

Proud of Planning Proud of Planners

Presidential Address Dartmouth House, Charles Street, London, 16th January 2013

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Ladies and gentlemen I appear before you today with a sense of pride and optimism.

I am proud and honoured to represent the Institute and serve its members as the 98th president. In taking the chain of office I am optimistic about the future of the profession and the Institution.

As I stand here a new president, in the shoes of the many great men and women, who have gone before me, my first duty is a pleasurable one, and that is to thank our president for 2012 Colin Haylock.

With Gratitude

Colin has done a tremendous job during his year. He has represented the profession to great effect and has established strong working relationships with key players including the former planning minister Greg Clark. He has endeared himself to all he has met with his warmth and enthusiasm. I would like to thank Colin most sincerely for all his hard work and efforts during the past year. He has been a fantastic ambassador for the Institute.

I would like to thank my employer Southend Borough Council for its support over the last two years as I embarked on the road to the presidency. Southend Council has the foresight and acumen to see the value of supporting its staff to develop and excel in their chosen area of expertise. I have no doubt such vision has been instrumental in it becoming Council of the year for 2012. The support of employers whether they are in the public or private sector is vital to the continued success of the Institute and the promotion of the profession. I hope my becoming president will give encouragement to others in the public services to support and encourage their staff to become involved in the Institute and in so doing develop their professionalism and enhance their skills. Chartered status is an important hallmark and those who have it are a valuable resource to employers be it in the public, private or voluntary sectors. This is a point I will return to later in my address.

On this auspicious occasion I would like to say that I am proud of my parents Breda and P.J. whose love and support has sustained me throughout my studies and professional career. I am also indebted

to my wife Caroline and my family for their loyalty and support without which a president could not hope to have a successful year.

Finally, I would like to thank Trudi Elliot and all the staff at Botolph Lane for their support over the last two years in the run up to the presidency and I very much look forward to working with them and our vice president Cath Ranson in 2013.

The tradition of the Institute

The year 2013, is an auspicious one. One hundred years previously on 21st November 1913, the first meeting of the Town Planning Institute was convened and chaired by Thomas Adams. A Council was elected and met for the first time in December the same year.¹ Adams was subsequently elected President on 13th March 1914.² Whilst Thomas Adams' definition of planning as 'nothing less than the control and direction, on scientific principles, of all forms of civic growth and all kinds of land development in the country as well as in the town'³ is somewhat dated particularly in the context of the modern view of planning as development management his view that 'the best plan is the one which presents the highest ideals that can be realised in practice'⁴ still has resonance even today.

On the eve of our centenary I wish to look both back to our great tradition and forward to our even greater future. Colin represents the immediate past and as continuity is important if there is anything that Colin has brought to the presidency that I wish to continue it is his warmth and ability to engage with all those he met. In my presidential year I am tremendously looking forward to meeting members on my regional visits and learning of the achievements of our members. Sharing the pride in the achievements of planners and planning.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Planning Aid, the flagship of the Institute. I have in the past been a volunteer and I am tremendously proud of my involvement. I look forward to meeting volunteers on my travels around the regions and hearing of work they do. Next year is also the centenary of the Institute. It is a time to celebrate all that is good about the profession and to have pride both in the practice of planning and those who undertake it.

I was inspired to become a planner by the achievements of great men such as Thomas Adams, Patrick Geddes, Raymond Unwin and Patrick Abercombie. These men made a huge difference to the lives of people. They created places for people to live, as well as places of beauty and inspiration. I am sure these men shared Ruskin's view that 'when we build, let us think that we build for ever'.⁵ Adams not

only brought the practice of town planning to the UK but internationally working in both Canada and the United States.

The achievements of these men are renowned the world over and their work encouraged the growth of the profession and the practice of town and country planning. The formation of the Institute in 1914, gave an important impetus to the spread of planning practice. The subsequent award of a royal charter in 1956 was also an important milestone.

As our royal charter states planning is both an art and a science; we aim to create places of beauty and aesthetic quality⁶ but places that function in the context of the natural environment and connected by efficient transport links. Planning is about the arrangement of spatial patterns over time.⁷ As Adams as said we use scientific methods, sometimes adapted from other scientific pursuits to underpin our work. Abercrombie expressed the concept well when he said that Town and Country Planning offers 'a guiding hand to the trend of natural evolution as a result of a careful study of the place itself, and its external relationships. The result is to be more than a piece of skilful engineering or satisfactory hygiene or successful economics: it should be a social organism and a work of art'.⁸ What we would call today sustainable development.

And all this is done in the public interest.

This is important. Very important to who we are.

We act as society's conscience.

Planners are the conscience of those developers who try to over-develop.

We are the conscience of those politicians who make decisions on planning applications based purely on political grounds.

We are the conscience of local residents who try to defeat much needed development proposals on grounds of pure self-interest.

It is a difficult role and one that has attracted criticism. Despite this we must never shy away from this important vocation.

The Present

In the UK recent planning reform in each Nation has created a level of interest in planning that has been unprecedented in recent times, which is a very good thing. It generated a level of debate about the role of planning that had not been seen since the early days of the profession.

