

assessing the levelling up white paper

Tim Marshall looks at the ideological and policy approaches of the Levelling Up White Paper and considers the prospects for progress on delivering greater fairness and equality across the country

What sort of policy statement is the Levelling Up White Paper?¹ It is no good imagining that a White Paper has an unchanging essence. One idea is surely old hat: that it represents a deeply considered analysis of an issue and fully developed ways of addressing that issue, likely to lead in most cases to legislation, as well as other government action. If we had in recent years ever thought that, the flimsy nature of the Planning White Paper of August 2020 should have put an end to such thinking.² This article starts with a review of the nature and fate of that White Paper,³ before analysing the recent governmental statement, which makes a major contrast to the planning effort.

The Planning White Paper and after—a contrast

The Planning White Paper was a mixture of back-of-the-envelope thoughts and more considered lines of policy development. In the latter category was the policy stream on design and 'beauty', because it did at least have the benefit of a Commission which had worked on the theme for some time. In the first category was most of the rest of the package proposed—introducing a zoning system (picked up from a kite-flying Policy Exchange publication), an infrastructure levy (long discussed, but still not properly analysed), and digitalisation strategies (an emerging reality, but still not considered in a comprehensive and serious manner, certainly by 2020).

All these contents of the 2020 White Paper were driven from the top of government, by Boris Johnson and his then top policy advisor Dominic Cummings; they were not aberrations, the result of some glitch in the governmental machine or a rogue Minister

(however Robert Jenrick may be characterised). They were complemented by parallel measures pushed through by secondary legislation or administrative measures, including, above all, sweeping extensions of permitted development and changes in the Use Classes Order, plus a rejigging of the standard method used to establish new-housing requirements in local authority areas.

We now know that this package was to face a very uneven fate. The permitted development changes were driven through, by August 2021 transforming the planning system in many ways which we will only see work out over a number of years. The change to the standard method was rejigged again in December 2020, to put the pressure back on major urban centres (rarely run by Conservative authorities, who had objected strenuously to the new numbers being imposed on them, especially in the Wider South East). How that rejigging works out is very much a political work-in-progress.

Parts of the White Paper are clearly surviving at the time of writing, including the design and beauty agenda, now being implemented in various ways, the digitalisation drive, and the proposal for a national Infrastructure Levy (NIL?). Neighbourhood-ism is in fashion again, strengthened, it appears, from 2020 (Levelling Up Secretary of State Michael Gove is keen)—in part as a way to continue undermining local government.

The Amersham and Chesham June 2021 by-election defeat for the Conservatives in their heartland is credited as being a major factor which led eventually to the dropping of a separate Planning Bill and the probable abandonment of changes to the plans



The White Paper acknowledges that spatially tuned policy-making has been weak in the UK

system. However, there are still references in the Levelling Up White Paper to the need to speed up or streamline the Local Plans system, so changes may still be expected. Unfortunately, the development of proper strategic planning components looks like it will be dependent on the vicissitudes of local deals, rather than a reformed system (see the chart on page 140 of the Levelling Up White Paper—with no reference to planning).

The Levelling Up White Paper—some strengths

The February 2022 White Paper is a thoroughly different phenomenon. It is generally well written and illustrated, even if the proposals part (Chapter 3) has more of a programmatic or manifesto style. It is long (297 pages), which makes engagement not as easy as would be desirable for democratic purposes, although many pages are easy to move through, being maps or other images. The Executive Summary gives, in my view, only a partial idea of the character of the document, and so a fuller reading is needed. Further thought should have been given to this accessibility issue, perhaps taking a leaf out of the work of the National Infrastructure Commission, which has worked hard at controlling length, creating clear lines of logic, and using clear visual summaries.

This White Paper remains in some ways deeply ideological, in the same sense as the 2020 Paper; but in certain respects this is a different ideology. My reading of the whole document suggests an attempt to create a new policy narrative which can take up the high ground for the next decade or more. It is really not just a policy statement on levelling up; it is a social and economic programme for

Conservative governments to hold on to power for at least another term. It does this quite cleverly, by taking over an essentially liberal democratic political narrative, combining characteristic dependence on private sector forces with an ample grasping of the role of some kinds of central state interventionism. It was helped by drawing on academic support, however selectively, especially from the Bennett Institute at Cambridge University,⁴ and by the idea of medium-term missions put forward by Mazzucato *et al.*⁵ (see pages 58 and 118, respectively).

