
Commentaries

‘A collision of adverse opinions’? Major projects, planning inquiries, and policy change

It’s funny how things come round again. The current high level of indignation about planning delays in the United Kingdom, especially in relation to major infrastructure projects, is but the latest manifestation of a long-standing tension in the decision-making process. Intrigued by the *déjà vu*, and revisiting some of my work on energy and planning from around twenty years ago (Owens, 1985a; 1985b), I find expressions of concern that could, with few adjustments, be plucked straight from the mouths of the major protagonists today. Then, as now, the planning system was seen by industrialists as being “weighted in favour of causing undue delays in decision-taking” (Bell, 1980, page 35), which would jeopardise ‘essential’ development, including (at that time) major new coalfields and rapid expansion of the nuclear power programme. In relation to the former, the National Coal Board (NCB) thought it “illogical” that objectors to planning applications should be able to raise questions about the future demand for coal, and was alarmed at the prospect of successive inquiries in which “the arguments over need will take place again and again, at great length and expense” (NCB, 1980, page 37). The NCB and other developers were of the view that generic issues were for government and Parliament, not for local public inquiries. Ministers shared these anxieties, as they do today, and pressed for reforms that may sound familiar. In a speech to the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors in 1980, Tom King, then Minister of State in the Department of the Environment, advocated separation of generic and site-specific issues, new procedures for ‘rare big cases’, and more general reforms to achieve “faster, simpler and less formal inquiries” (cited in Owens, 1985b).⁽¹⁾

Environmental groups were also dissatisfied at this time, but for different reasons. They felt obliged to raise generic issues at public inquiries in lieu of proper deliberation in a wider polity, but complained that they were hopelessly under-resourced to sustain the necessary level of engagement with the system. Objectors, they perceived, were placed in a position of “impotence” (House of Commons Select Committee on Procedure, 1978, page 50), and inquiries amounted to little more than “ritual, designed only to supply window dressing for a foregone conclusion” (Council for Science and Society et al, 1979, page 3). For this emergent environmental coalition, the favoured solution was some variant of a multilevel procedure, in which issues of policy and need would be subjected to rigorous scrutiny at an early stage, possibly involving an independent body, and always including exhaustive parliamentary and public debate (see, for more detailed exposition, Council for Science and Society et al, 1979; CPRE, 1978; Pearce et al, 1979; PERG, 1978; TCPA, 1978; and for a summary Owens, 1985b).⁽²⁾

In the late 1970s, it was the Windscale inquiry (into the still troublesome thermal oxide reprocessing plant) that had provided a particular focus for debate and discontent. Lengthy hearings into proposals for the Vale of Belvoir coalfield and the Sizewell B

⁽¹⁾ Incremental, largely procedural reforms to the inquiry system have been ongoing throughout the past few decades.

⁽²⁾ The ‘Planning Inquiry Commission’, a two-stage procedure provided for in legislation but never used, was not the favoured model, possibly because of the unfortunate precedent of the Roskill Commission inquiry into London’s third airport.

pressurised water reactor kept up the momentum throughout the 1980s.⁽³⁾ The latest round of consternation has been fuelled by Heathrow Terminal 5, subject of a planning inquiry that broke all previous records in terms of time and cost, and that is rapidly acquiring emblematic status.⁽⁴⁾ A crucial difference, however, is that the government now in office is more than usually determined to ‘modernise’ planning, responding to concerns vociferously expressed by industry and developers that projects are being unnecessarily (and expensively) delayed (see, for example, CBI and RICS, 1992). In July 2001 the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions announced new measures to streamline the decisionmaking process, and apparently to square the circle at the same time:

“We want the overall process for deciding [major infrastructure] projects to be shorter and more focussed whilst ensuring the people affected have a full right to make their views known” (DTLR, 2001a, page 3).

Big projects, said the Secretary of State, were “essential for our economic future” (DTLR, 2001a, page 3), and their approval in principle should become a matter for Parliament. Together with up-to-date statements of government policy, this should meet concerns about time being “wasted” at inquiries “going over issues which have been *settled*” (DETR, 1999a, paragraph 17, emphasis added). These intentions were reiterated in the planning green paper (DTLR, 2001b) and in a consultation paper on new parliamentary procedures (DTLR, 2001c), both published at the end of 2001. The latter proposes that Parliament should decide on the principle of, the need for, and the location of major projects, primarily those “of national significance” (DTLR, 2001c, paragraph 14). An indicative list of development types that might merit such treatment includes trunk roads, power stations, quarries, runways, reservoirs, and nuclear facilities.⁽⁵⁾

