'Do the right thing': planning at the intersection of the 'culture wars'

Article

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‘do the right thing’ — planning at the intersection of the ‘culture wars’

Long-standing tenets of good planning, such as public health, accessibility and sustainability, are moving into the crosshairs of the culture wars as the values underpinning planning and development choices are being increasingly contested using populist tropes, say Gavin Parker and Mark Dobson

At the heart of planning activity lie values and choices. The choices are, at face value, decisions about places, land use, and types of development. Yet, as any practitioner can attest, such judgements also involve consideration of trade-offs over competing interests and priorities. They hold important

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Low-traffic neighbourhoods—drawn into the ‘culture wars’

implications as they involve shaping the future. As a result, planners are routinely questioned on the technical evidence base and wider stakeholder consultation underpinning any decisions. In a healthy democracy it is only right that a range of information is considered and ideas deliberated upon, not least to ensure legitimacy and accountability in process and outcome terms.

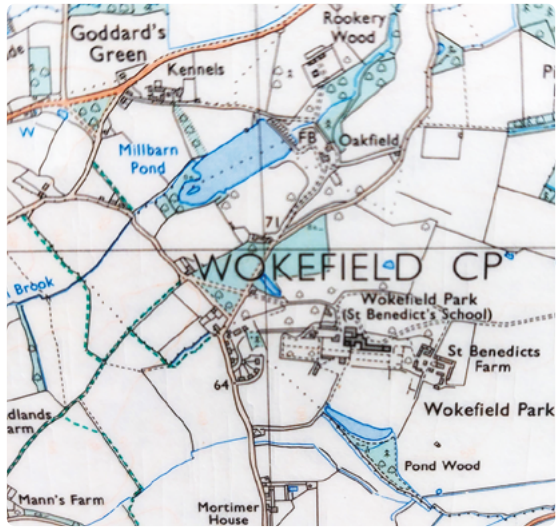
Crucially, such practices are central to establishing trust in both the planning process and its institutions. This is especially salient given that planners can no longer comfortably assume public support. Indeed, claims of acting in the public interest are routinely invoked as a justification for a range of particularised and quite disparate goals by a variety of groups as, when and where it may suit.

Beyond ongoing concerns about legitimacy, process and decision-making in planning, we see that the values that appear to underpin planning and development choices are being increasingly contested, using populist tropes. Without plumbing the murky depths of fake news, statistical distortion and outright untruth, we discern that one of the consequences of the conflictual nature of recent planning discourse is that planning itself is being dragged into the 'culture wars'. These are typically characterised as disagreements about cultural and social beliefs held by opposing groups, especially by people with more conservative attitudes versus those holding more progressive opinions. As a result, long-standing tenets of good planning, such as public health, accessibility and sustainability, have moved into the crosshairs of the culture wars to further populist political agendas (noting that sometimes such interventions are also promoted, somewhat disingenuously, as 'disruptors').

In this context, attempts to edge a climate-related policy agenda forwards by some groups are contrasted with attempts by others to vilify and undermine that trajectory.

For example, in Oxford earlier this year a crowd of approximately 2,000 people took part in a protest *against* measures to introduce low-traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs). This group took aim at a number of other urban planning initiatives, such as 15-minute cities, and more broadly climate action policies. A feature of the protest were placards displaying messages such as 'The 15-minute WEF [World Economic Forum] ghettoes are not about climate, it's tyrannical control' and 'Say NO to the new world order. Say no to 15 mins prison cities. Wake up, people, wake up.'[1] Such claims appear to link a broader libertarian agenda with conspiracy theories which centre on elite control.

In such a febrile milieu, local authorities and planning practitioners can all too easily become targets, with 'town planners [...] cast as the acolytes of some shadowy new world order, intent on crushing liberty'.[1]



Place-making can easily fall victim to political culture war interventions

The erosion of confidence and the corrosive impact of cultural conflict

Unquantifiable as they are, it seems that tensions over the operation and aims of planning have never been more apparent than they are now. This may be the consequence of a system in which discretion and political mores are part of the approach taken to decision-making. This is also a product of a time in which the public are both diverse but also information rich. It may also be, as Ian Dunt recently argued, that '[t]he British political system rewards short-term tactics over long-term strategy, irrationality over reason, amateurism over seriousness, generalism over specialism and gut instinct over evidence'.[2] This seems a credible accusation. It also sits uncomfortably with political messages recently adorning conference halls, such as the 'Long-term decisions for a brighter future' slogan displayed at the Conservative party conference in October 2023 and assertions at the Labour party conference in the same month that planning was to be 'bulldozed'.

