

## **'Mods' and 'Blockers': Rural Planning Cultures in Britain**

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The concept of planning cultures (Sanyal, 2005) offers an interesting lens through which to examine rural planning policy and practice in Britain<sup>1</sup>. Rural planning cultures differ across territories and through time, in interaction with wider changes in power structures and cultural practices. Some themes suggested by Sanyal seem less applicable to British rural planning. Thus, he writes of a paradigm shift in many countries from a post-war rational comprehensive model, based on professional expertise and supposedly value-neutral analysis, to a communicative planning model, but this shift is less evident in British rural planning practice. More relevant is Sanyal's reference to neoliberalisation's attacks on planning as an obstacle to prosperity contributing to planning's "gradual loss of legitimacy over the last 50 years" (Sanyal, 2005, p. 11). . But a third, much more significant thread must be woven into the analysis if we are to fully understand rural planning policy and practice in Britain, namely the continuing tension between pastoralist and modernist narratives of rurality.

Indeed, these two narratives, of *pastoralism* and *modernity* (Murdoch & Lowe, 2003), have long shaped perceptions of rurality in Britain, even though there is tension between them. Pastoralists often see rural areas as repositories of cultural values, perhaps even of national identities, and seek to protect their romantic notion of rural life from outside influences. In contrast, modernists see rural areas as essentially backward and needing transformation and development to enjoy the tangible benefits of the modern world. The tension between these two narratives, of 'blockers' and 'mods', and their power-infused deployment in discursive framing, is at the heart of Britain's rural planning cultures.

Rural areas in Britain tend to be viewed differently from those in most other countries, and this has produced some unusual outcomes. For example, Britain is unique in having rural house prices averaging well above urban; indeed, house prices rise systematically as settlement size decreases (CRC, 2010; Shucksmith, 2011). Average incomes (by place of residence) follow the same pattern. Much of rural England is 'accessible rural' (OECD, 1993), within commuting

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<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on Scotland and England, to the neglect of Wales. Planning policy is devolved to each nation.

range of urban labour markets, though this is less true of Scotland. But even beyond commuting range, rural house prices are high. Frequently this is blamed on planning policies, which do limit the supply of housing in the countryside (Hall et al., 1973), but it is also because so many people aspire to live in a rural location.

Wiener (1981) has a cultural explanation for this aspiration towards country living. At the time of the industrial revolution, he argues, the new industrial capitalists sought social status by building grand country homes which mimicked the landed aristocracy's country residences. This aspiration to a home in the country cascaded through society, setting the cultural norm that a house in the country, not the city, denotes status. The inter-war growth of suburbs was thus marketed as fulfilling a dream "of a modern home in beautiful countryside with a fast railway service to central London" (Green, 2004, p. 8). Those mobilizing with seminal British town planner Patrick Abercrombie to prevent 'urban sprawl' emphasised the social inferiority of city dwellers: "the people are not as yet ready to take up their claim [to the countryside] without destroying that to which the claim is laid" (Joad, 1938, p. 64 as cited in Sturzaker & Mell, 2017), since they had "no instinct for country life" (Williams-Ellis, 1928, p. 38 as cited in Sturzaker & Mell, 2017). In other words, planning should not only prevent urban sprawl but should also exclude city folk as socially unsuitable to the countryside.

In the 1940s, when rural planning legislation prioritised pastoralism over rural development, it reflected this "hopelessly sentimental view of rural life among nature-loving ramblers and Hampstead dwelling Fabians", while "the rural poor had little to gain from the preservation of their poverty but were without a voice on the crucial committees which evolved the planning system from the late 1930s onwards" (Newby, 1985, p. 225). This pastoralist discourse has been refreshed and strengthened over the years by powerful pressure groups, intertwined with planning professionals<sup>2</sup>, subsequently "ecologising" their arguments to make an environmental case for containment and the separation of nature from society (Murdoch & Lowe, 2003). Accordingly, the government's justification for urban containment changed from farmland preservation in the 1940s to protection of the countryside for its own sake in the 1980s, and then to sustainability understood as higher density urban living from around 2000.

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<sup>2</sup> Abercrombie was co-founder of the Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) in 1926.

Settlement hierarchies were another core element, driven both by pastoralism and the technocratic, rational planning model. Today this persists in local planning practice as confinement of development and investment to designated 'sustainable communities', despite national planning policy guidance that no community should be considered unsustainable.

In parallel to the dominant pastoral, preservationist culture and practice of English rural planning, rural development (modernisation) was simultaneously promoted by another statutory body, the Development Commission, mostly under the auspices of the Treasury. This supported rural industry and community development, evolving from externally-driven modernisation towards fostering local, 'bottom-up' initiatives through Rural Community Councils, including village appraisals and 'parish plans', which reflected local communities' views about the issues they faced and the future of their places (Rogers, 1999). The contrast (and disconnect) with statutory rural planning was evident in the inability of planning departments to embrace and accommodate the parish plans produced by rural residents into statutory, technocratic development plans (Gallent et al., 2008). Moreover, "the planning system's treatment of the countryside was fragmented and focused disjointedly on distinct 'policy regimes'... [with agendas] championed by separate government departments, their own national agencies, their own distinct lobby groups" (Gallent et al., 2017, p. 94).