On reading Chapter 1, an analysis of the roots of the UK's uneven geographical development, and Chapter 2, a statement of the need for a new governing doctrine based on a package of missions, one can detect a somewhat eclectic or pick-and-mix blending of New Labour and Heseltinian Conservative philosophies. This is then further blended with a continuation of Cameron-Osborne-May initiatives, above all on elected mayors and deals, as the insistently repeated basis for 'devolution' (still a misnomer, given what is proposed). Incidentally, Policy Exchange's founding in 2002 was marked by a call for elected mayors in all big cities, so that has a Gove stamp on it too. All these ingredients have been glued together under the leadership of Andy Haldane (watch an Institute for Government interview with him on 1 March to get a flavour of his role⁶).

The omissions from such a narrative are obvious: no sign of capitalism and its continuous stresses and its forming of uneven development, decade after decade; nothing on class; no analysis of the City of London or the wider London mega-region—no sharp-edged regional political economy, as against

a kind of bland average geography.⁷ While the return of talk of spatial policy and regions is very welcome, the idea that so much of the disastrous inequalities and the levelling-up challenge has been generated by quite deliberate government policy, especially by post-2010 governments, is nowhere to be seen.

What has been created in this foundation for the 2024 Conservative Party general election manifesto is therefore a new narrative, designed to cover the whole of the UK, as well as the whole of England, even if continuously pointing to some special notice for those parts of the UK map designated in the top-need category—see the final, geographical section of the White Paper, covering each English region and the other countries of the UK (with hardly a word about the devolved administrations themselves, invisibilised by Gove). This is somewhat reminiscent of the New Labour insistence on Regional Development Agencies for the whole of England, even if with much bigger budgets, as it turned out, for the North and Midlands.

The similarity goes further because New Labour famously sought the support of 'Middle England'—a part of the electorate that the Conservatives are very worried about losing, alongside their new clientele in the North and the Midlands.

So the programme must be all things to all people, as arguably it is in many ways. All this implies a Conservative capacity for 'shape shifting', a capacity evident for many years: we are clearly in a new round of it.

There are some positive signs...

Nevertheless, there is the beginning of engagement with the depth of the problems involved, and the start of thought on 'systems reform', as the Chapter 2 title calls it. Positives include the serious stress on overcoming silo government at the centre, and the institution of Levelling Up Directors, which might even look to some like Government Offices for the Regions 'lite'. Equally welcome is the commitment to build new data sources, so that the heavy post-2010 culling of data streams can be corrected and progress on levelling up can actually be monitored. (Anyone for Regional Observatories, that invention of the 1990s, designed to show what was changing in each part of the country?)

The promise to set up a Spatial Data Unit within the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (on page 151) gives cause for hope, based on the explicitly stated view that spatially tuned policy-making has been weak in Britain, and must be improved to give us far better knowledge of what is being spent where and for whom. The transport parts show genuine efforts to advance matters—on buses, for example, moving finally to Transport for London type controls (see pages 177-180). And there is even support for a 'strong planning system' (on page 227)—not the language of 18 months ago, and something that planners could try to hold Ministers to.

...but the White Paper has big problems

From the first two chapters, the White Paper could be characterised as centrist, with an analysis that will gain some cross-party and societal support. But two big holes open up against that judgement—on Unionism and on the adequacy of the response to regional disparity. Unionism permeates every page of the document, where Michael Gove, a passionate Unionist (and according to his biographer an even more passionate supporter of the Orange Order⁸), has clearly made his presence felt.

The programme of funding packages across every single governmental sector, reaching deep into the devolution competences of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, has to be read to be believed. The transfer of central civil servants to these three countries is going to be so great that there may in due course be more UK civil servants in Wales and Scotland than those employed by their own governments. This is the Conservative and Unionist Party in power with a vengeance—no New Labour approach or consensualism there.

Perhaps more fundamentally, Chapter 3, which goes some way to detail what is going to be done in the short term, and then in the medium term (set at 2030), fails to convince in terms of the depth and credibility of the response. This can be seen to have three components.

The first is again ideological in the deep sense, due to the commitment of the Conservative Party to a low-tax state. This must have expressed itself in a deep resistance in the Treasury and probably in the Cabinet as a whole to providing the sort of funding and deep interventionism which would be needed to have a chance of really addressing the challenges exposed in Chapter 1. There is no reference to the massive cutting back of the state since 2010, not a word on austerity. No new money is to be found, overall, for the purpose of levelling up. So this is an overall resources issue.