Graham Haughton[3] noted over a decade ago that within British politics 'planning is almost a paradigmatic example of a sector used as a 'political football', one that every incoming administration attempts to use to explain the failings of the previous administration and demonstrate its own radical credentials', resulting in 'a bruised sector, accustomed to multiple reforms intended to 'cure' a problem that has been misdiagnosed'. While the near-constant political tinkering and reform of the planning system is not new, we view recent attempts to politicise planning ideas in the culture wars as distinct from previous forms of political scapegoating of planning.

Part of the reason for this shift is that the role of the planning system has expanded over the years, as more issues become apparent and understood to be important in achieving sustainable development.

Yet accompanying this change and the increasing complexity of the issues considered are allied feelings of uncertainty and frustration. Such underlying sentiments provide the potential groundswell for exploitation by populist discourses oriented to oppose change, and conditions also become ripe for fear-mongering from extreme perspectives (for example railing against 15-minute cities as 15-minute 'prisons' and 'ghettos').

As such, there are two 'fronts' to the culture wars: the first is propagated as part of *mainstream politics* to achieve populist goals; and the second is effected on the ground by various *alt-right and leftist groups*. We focus here on the former, while being wary of its impact in encouraging and stoking the discourse and actions of the latter.

The culture wars manifest themselves as exchanges of opinion about many different issues. We see the culture wars as an extension of, but also something that goes beyond, populism. There appear to be a variety of messages reflecting an attempt to speak to the 'common person', echoing key elements of Trumpism (for example 'Make America Great Again'). Populist agendas typically claim to be meeting the needs and wants of 'ordinary' people and are pursued to elicit their political support. In such narratives, the (will of the) 'people' is juxtaposed with the interests of the 'elite'; the privileged few versus the under-represented many—a line that can suit parties both of the left and right. This form of populist rhetoric was a core feature of British politics during the Brexit saga.

We argue that this should interest planners because, if we assume that UK planning systems and their operation reflect wider social attitudes and tensions (to a degree at least), then it follows that the conflicts and sense of dissatisfaction in the practices of planning are also shaped by wider social and cultural tensions.

In recently attempting to roll back on the UK's net-zero targets, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak effectively politicised the Climate Change Commission's (CCC's) Carbon Budget plans for 2050. The CCC is an independent body set up to advise the government, and Sunak chose to position its advice in terms of cost to the public:

> *'For those who disagree with me … the question's for them—they should explain to the country why they think it's right that ordinary families up and down the country should fork out five, 10, £15,000? … I don't think they need to, and if someone disagrees then they should explain why.'*[4]

Such politics represents one manifestation of the culture wars in its attempt to pit social groups against each other (i.e. positioning the claims of elite experts versus the needs of common people).

Wider political debates over big issues such as climate change and immigration (such as Suella Braverman's recent pronouncements about multiculturalism[5]) are one thing, but there is less focus placed on smaller ideas that become politicised and then act as lightning-rods for creating division between groups, often using cultural value propositions derived from the left and right.

Politicians engaging in populist politics typically appeal to the idea of a *united* people *all* wanting the same thing; while the rhetoric of culture wars is more pernicious in its emphasis, where *division* and ideological-discursive *conflict* between groups becomes necessary. Issues become 'battlegrounds' to claim and assert the public good. What has been happening recently is that planning issues are increasingly being contested based on populist agendas and influenced by a politics of division. Planning in both its processes (see, for example, talk of 'project speed') and its outcomes (i.e. policies and initiatives as well as planning metrics) has drawn fire in this (*faux*) war.

While we should not be surprised that politicians make use of populist agendas when they appear to suit their own interests (especially when they are behind in voting polls and approaching an election), we see the impacts of short-term decisions, which rest on cultural division, as particularly corrosive to trust in public institutions and to effective long-term planning. This turn is quite possibly the latest branding of pre-existing divisions with a focus on 'culture', but it is ultimately also about past and future; of where we are going, how to embrace or avoid particular futures, and how to return to or surpass the past.