These English cultures of rurality are foreign to rural Scotland, and especially to northern Scotland where rural development narratives dominate pastoralism, largely for historical reasons. The prioritization of development over pastoralism is exemplified in the creation of the Highlands and Islands Development Board in 1965, and in no national parks being created in Scotland during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, mainly because of opposition from landowners and local authorities (Lloyd & Shucksmith, 1983). When the first national parks were eventually created in 2002/3, their statutory aims included promotion of the sustainable economic and social development of communities, unlike the more pastoralist English legislation. An overarching commitment to sustainable rural development has been explicit in Scottish policy since 1997 and underpins the facilitation of community-based land reform (Mackenzie, 2013; Hunter, 2012), the establishment of a Scottish Land Commission, and support for a Scottish Rural Parliament and Scottish Rural Network. Despite this, there remains

a disconnect between statutory rural planning and rural development policy, as observed by OECD experts in their report on rural policy in Scotland, which recommended “directly tackling the rigidity of land use regulations that inhibit the sustainable development of rural communities” (OECD, 2008, p. 112). This is echoed in a recent study for the Scottish Government which reports planning’s “tendency to seek to protect rural areas from development rather than to support development” and criticisms of planning’s “urban mindset” (Savills, 2020, p. 4).

This disconnect is similar to that observed by OECD experts in England (OECD, 2011); suggesting that the different understandings of rurality between Scotland and England, and different public priorities of pastoral and modernization in particular, have made little difference to professional rural planning cultures. A study in rural Scotland in 1993 found that planning officers “sought to control councillors by bringing their thinking more into line with the dominant professional ideology” of urban containment (Shucksmith et al., 1993, p. 252), which remains after all “the critical mission of rural planning” (Satsangi et al., 2010, p. 20). Even where councillors had been elected on a manifesto of promoting new housing development and voted to adopt this as council policy, planning officers found ways to subvert this and to maintain pre-existing policies which accorded more closely with their professional ideology. In a later English study, Sturzaker (2010) found similar professional ideologies in English rural planning authorities, contrasting with the views of housing professionals within the same authorities. Sturzaker and Shucksmith (2011, p. 185-6) illustrate this cultural contrast with the following two quotes from different officers in the same local authority:

People in housing need stand the best chance of a more sustainable, included lifestyle, in slightly larger settlements, where there may be a shop or there is a little bit more in terms of service base. (planning officer)

Sustainability is not a bus stop... If you’re talking rural areas, sustainability is about keeping local people living and working in their local area – keeping the villages alive, keeping the local areas alive. (housing officer)

The former quote epitomises a professional planning culture, echoing Joad and Williams-Ellis above in their paternalistic (or patronising) eagerness to protect poorer citizens from their misguided desire to live in rural places which are patently unsuitable for them, thus corralling

them into towns while reserving the countryside for more suitable country-dwellers. The housing officer's quote reveals a very different, modernist culture: accepting that people already live in so-called unsustainable villages, and that policies should seek to provide affordable housing, improve services and provide public transport to make small rural settlements more 'sustainable' for everyone. Satsangi et al. (2010, p. 19) concur, arguing that these cultures of control and restraint amongst rural planners have "survived beyond their time, creating a raft of difficulties" for rural communities.

In recent years there have been attempts to address these problems (Gallent et al., 2017). A Labour government from 1997 intended planners to have a coordinating role in strategic partnerships under a spatial planning approach which goes "beyond traditional land use planning to bring together and integrate policies for the development and use of land with other policies and programmes which influence the nature of places and how they function" (ODPM, 2005, pp. 12-13. This was swept away by Conservative governments from 2010, in favour of deregulation and 'muscular localism' (Lord & Tewdwr-Jones, 2018), with citizens encouraged to prepare 'neighbourhood plans' so long as these accorded with higher tier development plans and government policy. The latest Government proposals for planning reform (MHCLG, 2020) go further by removing any local democratic role in development control decisions and "unlocking land for development," except where land is designated for protection, for example in green belts and national parks. Unsurprisingly, this challenge to the dominant pastoral rural planning culture has prompted a backlash from Conservative-voting rural residents, the CPRE and planners.

The challenge facing rural planning in Britain is to reconcile entrenched 'blocker' planning cultures with 'mod' objectives of thriving rural economies and inclusive rural societies, a challenge which still appears insoluble. Rural planning should have much to contribute to a place-based approach to rural policy, "connected to local needs and interests, and with the participation of as wide a range as possible of public and private bodies, community groups, businesses and individuals" (House of Lords, 2019, p. 9). As experience of community ownership in Scotland is showing (Mackenzie, 2013), such an approach has the potential to challenge norms of neoliberalisation and individualisation while also disrupting the separation

of nature and society inherent in British post-war rural planning cultures (Murdoch & Lowe, 2003). Yet the pastoral culture remains doxa in British rural planning practice.

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