hearing about the planning and regeneration work the staff did in the office exclaimed 'so this is where the magic happens'.

So as we look toward the future today with the inauguration of our new President Richard Summers in just a few moments time, we should look forward with confidence, but also with more than just a passing glance to the values of planning which stand us on such solid ground.

I have a quiet confidence about the Institute. And whilst we are not generally ones for blowing our own trumpets, we should be proud of our achievements. But it is up to us to fight for what we believe in. To show what can be achieved, how much it means to people. It is up to us to stand up for planning.

Ladies and Gentleman - thank you for giving me this opportunity to represent our profession, a profession of which I am so proud to be a part of and love so much.