The precise nature of the parliamentary procedure is not specified [this would be “for each House to decide” (DTLR, 2001c, paragraph 3)], though a committee-based system is clearly one of the possibilities. But any procedure would have to fit into the proposed timetable, which is extremely tight. Interested parties would have only 42 days in which to make representations.⁽⁶⁾ After 60 (sitting) days, the Secretary of State would be able to lay the draft Order for a project, which would then be debated by both Houses in the normal way. For major schemes thus approved, the ensuing public inquiry would be debarred from reopening the wider issues considered by Parliament, and consent would be refused only in “exceptional circumstances” where problems identified at inquiry could not be rectified by planning conditions (DTLR, 2001c, paragraph 22).

Although the proposals outlined above are specific to England, and may yet be subject to modification, they are symptomatic of “a particular way of talking and thinking” (Hajer, 1995, page 13) about major projects that has not only proved resilient over time but is shared across many of the liberal democracies.⁽⁷⁾ In this dominant

⁽³⁾ These energy projects were particularly prominent, but many other forms of development also aroused intense controversy. Highways inquiries, for example, were always an important arena for conflict (see Dudley and Richardson, 1996; Tyme, 1978).

⁽⁴⁾ The inquiry sat for 524 days in the period 1995–99. Planning approval was announced by the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions on 20 November 2001.

⁽⁵⁾ The list is extensive, and somewhat difficult to reconcile with the Secretary of State’s claim that parliamentary procedures would probably be invoked only two or three times per year (House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee, 2001, question 166).

⁽⁶⁾ The developer would have 21 days to submit a statement on “the wider economic and other benefits of the scheme”.

⁽⁷⁾ See, for example, papers presented at an international conference, “New Perspectives on Siting Controversy”, held in Glumslöv, Sweden in May 2001 (<http://www.cefos.gu.se/sitingconf>).

storyline, the problem is framed primarily in terms of a conflict between national need and local amenity. Schemes are characterised by their proponents as essential for national prosperity, but *locally* unpopular because of their scale and potential impacts: thus, for example, the Confederation of British Industry holds that they will “rarely be accepted voluntarily within any given area” (CBI and RICS, 1992, page 11; see also DTLR, 2001a). Adversarial planning procedures are portrayed as inefficient and unproductive, providing too much latitude for what is ‘really’ NIMBY-type⁽⁸⁾ opposition (see, for example, NCB, 1980, page 37), with the result that investment is stalled and substantial benefits foregone. The solution, then, lies in well-defined strategies that cascade from national, through regional, to local level, and in a decisionmaking process that separates issues of principle from detailed, site-specific considerations. People affected would still have a right to be heard, but this is a vision in which some universal good, identified by Parliament in a functioning liberal democracy, can triumph over the particular goods of identifiable local communities (Strandberg, 2001).

So far, so rational. But in what follows I suggest that both the cascade model and the dominant storyline in which it is grounded are seriously flawed. This might explain why conflict endures though proposals for essentially similar reforms are periodically reinvented; and it points to particular dangers in the rather precipitous cascade envisaged in the UK government proposals.

A structural fault in the storyline is that the world view in which certain kinds of development are deemed ‘essential’ is not one that is universally shared. With honourable exceptions, there are few major development types for which the need is clear and uncontested; indeed, planning history is littered with cases of ‘need’ that turned out to be not so pressing after all (witness the coalfield proposals mentioned above). ‘The national interest’, as a singular conception, is problematic. But so too is ‘local amenity’, not least because the effects of major infrastructure projects invariably transcend the local.⁽⁹⁾ What we see, therefore, when such projects are contested, is rarely a simple conflict between universal and particular (place-specific) conceptions of the good, but nearly always a more complex and dynamic process which, over time, can be a vital stimulus to policy learning and change.

Evidence for the essentially iterative nature of this process can be found in key policy arenas, including those concerned with energy, transport, minerals, and waste. Although there is, undeniably, a ‘national–local’ axis in all such cases, conflict can by no means be reduced to this dimension. Rather, we find that basic questions about what constitutes the public good are crystallised and rendered material by specific development proposals, while planning procedures in turn provide a vital institutional space for scrutiny of prevailing assumptions (Dudley and Richardson, 1996; Grove-White, 1991; Owens, 1985a; 1985b; Owens and Cowell, 2002). As policies are pursued, repeated challenge makes it more difficult to defer systemic questions about growth and social purpose: can we really ‘build our way out’ of traffic congestion, should we be so profligate with energy, why do we generate such prodigious quantities of waste? Thus resistance in principle reinforces, and is reinforced by, resistance in particular places, and conflicts played out within the planning system gradually help to change the frame in which policies and strategies are conceived.⁽¹⁰⁾

⁽⁸⁾ NIMBY—*not in my backyard*.