Second, there is the question of the public sector agents leading much of the work—in a sense another resource or capacity issue, but also one of process. The whole programme, or 'mission' set, is to be carried through very largely by the dramatically weakened governmental machine: at the centre, in the many weakened agencies, and locally by the austerity-hobbled councils, backed by some low-power mayoral or similar bodies to be spread across as much of England as can be persuaded to give up what autonomy is left in councils. This weakness is evident in international comparison. Research conducted in the preparation of the New Leipzig Charter, on local governments' capacity to act, showed that in the six case study countries just England and Hungary had clearly declining capacity at this government level, with, in the English case, the decline occurring ever since the 1980s.⁹

Thirdly, the unwillingness to change direction across so many policy fields—an unwillingness



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generally ideologically rooted—must surely make readers of Chapter 3 wonder about the basic commitment of a government that has shown its genetic make up to be deeply pro-inequality (whether spatial or non-spatial) to prioritising overcoming issues of inequality. The predominantly non-spatial forces of inequality are critical—income, class, race, benefits, and structural chasms in education, health, care, and housing. The Conservatives have rarely shown a willingness to tackle these forces.

In fact, we know that poor areas and poor authorities have got ever fewer public resources over the last ten years. Why should this change now, whatever special funds are listed, page after page? There are certainly hopeful passages about re-setting the distribution of resources to localities—presumably going back to some sort of allocation of money to places by need. But there is surely a credibility and commitment issue here.

Ideology and politics in tandem this time?

As I argued in my 2020 book on the way to analyse planning (and other policy fields),¹⁰ it is essential to combine ideological and political analysis of public policy: the long-run conviction force of ideological complexes and the day-to-day and month-to-month insistent pressure of politics—of MPs, councillors, pressure groups, and party-funders. My article in the September/October 2020 issue of this journal³ suggested that the Planning White Paper was largely driven by ideological pressures within the Conservative political world, emerging from strands of work pushed by Policy Exchange for over 10 years, and intensified by the transformation of the Conservative Party by its takeover by Brexit forces since 2016. The same forces pushed for the parallel reforms on permitted development, allied to the practical pressures applied politically by some of

the Party's main supporters and funders in the development industry.

Ideology and politics meld together more successfully in the Levelling Up White Paper than in the Planning White Paper, but they are just as present. Essentially, the Levelling Up White Paper is a foundational programmatic statement, and is a blend of centrist narrative-making with certain Conservative ideological red lines (Unionism, Treasury fundamentalism), along with carefully calibrated political budget and process juggling, to hit 2022–24 requirements.

I have said little about this process element ('devolution', etc.), but it is clearly central to the programme. In some ways it is easy to put the accent on deals, new mayors, and so on, as against making basic differences to social and economic life-chances. This plays well to certain political needs, especially over the next two years. Alongside the substantive problems identified above, Chapter 3 must be read equally as a masterclass in shorter-term politics: how to convince opinion-formers and voters that the government is both doing something in key constituencies by 2024, and plausibly able to promise things for the 2024–2029 government.

Prospects

Will it work? It may work politically, as Jennings *et al.*¹¹ have suggested, in delivering 'a steady supply of governing spectacles', as well as in effectively managing Conservative divisions. But, no, the White Paper is nothing like sufficient to achieve real progress on its stated substantive objectives. A short article cannot give full justification for that judgement, but it rests on the limited nature of the changes proposed in so many fields, especially in local government, public spending, making planning work properly—and perhaps most fundamentally the expectation that private sector investment will deliver the scale of results needed, when the lack of such investment in the past has been a large part of what has generated the present massive failures. It is true that a get-out clause has been inserted at the start of Chapter 3, saying that not all the policy programme is there yet; more is to come (page 159). But the basic framing surely needed to be set out here.

One can point to many other elements which could be added, if the Conservatives would look to sources of policy ideas well outside their own tent. Valuable lines of work have been pursued by several big investigations over the last five years, which the White Paper might have drawn on far more. Examples are the two IPPR-led Commissions on Economic Justice (2018) and Environmental Justice (2021)¹² and the continuing work by the UK2070 Commission.¹³ All of these studies would help in filling one big gap in the White Paper, which is to bring much more to the forefront net zero and deep green programmes. References are there in the White Paper (on pages 169 and 170, for example), but these issues are

hardly given the weight and urgency of resources needed, above all in the Chapter 3 programmes.