Some have argued that decline in trust in social institutions, and in those overseeing supposedly accepted conventions and the levers of power, have fed the culture war. Others point to changing conditions in terms of growing inequality, accompanied by the accessibility of social media and associated technologies that enable people to communicate in a variety of social clusters or echo chambers. Plenty of local politicians align themselves to progressive agendas when they become inescapable, but such agendas, and their advantage, are not always clear. Why are progressive ideas absent in Local Plans? Is this perhaps especially so where strong leadership is absent, or the reverse; is this a result of 'corrective' leadership?

We reflect therefore on a new twist on what is actually an enduring story. Indeed, perhaps nothing is really new here; there have always been deep divides in British society. Some downplay the existence of culture wars, and others claim they are merely the concern of elite groups attempting to gain political advantage over each other. Liz Truss's 'Growth Group' and the blaming of a 'left-wing economic elite' for her downfall as Prime Minister ('are you part of the anti-growth coalition'?) provides another exemplar. We can see that, whatever one's assessment, the ripple effects of the culture wars in

Box 1

Example 1 — Planning and beauty

Arguments over architectural styles and tastes have raged for decades and pre-date modern town planning, but they have recently resurfaced with a new twist in the era of the culture wars. This can be detected most clearly with the formal recognition of 'beauty' in policy. Some may say that this reflects an attempt at cultural appropriation of the planning system, whereas others might simply argue that it reflects what 'people' want — an often-used tactic is to claim 'common sense' for a particular view, or to make a choice seem obvious and unobjectionable.

In 2021 Nicholas Boys Smith was quoted as saying, in relation to beauty in planning, that the 'ultimate purpose will be to make it easier for neighbourhood communities to ask for what they find beautiful and to refuse what they find ugly'.[a] Such aspirations are now reflected in formal planning policy guidance, as this extract from the NPPF highlights: '... ensure that appropriate tools such as masterplans and design guides or codes are used to secure a variety of well-designed and beautiful homes'.[b] Others have indicated that this will actually become vexing for many actors, and its resolution in practice will in the end come down to who has the power to determine beauty and therefore which cultural pre-disposition will prevail.

Such an emphasis on planning pursuing 'beauty' may be seen as elitist, or geared to the wealthy. This preferencing sits in contrast to a deeper focus on, for example, alleviating socio-spatial inequalities and myriad other planning issues and considerations, such as affordable housing, employment, and infrastructure.

a Nicholas Boys Smith, quoted in 'All new developments must meet local standards of beauty, quality and design under new rules'. Press Release. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 30 Jan. 2021. www.gov.uk/government/news/all-new-developments-must-meet-local-standards-of-beauty-quality-and-design-under-new-rules

b *National Planning Policy Framework*. Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Sept. 2023, para. 73. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1182995/NPPF_Sept_23.pdf

policy and politics locally and nationally are real and apparent, even if they are manufactured.

Planning as perpetrator, pawn, or victim?

Never too far from controversy, planning issues have also been in the crossfire because they are precisely cultural (as well as environmental and economic, or pertaining to some social agenda or another), and are essentially decisions over the future. How we preside over change forms a key battleground in the culture wars, too. Clearly, planning decisions and development can be targeted when they produce tangible outcomes that reflect directions or trajectories of change — both welcome and unwelcome. As a result of this correspondence, development can easily become refracted through the lens of the culture wars. The culture war controversies are fuelled by suspicions that change, and more specifically those marshalling change, are allowing particular values — values that are not settled or accepted — to be pursued via the planning system.

This situation has consequences for the practice of planning and for the politics that inevitably shape practice. It can appear that planning is being used to service one agenda or another and as a consequence may be ripe for attack, or appropriation, by one group or another. This will, in essence, be either on the grounds of not being progressive enough for some on the left, or not fast enough, or sufficiently pro-growth or producing enough 'beauty' for others on the right. Different interests want planners and the systems that they oversee to deliver what they want for themselves and society more broadly.

Our contention is that good planning is becoming a victim of culture wars, and there is resonance with the line from 50 years ago spun by Aaron Wildavsky, reflecting on 'why can't the planners ever seem to do the right thing?'[6] Wildavsky's assessment appears to imply that better balancing and accommodation would provide the answer, but, as we argue here, this has never really been the case, and the culture wars really highlight just what a challenging and divisive activity planning can be.

