

Keynote Address

Helen Hayes MP

Thank you very much for that introduction—it isn't an everyday occurrence for an after dinner speaker to be introduced by her dad, so let me assure you all, in case it is a little weird for you, that it is a little weird for me too!

I'm hugely grateful to Trudi, Rory and the organising committee for inviting me to speak this evening—I am not a regular on the after dinner speaking circuit, so I hope that I can do the role justice!

I see that the title of this conference is "Making Planning Great Again"—you looked to all the best people for your inspiration!

So, I wondered exactly how far the inspiration from the 45th President of the US extended. I was scanning the programme expecting to see, perhaps, a workshop on how to write the mother of all s.106 agreements entitled "We're gonna build a wall, and they're gonna pay for it ...".

Hopefully that's about the extent of it.

Trudi said that you would like to hear the gossip from Westminster. At this stage in a Parliamentary year, it is usual for there to be many rumours circulating about the possible content of legislation proposed in the Queen's Speech, and possible party conference announcements. But we are not living in usual times. We are at the end of an extraordinary week, which has seen the Second Reading of the EU Withdrawal Bill—the biggest direct power-grab since Henry VIII; the government refusing to vote on Opposition Day motions, resulting in a situation where the expressed will of the House of Commons is in direct contradiction to government policy. And then, quietly yesterday, we had an announcement about planning policy, promising a new approach to housing needs assessments and a reform of the duty to co-operate. That this last announcement wasn't trailed in any way, is testament to the absolute dominance of Brexit—which means both everything and nothing at the same time.

It means everything because it will have a profound impact on almost every aspect of our economy, public services and communities, including planning, construction and environmental legislation. And for the present, it means an extraordinarily sparse legislative programme, and many areas in which policy announcements and progress are delayed, reflecting both a lack of capacity in the civil service and ministerial teams and a lack of focus on domestic issues. In my view, as someone who is a passionate Remainer, representing an overwhelmingly pro-Remain constituency, this current predicament, even while the Brexit negotiations are underway, is all part of the damage it will do.

I came to planning by accident rather than by design. I've been interested, for as long as I can remember, in issues of social justice and fairness, and in the depth, complexity and richness of our cities—and I'd imagined that there was some other way to combine these two interests, but in the end—having spent my teenage years determined not to work in the same field as either of my parents—I grudgingly accepted that essentially, it was planning. And eventually, I'd worked in planning for long enough to apply to the RTPI for recognition as a proper planner.

Having decided four years ago to work in a different field altogether, it has been an unexpected pleasure to find myself as the only recently-practising planner in Parliament. It has been a joy to host events in Parliament for women in planning and for PlanningOut, the fantastic new network organisation for LGBT+ people working in planning and related professions; and politically, my first 18 months were dominated by the Housing and Planning Act—one of the most significant pieces of planning legislation for many years, and in my view, one of the most damaging.

But more widely than that, since I stood for election to Parliament in 2015, we have witnessed extraordinary and profound change, both in our country and in global politics and across multiple different axes—Brexit and the election of Donald Trump indicating that for many people, mainstream politics

simply hasn't delivered; the rise to power of Emmanuel Macron in France signalling in a different way a not dissimilar rejection of the political establishment—a breakdown of trust, because the economy and public services are simply not delivering, the big narratives failing to ring true with people's real life every day experience.

While it is easy to feel bewildered and despairing about these seismic changes and their impacts, and to keep on tweeting fervently into the night, understanding the factors that led to this current predicament is vital in telling us where to go next, and I think in some ways, planning offers some insights which can perhaps be applied more widely.

My frequently-repeated mantra, both in the debates on the Housing and Planning Act and elsewhere, is that planning is a progressive discipline, because its fundamental purpose is to broker the gap between individual interests and collective community needs, and to make sure that the pursuit of individual goals for individual sites contribute to wider objectives of place-making, do not compromise the amenity or harm the interests of existing residents and businesses, and that those who will profit from new development contribute to funding the infrastructure and services for which new development will generate a need.