So, this is a deeply important government policy statement. It may not say much on planning in the more specific sense (some of that may have emerged by the time this article is published), but the overall ideological and political direction of travel needs to be engaged with, supported where it is potentially useful, and critiqued in all the areas where it falls short. Planners may not necessarily see much of the content of the White Paper as their home turf, but I would argue that they ignore this stream of policy-making at their peril. They may have been partially let off the hook from that 2020 maelstrom of attacks on planning, but the overall direction of state policy-making is what is really going to make the long-term difference to social, environmental and economic outcomes.

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For that, sooner or later, a more fundamentally critical narrative is going to be needed, tying together the quite basic transitioning needed, environmentally and economically, out of the high-carbon society, with the change to far lower levels of social inequality, based on a new grasp of systems—above all of how capitalism works. Little in Chapter 1 of the White Paper would meet the needs of such an improved analysis.

But even in the immediate term, if we were to take Chapter 1 as adequate, I would see the need for sweeping changes of state policy direction, including root-and-branch changes of Treasury neoliberal ideology (notwithstanding Covid exceptionalism), the genuine rebuilding of local government capacity and autonomy (not this tiresome 'deals' disease, which makes every council leader in the UK a supplicant), and the making of a new environmentally and socially attuned planning system. Then there might be some chance for some real levelling up (greater fairness and equality across the country) to get some effective traction.

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Notes

- 1 *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*. Levelling Up White Paper. CP 604. HM Government, Feb. 2022. www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom
- 2 *Planning for the Future*. Planning White Paper. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Aug. 2020. www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future
- 3 T Marshall: 'The White Paper's ideological core'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2020, Vol. 89, Sept./Oct., 304–306
- 4 See, for example, *Measuring Wealth, Delivering Prosperity*. Bennett Institute for Public Policy, University of Cambridge, Jul. 2019. www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/publications/measuring-wealth-delivering-prosperity/
- 5 See, for example, M Mazzucato and G Dibb: *Missions: A Beginner's Guide*. UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose. Dec. 2019. www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/public-purpose/publications/2019/dec/missions-beginners-guide
- 6 'In conversation with Andy Haldane: how to make levelling up work'. YouTube video. Institute for Government, Mar. 2022. www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GuuxSDNs0s
- 7 See this quote, from D Massey and M Rustin: 'Whose economy? Reframing the debate'. *Soundings*, 2014, Vol. 57, 170–190:
'A further effect of the dominance of finance has been the ever-more yawning disparity between London-and-the-South-East and the North and West. Given the geographical propensities of finance, the North-South divide cannot be seriously addressed without challenging the dominance of the sector in its current form.'
- 8 O Bennett: *Michael Gove: A Man in a Hurry*. Biteback Publishing, 2019 (see pp.92–94)
- 9 *Local Governments' Capacity to Act: A European Comparison*. Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR), Federal Republic of Germany, 2020. www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/DE/veroeffentlichungen/sonderveroeffentlichungen/2020/handlungsaefahigkeit-dl-en.pdf;jsessionid=12DD2C1E8C9CB03850E69A1301787782.live11294?__blob=publicationFile&v=2
Readers may also find the New Leipzig Charter of interest, as it makes a clear case for 'empowering cities to act in the common good', making a narrative quite distinct from this present UK one being assessed — see *The New Leipzig Charter: Synthesis and Focus*. BBSR, Jul. 2021. www.bbsr.bund.de/BBSR/EN/publications/SpecialPublication/2021/new-leipzig-charter-synthesis-focus.html. These are EU documents, agreed by EU-wide working groups, but prepared under the 2020 German Presidency, and so published by the BBSR
- 10 T Marshall: *The Politics and Ideology of Planning*. Policy Press, 2020
- 11 W Jennings, L McKay and G Stoker: 'The politics of levelling up'. *The Political Quarterly*, 2021, Vol. 92 (2), 302–11. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-923X.13005>
- 12 *Prosperity and Justice. A Plan for the New Economy*. Final Report. IPPR Commission on Economic Justice. Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), Sept. 2018. www.ippr.org/research/publications/prosperity-and-justice; and *Fairness and Opportunity. A People-Powered Plan for the Green Transition*. Final Report. IPPR Environmental Justice Commission. IPPR, Jul. 2021. www.ippr.org/research/publications/fairness-and-opportunity
- 13 *Make No Little Plans: Acting at Scale for a Fairer and Stronger Future*. Final Report. UK2070 Commission, Feb. 2020. <http://uk2070.org.uk/2020/02/26/uk2070-final-report-published/>