But while conflict and argumentation are the norm, a growing number of recent examples appear to be products of the culture wars. Such interventions are making good planning even harder. In order to amplify our main contention that planning is increasingly being drawn into the culture wars, we highlight three instances here — as given in Boxes 1–3 — drawn from topics where questions of aesthetics, environmental policy and attempts to organise land use are in view.

The populist politics operating within and across these examples are, to a greater or lesser extent, creating a narrative of division that evacuates the

Box 2

Example 2—Planning and low-traffic neighbourhoods/low-emission zones

We can also see cultural conflict manifested in recent debates over the existence and importance of climate change—and as such the necessity or urgency to deliver climate action, such as reducing carbon emissions. The UK's commitment to achieving its net-zero targets has recently been called into question by Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. This wider politics has taken form in particular places, as well as in arguments over specific policies—notably conflict around transport policy, and in particular the extension of London's Ultra Low Emission Zone (ULEZ) scheme, and a backlash against 20 mph zones and associated low-traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs).

Indeed, Rishi Sunak has characterised LTNs as a 'war against motorists' and pledged to end 'anti-car measures', noting that penalising drivers going about their daily lives 'doesn't reflect the values of Britain'.[a] Those pronouncements quickly followed the Prime Minister's controversial decision to delay the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars until 2035. Transport Secretary Mark Harper also stated that the Conservatives were about 'giving people more choice on how they travel… not banning you from driving your car'.[b] Along with a requested review into the national roll-out of LTNs (and 15-minute cities—see Box 3) by the Department for Transport, one of the main ideas floated is to 'rein-in' local authorities by limiting the number of roads that they can place under 20 mph orders. This politics is designed to appeal to the 'rights' of drivers and acts to stoke divisions between them and planners and road safety, air pollution and environmental action groups. This culture war intervention by the Prime Minister appears to ignore benefits to health, local services, and, in essence, place-making.

a H Cole: 'SLAMMING BRAKES: Rishi Sunak says he's ending war on drivers by stopping LTN rollout chaos in a big win for Sun's Give Us A Brake campaign'. *The Sun*, 29 Sept. 2023. www.thesun.co.uk/motors/24208749/rishi-sunak-car-drivers-ltn-speed-scheme/

b J Sandiford: 'Low-traffic neighbourhoods under spotlight as Rishi Sunak wants to 'support motorists' '. *BirminghamLive*, 31 Jul. 2023. www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/low-traffic-neighbourhoods-under-spotlight-27426250

middle ground and explicitly pits groups against each other—and which is rendering planning issues, and trust in their institutions, toxic in the process.

Conclusion—planning caught in the crossfire?

The wider context of political-party pressure to reform planning is further complicated by the way that planning issues can be used as both ammunition and a battleground in the culture wars that have recently accompanied populist rhetoric. We can view instances of culture war rhetoric as a struggle for dominance over the values, beliefs and practices that *should* be accepted within civil society.

If we can agree that the conflicts and sense of dissatisfaction in the practices of planning are shaped by wider social and cultural tensions, then we fear not only for the operation of the planning system but for the *basis* upon which planning policies and practices rest. This can be seen in examples that arbitrate where liberty and the environment are at stake—with planning often ending up a victim on both sides (i.e. for conservatives, over-stepping on individual freedoms, and for progressives, not doing enough to move beyond the status quo).

The examples presented are the headline-grabbers that place planning issues centre stage in political/ideological conflicts, but less apparent and unremarked are the everyday micro-aggressions which impact on trust as well as on the mental health and wellbeing of planners. The divisions and tensions here are obvious: profession versus laity, left against right, traditionalist versus progressive.

So, what does this mean for the act of planning, and the way that policies are formulated both nationally and locally, when planning ideas are effectively weaponised in the culture wars? If planning in the past was about making careful arguments about what is needed in the public interest, now there is a 'war' being conducted in an attempt to claim dominance over politically polarised positions. How does this shape perceptions of the possible? What does this mean if 'debate' is reduced to merely talking past each other? In such circumstances, how can planners do the right thing? These are pertinent questions when longer-term sustainable development is at stake.

Given these observations, we see a core feature of the culture wars as appropriating the public interest while simultaneously destroying trust in institutions. This is problematic for planning and planners precisely because politicians rely on public institutions and public trust to fulfil their agenda and renew the democratic mandate. There is a clear relationship between values and trust in institutions, and attacks on those institutions for short-term political gain appear counterproductive.