But I think that a combination of the impact of government funding cuts on local authorities, a lack of focus in government policy on design quality since the introduction of the NPPF and the de-commissioning of CABE, the expansion of permitted development rights, the slashing of government funding for both social housing and infrastructure and a definition of affordable housing which is completely broken, means that planning is at risk of being seen to be the protector of private interests rather than the negotiator of public good. While modern urban planning was established in a post-war age of a paternalistic public sector, we are now living in an age of participation—and that requires some serious consideration.

Communities want to be more involved in decisions about the future of their area—at precisely the time when Councils are less well-resourced than they have ever been. I believe that we can't possibly deliver the scale and speed of development we need to address the housing crisis in the UK without the in-depth involvement of communities in every aspect of design, planning and construction. Effective, meaningful community engagement is time and resource intensive—a few exhibition boards are simply not going to be up to the job in the age of social media and online engagement—but it is absolutely essential to gaining both the formal and informal consent of communities to build the homes that are needed both now and for future generations.

So that is my first challenge when considering the theme of “Making Planning Great Again”—it is a progressive profession, but in the 21st century, its progressive intent will be measured by who is involved as much as by what is proposed.

There are also huge issues about remedy and recourse to redress in our age of participation. Our legal system has been in recent months a vital measure of last resort on some of the biggest issues—securing a vote in Parliament on the Brexit deal, and forcing the government to take action on air quality—in both cases, it was outrageous that legal action was necessary, but a huge relief that it was possible and successful. But it is also harder and harder for individuals to access justice against institutions via judicial review; and the collapse of trust in public servants across the board means that even judicial inquiries—which should be the ultimate example of dispassionate independence—are unable to command public confidence.

There has long been a consensus that one of the core aims of good planning is to provide certainty to those who are seeking to build, to enable investors to commit resources to deliver homes and jobs which may take time to come to fruition, without the risk of a shock change of planning policy. There is no doubt that this is important—particularly in this time when the certainty of planning policy is likely in many areas to be completely eclipsed by the uncertainty of Brexit—but I would argue that it should also be a core aim of good planning to deliver certainty for communities. As a local councillor and an MP, I have been struck on many occasions by the mismatch between the certainty that many residents believe the planning system gives them, and the looseness of its interpretation combined with a lack of capacity for

enforcement, which can sometimes leave people feeling let down. Certainty means more than simply whether the finished development looks like the plan drawings or not, it is also about affordability. In communities with high housing need, new homes which are way beyond the reach of anyone on a low to average income will never be embraced as a solution to the housing crisis, because they are not a solution to the housing crisis as it is experienced locally.

So, my second challenge in “Making Planning Great Again”, is that what is delivered matters only as much—but not more than—who it is delivered for.

My final reflection concerns the casualty of public service cuts which is never documented or accounted for, and that is the value of relationships. Whether it is the loss of institutional memory in councils which have shed layers of senior officers; or the loss of relationship between customers and a longstanding local shop forced to close by increasing rents; or the loss of capacity for relationship in communities dominated by short term private renters, relationships are the hidden fabric of our communities, and if they are not cared for, fostered, protected and recognised, the best formal planning processes in the world will not be able to substitute for them. So I think it should be a critical part of our thinking about 21st century planning to find ways to recognise, document, protect and foster relationships—whether by planning effectively for an ageing population of baby boomers who want to remain engaged and involved in their communities in later life rather than being cossetted and shut away; or by finding ways to protect longstanding independent businesses which are often at the heart of communities; or by ensuring that new homes in an area are for local people in housing need—the social fabric of our communities matters just as much as its physical fabric.

Each of these reflections—who is involved, who is it for, and how are local relationships protected, feeds into a much bigger objective, and that is the rebuilding of trust, which has been eroding for many years, but which in the Grenfell Tower tragedy, for many people was finally broken. The planning and development industry is critical to tackling some of the biggest challenges the UK faces—to deliver the homes and infrastructure we need, and to safeguard and protect our environment—but this absolutely cannot be done through business as usual.

Brexit and Trump have changed the political landscape completely—but their roots are in the failures of the mainstream to deliver for significant numbers of people over many many years—when the mainstream does not deliver, people will look elsewhere. Planning has been a fundamental part of that mainstream, and it can be—I passionately believe—a huge part of the rebuilding of public trust. To do so, it must focus on restoring a social purpose, involving and engaging communities and delivering just outcomes.