In England the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) identifies 12 core land-use planning principles including that the system should be genuinely plan-led, empowering local people to shape their surroundings.⁹ This affirmation of the plan led system and the support for the development plan is most welcome by everyone. It is the basis on which a successful and responsive planning system is based. The Framework states the planning system is not simply about scrutiny, but instead should be a creative exercise in finding ways to enhance and improve the places in which people live their lives. As planners, we would say that this is what they have been doing for years. It is part of our professional DNA.

However, to achieve creativity you need talented and skilled people. The impact of the recent economic recession and the continuing squeeze on public finances is having a dramatic effect upon public services. A creative planning system requires properly resourced planning services. It is regrettable that planning has been hard hit by the recent cuts. Spending on planning and development services in Local Authorities has reduced 'drastically' by 24.2% over the last two years and the number of professional planners employed by Local Planning Authorities has dropped by 12.6% between October 2010 and October 2012.¹⁰

It is in the interests of everyone to have properly resourced planning services both in financial terms and in terms of experienced personnel. As well as a reduction in numbers there is a substantial reduction in experienced and knowledgeable planners. These are the creative professionals envisaged by the NPPF. The recent cuts have tended to impact upon that cadre of planners that are highly experienced because they tend to be the most expensive in terms of cost to the organisation but they have the most value in terms of their knowledge and experience – the type of professionals you need in such straitened economic times.

As Bannon has pointed out 'the aim, scope and nature of planning varies from country to country and each society must devise a planning system and foster a planning profession relevant to its peculiar requirements.'¹¹ Since its inception the Royal Town Planning Institute has strived to provide the leadership to achieve such an aim.

The RTPI has been open to working with governments in Scotland, Wales, England and Ireland both North and South to help develop and improve planning systems for a modern age. And we remain wholeheartedly committed to such engagement. We work with our sister Institute's in association with international organisations such as the UN and European Union to press the case for planners and planning in helping build a sustainable world.

However, recent past presidents have made it clear that criticising planning systems is one thing but criticism of planning professionals is not only unjustified but unacceptable. For example, Ann Skippers has said '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.'

I very much agree with her clarion call: "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"¹² and I say to be proud of planning and proud of planners.

Our working lives are spent trying to improve or enhance peoples' lives. Whether that is in the private sector providing advice and guidance to clients or in the public sector trying to improve or modify development proposals or in the voluntary sector working with communities or individuals and assisting them in having their voice heard. We should take pride in this work and showcase the achievements of those who undertake it.

The future

This a very difficult time for the nation and the wider world. Despite this I am optimistic. I am positive about the future and the ability of the planning profession to shape that future. Planners made a huge contribution to the rebuilding of the country following the Second World War and the landmark 1947 Act was instrumental in delivering the growth and development required at that time.¹³ The task that faces the country now is in many ways of a similar magnitude. Planning and planners can deliver the country from recession now as it did then. We have the professionals with the skills, expertise and creativity to achieve this. We are a modern profession for a modern age.

The RTPI is an international organisation with members across the world. It is striking the similarity of challenges that planners face in very different circumstances.

Last year I attended the Institute's planning awards and one of those presented was for young planner of the year. I was struck by the calibre of the candidates. I was impressed by their confidence, assuredness, and professionalism. To me this is a good barometer of the quality and calibre of the young professionals being produced by our planning schools.

I believe the future of our profession is in good hands but we must not be complacent. The introduction of the assessment of professional competence (APC) has been an important step in not only maintaining but raising professional standards and in so doing we are creating more rounded and adept town planners.

This supply of highly qualified and well trained professionals will be important in delivering the growth and sustainable development the country requires.

We practice the art and science of town planning in the public interest; indeed, as chartered planners we are obliged to do so. Many of us came into the profession to make a difference to the lives of people. However, as a profession we have somehow allowed ourselves to be characterised by process and an emphasis on procedures. Patsy Healey in her 2007 gold medal address said that she came to the view that 'government activity had swallowed up the planning project.' She went on to say 'And the project we are engaged in, despite the regular avalanches of criticism against 'the planners' or 'the planning system', grows in importance rather than diminishing.'¹⁴

It is regrettable to say that the ill-informed criticism has remained with us since 2007. However, Healey is right in that the 'planning project' as she has termed it is not a government activity. It is a sphere of professional activity. And I agree with Healey that its importance continues to grow. Modern town planning is about the exercise of professional judgement in a political context. Modern planning professionals have the skills and abilities to deliver on this difficult task. Chartered town planners in particular represent the benchmark of skills and expertise that are commensurate with a modern professional. The Institute has worked hard over the last number of years to ensure that the standards are high and continue to improve. As I have mentioned earlier a key aspect in improving the calibre of

future chartered planners has been the introduction of the APC, which although rigorous and difficult, has been important in maintaining and raising professional standards.