Furthermore, perceptions of the 'capture' of

Box 3

Example 3 — Planning and the 15-minute city

At face value, the 15-minute city/20-minute neighbourhood appears to be a relatively innocuous, if important, planning idea. This has been discussed and experimented with in other countries over time, and aligns with a much longer lineage in thinking about urban villages and considering the benefits of localisation. The idea has recently received some significant attention in the UK.

At one level the idea is quite simple: places should be accessible, with services and social infrastructure within easy reach for people. The concept is closely linked to questions of sustainability and liveability. For many, ideas about making places more sustainable and accessible may seem uncontroversial, but critics have made a (perhaps tenuous) connection to questions of individual freedom and choice — as if the idea will result in people living in self-contained areas. The depth of such suspicions (as well as the opportunity for opposition that almost any planning idea seems to provoke) can be quite alarming.

Those concerns over personal freedom were clearly shown when Conservative MP Nick Fletcher made the headlines in requesting a parliamentary debate to investigate the 'international socialist concept of so-called 15-minute cities and 20-minute neighbourhoods'.[a] Here the rather indolent (mis)use of the term 'socialist' is mobilised pejoratively as a catch-all label for something 'bad', which positions the heroic liberal conservatives protecting individual freedom against those deemed on the left, who want to stop people being able to go where they want, do what they want, and act as they have always done. Such sentiments prompted the Department for Transport to state that it plans to stop councils implementing so-called '15-minute cities' amid fears that they would 'aggressively restrict where people can drive'.[b]

a Request by Nick Fletcher MP for a debate on 15-minute cities and 20-minute neighbourhoods, cited in *Hansard*, 9 Feb. 2023. Business of the House, Vol. 727, Col. 1042. https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2023-02-09/debates/306A686A-9B53-42BE-9367-C12AB4771504/BusinessOfTheHouse#contribution-94431A3F-FEB8-4A2C-B979-1EE81B5F1FFF

b 'Rishi Sunak attacks 'hare-brained' traffic schemes and vows to 'slam brakes on the war on motorists''. *Sky News*, 30 Sept. 2023. https://news.sky.com/story/rishi-sunak-attacks-hare-brained-traffic-schemes-and-vows-to-slam-brakes-on-the-war-on-motorists-12972941#:~:text=Rishi%20Sunak%20has%20said%20he,where%20there%20is%20local%20consent

planning decisions by opposing sides of a culture war add to a sense of planning being not only under attack, but positioned in a place that cannot ever hope to satisfy both sides of manufactured cultural divides — unable to ever do the right thing.

'Politicians need to pause for thought and recognise the importance of planning, rather than indulging in gaslighting of long-standing social values and necessary institutions'

We are left doubting whether any initiatives can be implemented in such an environment. Politicians across the parties need to pause for thought and recognise the importance of planning, rather than indulging in what is becoming a continual gaslighting of what are, in the main, long-standing social values and necessary institutions — let alone ideas that should be regarded as eminently sensible.

● ***Professor Gavin Parker*** *and* ***Dr Mark Dobson*** *are both based at the University of Reading. The views expressed are personal.*

Notes

1 R Partington: 'Tackling the 15-minute cities conspiracy means fixing inequality'. *The Guardian*, 26 Feb. 2023. www.theguardian.com/business/2023/feb/26/uk-economic-uncertainty-adds-fuel-to-fire-for-conspiracy-theorists

2 I Dunt: *How Westminster Works … and Why It Doesn't*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2023

3 G Haughton: ' Planning and growth'. In M Ward and S Hardy (Eds): *Changing Gear — Is Localism the New Regionalism?* The Smith Institute, 2012, pp.95–106. www.smith-institute.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Changing-gear.pdf

4 H Horton: 'Rishi Sunak urged to stop attacking Climate Change Committee'. *The Guardian*, 22 Sept. 2023. www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/sep/22/rishi-sunak-urged-to-stop-attacking-climate-change-committee

5 R Ehsan: 'Multiculturalism has failed — and threatens to bring down British democracy'. *The Telegraph*, 26 Sept. 2023. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/09/26/multiculturalism-has-failed-suella-braverman/

6 A Wildavsky: 'If planning is everything, maybe it's nothing'. *Policy Sciences*, 1973, Vol. 4 (2), 127–153