⁽⁹⁾ As official discourse sometimes concedes. For example, DETR (1999b, paragraph 39) accepts that such projects can have environmental implications that are national in scale.

⁽¹⁰⁾ It is notable, for example, that criticisms of the roads programme voiced (and often disallowed) at successive highways inquiries gradually found their way into official discourses of transport policy (DETR, 1998; Owens and Cowell, 2002, especially chapter 5).

A fundamental question for proponents of the cascade model is whether the same rigour and richness of perspective could be achieved at a parliamentary (or equivalent) stage without the prospect—in effect, the sanction—of challenging and costly local inquiries. Minimum requirements for a functioning cascade would seem to be critical and wide-ranging debate at the ‘principles’ stage, and a timetable commensurate with extensive opportunities for public involvement (much as advocated by environmental groups in the 1970s and 1980s). A legitimate, if not fully consensual, framework could then pave the way for simpler planning procedures. Still, it would be unlikely to resolve all conflict, or to ‘settle’ substantive issues for very long. Arguably, the proponents of this model overplay the stability of policy context⁽¹¹⁾ and underplay the importance of continuous feedback and iteration in policy evolution and change: after all, whether policies are acceptable in principle must in some degree be determined by their overall ‘digestibility’ on the ground.

Even with generous provision for deliberation, therefore, the subsequent flow of the cascade is unlikely to be smooth and unbroken. But this open and participatory model begins to look like a remote ideal when set alongside the UK government proposals for major projects, outlined above (DTLR, 2001c). These hold little promise of wide-ranging deliberation about need and other generic issues. The best hope—though there is little in the way of encouraging precedent—is that the policy statements providing a context for proposals would “normally” be informed by public consultation (DTLR, 2001c, paragraph 26). Once a project is designated for the proposed parliamentary procedure, the timetable would severely restrict opportunities to develop coherent counterarguments or alternatives, let alone subject the norms and presumptions of economic imperatives to critical scrutiny. For major projects approved in principle—possibly in as little as nine weeks—opportunities to challenge policies from within the planning system would be extinguished.

It will be argued, legitimately, that fundamental policy choices must be for democratically elected governments to make. But it does not follow that as long as national priorities are debated in the ‘proper place’ (Parliament), there will no longer be any benefit in discussing need or policy principles in fora such as public inquiries. On the contrary, stripping the planning system of its capacity to question such presumptions removes one of the most important apertures through which political debate can be enriched and new ideas come to impinge upon the status quo. As J S Mill once observed, “the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth”, so that “it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied”.⁽¹²⁾ Closing down opportunities for relatively civilised ‘collision’ is unlikely to deliver the streamlined, hierarchical, and consensual procedures so restlessly sought by governments and developers. This is because controversies about major projects do not simply reflect a tension between some uncontentious national good on the one hand and particular local interests on the other; often they expose deeply held and divergent beliefs about the nature of the national good itself. In such circumstances, either ‘the remainder of the truth’ will find an outlet (perhaps less civilised) elsewhere, or its suppression will seriously undermine the potential for learning and evolution in crucially important aspects of public policy.

Susan Owens

⁽¹¹⁾ The context (and indeed policies themselves) may be changed abruptly by what Sabatier (1987, page 653) calls “external (system) events”. For example, the UK nuclear power programme was undoubtedly threatened by planning delays in the 1980s, but it was privatisation of the electricity supply industry that exposed the financial costs of nuclear-generated electricity and precipitated a moratorium on further construction.

⁽¹²⁾ “On Liberty”, first published 1859 (see Mill, 1910, page 111).

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Does it all come together in Los Angeles?

For some rather unrelated reasons, I reread Ed Soja's (1989) *Postmodern Geographies* not too long before I departed for the 98th Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) held in Los Angeles, USA. What invigorated me most in this influential text was Soja's imaginative ways of illustrating his views on capitalist spatial restructuring through the empirical lens of Los Angeles. As Soja (page 191) puts it,

“What better place can there be to illustrate and synthesize the dynamics of capitalist spatialization? In so many ways, Los Angeles is the place where ‘it all comes together’, to borrow the immodest slogan of the *Los Angeles Times*.”

