

Address to Leichhardt Planning Forum  
held by Civic Design Society  
Sat 5. Apr 1975

1/4

GEORGE CLARKE

It seems today that we have agreed that planning is politics. But what politics, what ideologies or what policies are clashing? Looking at today's urban problems in an historical-social context, Leonie Sandercock described the basic conflict as that between conservative and redistributive policies. One can use other terms, which basically mean the same things, but which can give us additional useful insights into how we might go about resolving those conflicts. What Sandercock calls the "conservative" attitude to human settlements is the producer ethic - the belief that building things is good in itself, and that urban development is first and foremost a process for producing fixed capital investments of long term value in servicing capital. What Sandercock calls the "redistributive" attitude is the consumer ethic - the belief that urban settlements should be rearranged, left alone or developed only to serve the interests of those who live or work in them or who are most intimately affected by them. Thus, urban development is now seen first and foremost as a process for achieving satisfaction among the consumers of urban development, measured in ways quite different from the traditional rental and price mechanisms.

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Historically, we have always had cities dominated and shaped by the producers of cities, that is by developers, by kings, by governments, by government departments. Now of course we are headed into a consumer society. The urban revolution of the last few years has basically been a consumer revolution.

Some consumers are saying that they want opportunities to consume urban goodies equally with other, better placed, consumers. ~~There is a~~ <sup>There is</sup> conflict between producers of urban projects like the DMR or DMR or developers and the urban consumers, the people who are affected or displaced by those projects. We also have conflicts between different consumers, not only conflict between rich and poor, but also between different interest groups or between different people in the same locality. These include conflicts between, say, migrant owners in inner areas, who want property values to rise, and migrant renters, who can't afford to see property values and rents rise. In certain instances, we have conflict over projects that provide employment, and yet at the same time, disturb local amenity.

We have projects such as roads, or port facilities which may lead to lower production costs across the metropolis or across the nation, but which again disturb local amenity or consumer values. We have conflict between the functional technocratic interests of specialised government departments and the synthesising view of what is the best balance between different investment and spending priorities in a community.

1975

2.1/2

If planning is about politics, and politics is about conflicts, and we have these conflicts between producers and consumers of cities, then one of two things follows: either, as some would advocate, we have a process of permanent continuing revolution, or we devise, or adapt, processes by which conflicts can be identified and resolved. It will in many cases be necessary to re-identify and re-resolve new conflicts next year and the year after. We need a continuing process of re-identification and re-resolution of producer-consumer conflicts.

Leaving aside the alternative of permanent continuing revolution and now pursuing the branch of the decision tree that says we need a process, what should characterise such a process?

I think we have to regard that process as a social learning process. We have now a more educated, more wealthy society in this country than in most parts of the world. We have leisure for participation in public debate. There is demand for participatory democracy in all spheres, not just in urban planning processes. We have a problem with the word "participation". It might have outlived its usefulness, because it doesn't really describe anything that can be practically achieved. Witness the complaint that the 80 year old lady who lives on the third floor of the particular building in that particular city of metropolitan area, didn't sit down and write any part of the plan.

Now if planning is a social learning process, then it seems to me that in our information-based society the key issue, the key word, is "communication". By that I don't mean communication downwards or upwards, I mean information-sharing, or simultaneous communication on issues, upward, downward and sideways. Such a communication process can expose conflict, highlight major and minor issues, identify ideas and alternatives, and identify costs and benefits to particular groups, of particular alternatives. It obtains intimate local knowledge, hopefully it cleans up simple misunderstandings and leads to a definition of some common terms, a common language, in which a problem can be discussed, and it reduces somewhat the areas of misunderstanding.

It seems officially accepted that the new planning legislation for NSW should institutionalise such a process of "citizen participation" or "information-sharing". But precisely how do we legislate for such a delicate process? One can, by legislation, require the opening-up of decision making in planning to some extent. Legislation can require the early publication of proposals. It can require publicity and consultation in the preparation of plans and the deciding of development applications. It can require exhibitions and meetings. It can give Local Councils, who are closer to consumers, powers to vet proposals by ad hoc authorities. It can provide for third party or "citizen" appeals.

1975

3. / 4

But we can't legislate that planners, or politicians, or government departments or councils must listen sympathetically to, or agree with, any objections, submissions or proposals made by local people or groups. It is very difficult to legislate for the precise extent, technique, style or sincerity of any "participation", "consultation" or "information-sharing" process.

Even if and when we have a perfect information-sharing process on a particular issue, who makes which decisions, and how? Do we achieve any decision at all - or merely a stalemate?

We have, for example, reached stalemate in metropolitan transportation planning. We have an enormous amount of shared information on all aspects of the problem and alternative possible approaches to solutions, but no resolution. The stalemate seems to be caused by irreconcilable conflicts of opinion, or interests, among our current four levels of government - resident action groups backed by militant unions, local councils, state governments and their technocratic instrumentalities, and the federal government.

No one of these currently seems strong enough to make positive decisions without the strong support of at least two of the other three.

In such a situation of stalemate, one solution is to try to reallocate power among the conflicting "governments". There is one principle which offers some guidance in legislating for such a new planning system for NSW. That is the principle of devolution of executive decision-making and management by exceptions. No decision should be made at a higher level in any hierarchy if it can reasonably be made at a lower level. It should be the exception, not the rule, for lower-level decisions to be vetoed by high levels of government.

Beginning in 1788 with our Captain-Governors, themselves tied tightly to decisions made in Whitehall, we have had 187 years of maximising colonial or state centralism in NSW, particularly in environmental planning matters. Now is perhaps the time to try maximising the devolution of power to local government, closer to the consumers of urban environment.

The key here is to shift the onus of proof as to whether a particular issue is one which can reasonably be dealt with on a lower level. Our present planning system has far too many plans being prepared and decisions made too far up the hierarchy, too far away from local people.

Giving more responsibility to local governments can heighten their sense of responsibility, and can lead to improvements in the participation rates of people in the politics of local government. Legislation could require, or encourage the holding of local referenda on particular issues. Legislation can also make "management by exceptions" work by giving local government

GC 5.4.1975

4.  
/4

powers in most cases to make decisions on specific matters, and giving higher authorities a time limit of say, 60 days, to veto such local decisions if they seriously conflict with state or regional policies. This would tend to strengthen local or "consumer" initiatives, and bring out into the open the uses and abuses of higher level powers.

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GC 5.4.1975

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