Throughout the world the RTPI and chartered status is highly regarded and recognised as a mark of professionalism and expertise. Over the years the Institute has been called on to accredit universities all over the world including in South Africa, Botswana and Hong Kong. It has assisted in advising on the establishment of planning systems and professional Institutions. Chartered town planners from the UK have made important contributions to planning practice throughout the world. World-wide the value of town planning and planners is recognised. Mitchell Silver, the President of the American Planning Association said on his recent UK visit that in the US: 'For the most part, people see the value of planning and want planners to be involved in job creation, safe schools, protecting neighbourhoods and water quality.'¹⁵ Whilst at home the focus has been on process and an increasing characterisation as bureaucrats. Nothing could be further from the truth. Each year our annual awards showcase the excellent work of the profession and the confidence, enthusiasm and expertise of young planning professionals.

Young men and women that would grace any profession.

That is why I am especially looking forward to this year's awards which have been refreshed and launched as the RTPI Awards for Planning Excellence. This will complement my objectives for 2013 and reinforces what I hope to do during my presidential year.

Proud of Planning, Proud of Planners

I have felt for some time that as a profession we have become inhibited and reticent to proclaim and espouse the vital and valuable contribution we make to civil society and the national well-being. What we do is hugely important to the lives of people and should not, nor must not, be characterised as a purely bureaucratic process. This view does have some resonance with exasperation expressed by Adams who became frustrated with 'the routine of planning control ... [and] the lack of opportunity to do constructive work in planning'.¹⁶ We are creative and should rightly be proud of what we do. Proud of what our predecessors have achieved and what we achieve day in day out. That is why I intend to make it my mission this year on the eve of our centenary to showcase and highlight our achievements as chartered planners. I am proud of the profession and proud of planners.

I opened my address by expressing my optimism and I conclude by restating my optimism for the future. In the words of Thomas Sharp: 'It is no overstatement to say that the simple choice between planning and non-planning, between order and disorder, is a test-choice for English democracy [and I would say democracy in all Nations]...And plan we must – not for the sake of our physical environment only, but to save and fulfil democracy itself.'¹⁷

In the words of another recently elected president: 'Yes we can'. My optimism for the future leads me to say likewise, yes we can. I say not only, yes we can, but yes we must.

Plan we must.

Be proud of planning and proud of planners.

And as your President for 2013 I intend to showcase just what we do.

Thank you for listening and I look forward to seeing you at our reception.

¹ 'Planning for Town and Country – context and achievement 1914 – 1989' (RTPI 75th anniversary brochure).

² Adams was president of the British Amateur Press Association in 1891, first president of the Canadian Planning Institute, vice president of the American City Planning Institute, first paid official of the Garden City Association, first full-time planning consultant and the first town planning inspector. M. Simpson, 'Thomas Adams, 1871-1940', in G.E. Cherry (ed.), *Pioneers in British Planning*, (London, 1981), p. 41.

³ T. Adams, 'Town planning in Canada', *Journal of the Town Planning Institute*, (1917-18), p. 15.

⁴ T. Adams, 'State, regional and city planning in America', p. 9, Adams papers quoted in M. Simpson, 'Thomas Adams, 1871-1940', in G.E. Cherry (ed.), *Pioneers in British Planning*, (London, 1981), p. 38.

⁵ J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, (1849) p. 171.

⁶ As Cherry has said 'Twentieth-century town planning, at least, shares that one aspect of an urban past: design and purposive layout for artistic merit.' G.E. Cherry, *Cities and Plans*, (New York, 1988), p. 2.

⁷ G. Chadwick, *A Systems View of Planning*, (Oxford, 1977), p. 24.

⁸ L.P. Abercrombie, *Town and Country Planning*, (Oxford, 1933), p. 27.

⁹ Department for Communities and Local Government, *National Planning Policy Framework*, (March 2012), p.p. 5-6.

¹⁰ S. Adam, M. Brewer, J. Browne, et. al., *The IFS Green Budget 2012*, Institute for Fiscal Studies, (February 2012), p.p. 139-141; 'Feeling the squeeze', *Planning Magazine*, 14 December 2012, p.p. 12-13.

¹¹ M.J. Bannon, (ed.) *The Emergence of Irish Planning, 1880-1920*, p. 14.

¹² Ann Skippers, Valedictory speech, delivered in London on 19 January 2011.

¹³ For example, see G. Dix, 'Patrick Abercrombie, 1879-1953', in G.E. Cherry (ed.), *Pioneers in British Planning*, (London, 1981), p.p. 122-124; G. E. Cherry, *Cities and Plans*, (London, 1988), p.p. 137-179.

¹⁴ P. Healey, 'Re-invigorating the Planning Project', RTPI Gold Medal Recipient's Speech, delivered at Newcastle University on 9th March 2007.

¹⁵ 'A Man with a Mission', *Planning Magazine*, 14 December 2012, p. 16.

¹⁶ T. Adams, 'State, regional and city planning in America', p. 3, Adams papers quoted in M. Simpson, 'Thomas Adams, 1871-1940', in G.E. Cherry (ed.), *Pioneers in British Planning*, (London, 1981), p. 24.

¹⁷ T. Sharp, *Town Planning*, (Harmondsworth, 1940), p. 143.