

## **The RTPI SW Conference Regional Planning and LDFs 14 July 2010**

### **‘Engaging with the new Government to improve the planning system’ (alternatively titled ‘a brave new world of planning’) Presentation by Ann Skippers, RTPI President**

I want to start off by asking you to think about what sort of animal you think the RTPI might be? I spent quite a lot of time, too much time probably, pondering this question. I came up with a giraffe.

Easily recognisable, tall and elegant, feet firmly planted on the ground, light of foot, eats leaves from the highest branches, but vulnerable to attack.

In many ways this sums up the RTPI. However the RTPI isn’t an object or thing. Although it is an organisation, it is a membership organisation and that means it relies on our members to get involved. We really have a very small staff team. But now that I’m six months into the ‘job’ of being President, I can reassure you that we really do punch above our weight.

Today I am here to talk to you about the RTPI’s engagement with the new Government. We are currently in an unprecedented time of political and economic upheaval. It is a critical time for our profession. For whatever anyone thinks at a personal level, when David Cameron and Nick Clegg exchanged vows in the garden of No 10, a new era began for us all. Right now it feels pretty uncertain.

As Robert F Kennedy said in a speech in Cape Town, South Africa back in 1966 “There is a Chinese curse which says, ‘May he live in interesting times’. Like it or not, we live in interesting times...”

### **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?

**So it is a time of immense challenge, but also of opportunity.**

### **So just how does the RTPI go about engaging with the Government and what do we want to say to them?**

First of all we have a political engagement strategy. We monitor all Ministerial and departmental announcements through press notices, speeches as well as political links and internal CLG sources and the debates and questions in Parliament.

Our key message is that we wish to engage positively and constructively with the new Government. The RTPI is an apolitical organisation. Professional institutes have a very different role to other organisations. We are not a campaigning organisation although this year we have run some campaigns on the cuts in funding to Scottish universities and the job cuts in Northern Ireland. We pick the issues carefully. But we do a lot of lobbying, but this is done discretely.

## **So what have we been up to?**

We have made a good start in building relationships with the new Government. We had our first meeting with the Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, the Minister for Decentralisation the week before the Planning Convention. We took Greg Clark to Wandsworth to see examples of good planning. It would be very helpful if you could send us examples of good planning that you are proud of and which might fit into the Coalition's agenda as the Minister has agreed to meet us again. He has also accepted our offer to see a Planning Aid project and to meet our young planners.

The visit was quickly followed by our Planning Convention. Both Greg Clark and Bob Neill MP, the Local Government and Planning Minister attended the Convention and arrived specifically to hear a presentation from the young planners and the Presidential address. After Greg Clark's presentation to the Convention, both Ministers took questions from delegates.

The following day we held our Parliamentary Reception at the Palace of Westminster and it was a particular coup to have the Rt Hon Secretary of State Eric Pickles MP attending and speaking at this event. This event meant that members and staff of the RTPI and our major stakeholders to get across our key messages. He stated that he would be 'encouraging' smaller local planning departments to merge.

As well as Ministers we also build up relationships with civil servants. Andrew Wells will lead the Decentralisation and Localism Bill team. We will seek to influence the coming legislation before it is published in draft. Our staff continue to meet regularly with CLG, other departments and agencies including attendance at the CLG Planning Sounding Board. Steve Quartermain, the Chief Planner, is a good advocate for planning and we have a positive relationship with Steve.

Wherever possible we also highlight the role of Planning Aid and the links between Planning Aid and the new agenda which we think are obvious and many.

We have also contacted a number of other organisations alongside the Planning Officer's Society to see if they would work alongside us to say to the Government that there is a need to put in place planning at the larger than local level.

## **So what are our key messages?**

### **RTPI Manifesto**

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. It is available from the RTPI website [www.rtpi.org.uk](http://www.rtpi.org.uk)

The Manifesto is a 14 point campaign which can be summarised as

**□ Goals for planning**

- Standing up for planning
- Making the system work better
- Going beyond sustainable development
- Providing better planning skills and resources

**□ Planning Ahead**

- Supporting national spatial planning frameworks
- Delivering infrastructure
- Strategic planning for strategic issues
- Producing local plans for local issues

**□ Making the right decisions**

- Moving from development control to development management
- Retaining independent examination of planning decisions
- Securing spatial assessment of policies

**□ Living globally**

- Acting globally
- Planning for the long term

**Our key messages are**

- We are on the same wave length as the Government and better placed than almost any other profession in delivering their agenda.
- We will work constructively with the Government to develop a new 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 best now and long into the future.

**So on strategic planning, what is the RTPI's position?**

- Planning at the larger-than-local level needs to be embedded in the system. We advocate the need for a level of planning that coordinates 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 addressed.
- The RTPI is neither arguing for the retention of those elements of the current system that the Government has been mandated to abolish nor for the target culture which we have campaigned against for many years.

## **And what about localism?**

We know Eric Pickles has three priorities; localism, localism, localism. The RTPI believes that there is great potential in the principle of localism. We believe in fresh thinking and in looking at ways in which localism can deliver, enabling greater democratic thinking and planning in the future. But with localism comes the need for vision and leadership, community entrepreneurs, an approach that really is inclusive and isn't just the 'usual suspects'. Localism does not have to equal NIMBYISM, but it could. And with the ability to create a vision for an area and to make decisions comes 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 need proper transitional arrangements to 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, the loss of skills and innovative work built up over many years and of the evidence base which is vital to policy and decision making.

**But our overarching message to Ministers is that planning is not the problem. It is a very big part of the solution.**

The Decentralisation and Localism Bill will be a priority. We will need to use our resources effectively and will be taking a multi-strand approach to this including tapping into the expertise we have within our regions and networks as well as contact with individual MPS. Although the Bill is not anticipated until the autumn or early winter, work will continue apace over the summer and of course during the passage of the Bill.

And work will carry on right through to party conference season. Last year we held a very successful fringe event at the Conservative Party Conference. This year our Marketing and Comms Team were well ahead of the game in booking a slot at both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Conferences and so we hope to arrange meetings at each of the English party conferences.

So we know that we face major change. We are at the threshold of an important time. Let's send out a very clear message that planning is not the problem. It is a very big part of the solution.

I hope you agree that the RTPI is doing a great deal to engage with the Government and to develop ideas and thinking of its own to influence the Government's agenda.

My final message is let's stand firm and **stand up for planning**, confident in our abilities and skills to make a real difference.