Having never been to LA, I left Singapore with lots of geographical curiosities and intellectual hopes—very much a fact of life for a serious conference goer. Upon reflection now that I have returned home, I can say that my curiosities about the geography of LA have been exceedingly met. Soja was quite right—it all more or less comes together in Los Angeles if we are talking about geography with a small ‘g’. That in fact is one of the greatest beauties of conferences that introduce us—geographers—to the specificities of places and challenge our intellectual capacity to engage with these places critically (for example, those Postcard from LA sessions). Through various excursions and wandering, I learnt a great deal about LA as a place of many facets—from its celebrated role as the pinnacle of capitalist consumption and its enormously successful cultural industries to its incredibly fragmented ethnic and racial spaces and its massive scales of urban sprawling that certainly makes Singapore minuscule.

In my unusual mode of reflexive ‘jet-lagged writing’, however, I hesitate to report that my *intellectual* hopes for Geography (notice the capital ‘G’) as a discipline became less feverish after the LA meeting. While I thought I would have learnt something new about the latest thinking in social-geographical theories or more rigorous research methodologies in presumably the world's largest annual meeting of professional geographers, the harsh reality struck back with a vengeance. I not only found it difficult to tell what's great/new I had learnt from our supposedly scholarly meeting in LA, but also became even more disillusioned with the intents and purposes of the annual meeting. Despite my appreciation of all the hard work put into organising this year's AAG conference, I don't think in an intellectual sense it really all comes together in LA.

What's the big deal, you might ask, since this may just be one particular (and inconsequential) experience? After all, that's what conferences really are these days—a bunch of academics coming together holidaying on the pretension of engaging in serious intellectual discussions and/or exchanges of views. I beg to differ and indeed would like to argue that it is perhaps time for us to reflect critically on the intents and purposes of our regular meetings *beyond* just about knowing the place better and networking among us (both worthy goals, however, particularly for junior faculty members). As several commentators on the earlier versions of this commentary have noted, they (myself included) find great pleasure and usefulness in the fieldtrips and social occasions during each AAG meeting; and I am certainly happy with these positive externalities arising from conferencing. But if conferences are meant for us ‘conferring’ with each other about how best to understand and, as some might say, change the world in which we live, some serious rethinking about the kind of conferences for what kind of Geography is worthy here. This call for a reflexive “geographical moment” is not coincidental. In her recent editorial in *Area*, Viles (2002, pages 3–4) reflects on the RGS–IBG's revamping of its annual conference starting in 2003 and perceptively notes that:

“Many organizations and individuals are now querying the role of the traditional conference given the new structures and communication opportunities of academic

and corporate life... Now is an excellent 'geographical moment' to consider how we can continue to meet in ways that really encourage interchange of ideas and opinions."

In this rather polemical and personal commentary, I aim to explore further two key dimensions of such rethinking (see also Olds and Poon, 2002; Phelps, 2002). As an active participant and session organiser during the past five annual meetings of the AAG, my purpose here is certainly not to denounce the meeting. On the contrary, I hope we can collectively consider the ways in which we might rework the meeting to make it work better for us, our much-treasured discipline, and the world we study. I also wish the annual meeting to be an important *place* whereby all comes together in our profession. In the first place, I could not help but feel that a *lack of coherence and collectivism* permeated throughout the LA meeting—perhaps symptomatic of Geography as a professional discipline these days. Neither did the strange geographies of the Westin Bonaventure–Marriott complex help much to bring us together. There were simply too many presentations on too many different themes and topics in too many parallel sessions (located in too many obscure rooms!) Some may argue that this diversity of topics and themes reflects the intellectual strength and 'social capital' of our discipline—the celebration of differences and our generous tolerance for alternative views and perspectives. I don't dispute this except to add one important qualification—differences should always be negotiated and contested *among* subscribers of alternative positions rather than produced through ignorance and exclusion. When differences lead to too much fragmentation and isolation, I am not sure it will be a good idea at all. One might ask how do I know when it becomes 'too much'? Well, I suppose when we find geographers talking past each other intentionally or unconsciously, our differences might be 'too much' for the discipline.

