

Keynote address

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**J.P.L. 3* I'm particularly pleased to be here. It was one of the highlights of the year when I was Secretary of State because on each occasion this conference manages to have the kinds of discussions which I wish we could have more widely. Of course when you are a minister you spend a good deal of your time in discussions of one sort or another and not least in the European Union, where so many decisions are made sitting round a table with the rest of your colleagues.

One of the joys of the English language and our way of speaking is that we use the irony, the satire and just plain belly laughs which makes it possible very often for us to get a point across which sticks in peoples' minds for a very long time. My concern therefore about your conference frankly was that being entitled 'Modernising for the Millennium' you might have come here with too serious an approach to your discussions. I think there is a real need in the planning profession and indeed among lawyers, and certainly among those concerned with property, to recognise that the world out there does think that we take ourselves rather seriously.

Sometimes I think people look at us and say that we have lost the big picture. We are so concerned with the minutiae, with the legal arguments, with the particularities of planning that we don't remember what we are here for. Remembering what you are here for is important.

It is a vital part of our ability to gain the confidence of the public as a whole for the planning system. It's all too easy to believe that planning is something that is so natural to the British, such a sensible way of doing things that they'll put up with almost anything. I am increasingly a believer that the system is now so distant and so foreign to very large numbers of people that it is in severe danger of losing credibility throughout the country. It is widely believed that we have lost the plot and that planning has become arbitrary, expensive, and above all interminable.

It is clearly easy to find examples and T5 comes readily to mind. It has taken the inspector two years to decide whether you have a replacement for a sewage farm or not. T5 is an example of how not to run a planning system and the danger of T5 is that it has a real effect right through the system.

I believe that it is quite wrong that government should allow that kind of Inquiry to go forward without having made a statement as to what they intend and having asked parliament to agree to it in principle. Thereafter the inspector operates within a defined remit, and reports rapidly. If we don't do that then I think we undermine the whole system right down to the bottom. You cannot expect people to take the system seriously when they see these examples of decisions being made so painfully. There is obviously a national interest to which the government ought to have paid attention, and made a clear statement before they reached the level of the planning inquiry itself.

There are some issues which are clearly not of the ordinary kind. Of course they have different ways of enacting compulsory purchase orders in the rest of Europe. People often mention that in France they pay you for it; they make sure that the deal is good enough for you to be less dissatisfied. Indeed I personally think that we could do a lot worse than to reverse the decision that was made immediately after the First World War to restrict compensation to market price; instead of the 10 per cent over it which was traditional throughout the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century there were some times when 10 per cent of the GNP was being spent on infrastructure programmes, so there was a huge amount of development that was going on, with vast sums being expended. That development was **J.P.L. 4* possible because the system that we had made it more popular

with those who were affected, and certainly made it easier to get permission. Of course I don't want to go entirely back to those days; after all there was little chance for the real problems of localities to be heard. However, we certainly need to make some sensible changes about the big programmes and the big decisions instead of passing them down to an inspector.

The second thing we need to do is to think very much more seriously about the way in which the planning operation works in detail. I say this to you, including the members for the Royal Town Planning Institute who have been allowed in for the first time this year, for an important reason. We very often forget that the planning system is immensely expensive to the community as a whole. Britain is in severe danger of becoming sclerotic because we find it impossible to make a decision about new projects without very long-winded procedures. In a competitive world it is not possible to continue with that kind of method. We have to find something radically different, I don't mean tinkering at the edges, I mean something which will fundamentally change the present situation. Something which means that unlike most of our competitors we can do the things that we ought to do without such long delays that they become immensely more expensive.

Modernisation is not a trendy word beloved of politicians who have little to offer than that they are modern. It's actually a crucial word in a world which is increasingly competitive. If we do not modernise our system of planning we will fall behind our competitors in providing the basic ability to operate in a world where change is faster and faster. How can we go along with a system which is designed for controlling small scale developments, designed for dealing with small things, if it is totally unsuited for the big issues and the big programmes which we need? This becomes more important today because of the increasing number of these programmes which are produced by private enterprise.

After the First World War the belief was accepted that only government and local government should 'do' infrastructure. Now that has moved to one in which we expect the private producer to make it possible for us to modernise. So we have to recognise that the private provider cannot wait, cannot keep his capital waiting, must do it rapidly--if he is to do it at all. And for that reason I hope very much this conference will be one where real radical proposals will be uppermost in your mind, proposals for the changing of the planning system so that it can cope with the problems of today.

I hope that we will do so recognising just how competitive this world is. I don't know how many of you bet, but those who do may have noticed how the turf accountants, as bookies have chosen to call themselves, have taught us very simply that we do not have the kind of sovereignty, even over our taxation system, that once we had. The Internet means that they can move to Gibraltar and it doesn't matter how much you change the law about taxation, they can avoid it. When we talk about the taxation of motor vehicles, you may have noticed how rapidly the owners of lorry fleets have discovered that they can move to France or the Netherlands and thereby miss the extra cost which we placed upon them. The idea that we, as a nation, can operate on our own, make our own decisions irrespective of the rest of Europe, is, it seems to me, pretty barmy. And yet as a nation we still think we can operate in isolation on so many matters. Planning is one of those; we are actually in competition with the rest of Europe, not just on the basis of cost, but also on the straight basis of whether people come to London, come to Britain, or go to Paris, to Frankfurt or to Rome.

If we want to attract to this country and keep those who are most entrepreneurial here, then we have to have a system which enables us to provide not only the services they need, but the opportunities that they want to develop and grow. Now no-one could accuse me of ignoring the past, or being unaware of our great heritage; I defend to the uttermost the concept that we should keep what is best and maintain **J.P.L. 5* and uphold buildings like this and their equivalent right the way down to the modern age. However it has to be done by a nation that recognises that life is for living and buildings are for living in. If we want to have the sort of society able to afford the kinds of cultural expressions which are so dear to us, we have got to find a way of enabling the Millennium to come to us at a speed which is competitive and not at a cost which is prohibitive. We have to recognise reality.

If I can leave you with one message for the rest of the conference, it is the importance of the realities. The planning system today is losing its credibility with a growing number of people; it cannot deal with the biggest of its problems at a cost and a speed which is remotely adequate and unless we take radical steps for the new Millennium it will be the planning system which will be at the heart of Britain's inability to compete.