To cite just one example, I found this fragmentation particularly visible in the divide between substantive fields of human geography (say, economic geography) and area/regional geography. This divide may have something to do with the ways in which AAG sessions are sponsored by different specialty groups (organised either by substantive themes or by areas). But this phenomenon must also have something to do with the lack of willingness among geographers to be interested in works outside their specialised niches. Having attended sessions in both camps, I was rather disheartened to learn that there was little cross-fertilisation in practice. Whereas presentations in substantive fields seemed strong in theory but weak in evidence, the reverse was generally true among presentations in area/regional geography. Relatively few area/regional specialists attended substantive sessions and vice versa. The meeting was literally seen by many of them as a mere 'container' of different sites of separate geographical knowledges and imaginations—akin to the Chinese saying of "same bed but many different dreams". During my attendance in many such sessions, I really wished some common grounds could be established among them. It would be nice, for example, if substantivists and regionalists could be brought together to present their work in similar sessions through which they can engage and debate with each other. In that way, their intellectual differences could be reconciled or at least understood in a mutually respectful manner. Another strange example, as pointed out to me by a commentator, is that the session on the aftermath of the 9/11 incident was 'conveniently' scheduled to be held together with another session on Afghanistan in real time and in two different hotels. It is easy to tell which session had more empty seats.

In a related way, my second observation points to the issue of the *quality* of scholarly work. For all its institutional and financial reasons, I understand that the AAG office does not really (want to) impose any form of control on the quality of the papers presented in its annual meetings (except its one paper per participant rule).

But then, I think we may run into the risk of forsaking the future of our discipline by taking too lightly this ‘uncontrolled’ proliferation of presentations and panel sessions. I have come to know that in many influential science and social science disciplines, their major conferences have strict quality control mechanisms to ensure the highest scholarship of the work to be presented. For example, the Academy of Management conference requires all competitive papers to be refereed before they can be accepted for presentation—so do most top computer science conferences. Other major social science conferences organised by the American Sociological Association and the American Political Science Association are selective in accepting panels and sessions and may require panel organisers to review the papers before acceptance for presentation. While I am not suggesting that we should do the same for our annual meetings, some forms of ‘rationalisation’ might be beneficial to keep our diffuse interests and directions in check and to ensure that our precious annual meeting will not be seen just as an excuse for holidaying on university grants. Without going overboard, for example, let me ask how many of us can really say with confidence that “I learnt something new about X theory, or Y methodology, or even Z empirical findings”. I wonder whether half of the participants are able to say something affirmatively about what they learnt about their subject matters.

As guilty as I am sometimes, I think our implicit norms of accepting a presentation without a proper paper have certainly encouraged a greater degree of academic sloppiness. The AAG meeting has become very much like an overdiversified business conglomerate that lacks both focus and core competencies. I suspect it won’t take too long for our colleagues in other social sciences to realise this and I am sure that ‘discovery’ won’t go down well with our university administrators who give out conference grants. There is of course the funding issue—participants from less research-active colleges and universities might not receive financial support if they are not going to present a paper in the annual meetings. But surely there are many different ways of participating in the annual meetings that range from presenting a reasonably complete paper to chairing a session, presenting a poster, discussing papers by others, and serving as a panel discussant. This recognition of a plethora of participatory modes does not really contradict my call for a more focused and purposeful annual meeting that significantly *advances* the research frontiers of Geography.

To sum up, I was a bit disappointed by our lack of coming together in LA in an intellectual sense and I believe we should seriously rethink the fundamental rationale for our annual meetings. What amazes me most is that several commentators have noted that they no longer go to the AAG meeting with any expectations of interesting scholarly debates and nothing is likely to change in the near future. This is certainly not good news for all of us. Conferencing should certainly be an opportunity for us to present new and innovative insights into the complexity of our geographical world, whether such insights are theoretical, methodological, or plainly empirical. It should not be an occasion for promoting fragmentation and exclusion in the discipline. If we—geographers—can be so open about the ways through which we study the world, why can’t we be magnanimous enough to come together in order to search for some common grounds that unite rather than fragment, and include rather than exclude? If we can accept so readily the exciting work done in other disciplines, why can’t we take much more seriously the work done by our colleagues *within* the discipline? I hope my next journey to a major geography conference will bring back with me not only fresh insights into our geographical world, but also a strong sense of some common purposes and platforms for understanding such a world.

Henry Wai-chung Yeung

Acknowledgements. This highly personal reflection benefits from very useful and reflexive comments from David Angel, Trevor Barnes, Cindy Fan, George Lin, Allen Scott, Michael Shaw, and Eric Sheppard. My own colleagues in Singapore have also provided great comradeship through their unfailing encouragement and comments—Tim Bunnell, T C Chang, James Sidaway, and Brenda Yeoh. Considering all their (counter)opinions and suggestions that I might not be able to take on board here, I thought this provocative piece was worthwhile. I am of course solely responsible for the opinions expressed here. No institutions or individuals should be implicated.

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