

The system may be slightly batty but do we want to hand it over to Westminster bunglers?

# Why planning is much too important for Government

**O**ne has to be deeply suspicious whenever central government tinkers with the planning system. Everyone who has had anything to do with local planners knows that the process is often tortuous and slightly bonkers, listening to Councillor Bloggs sound off about the right sort of windows, or opine that architecture took a wrong turn after, say, Sir Christopher Wren.

But no matter how daft the local planning process is, we all know that it is better than any alternative likely to be imposed on us from central government.

The results of central planning diktats in the past have been the soul-destroying uniformity of our towns and the hideous sprawl of car-dependent 'standard house types' over the rural landscape.

So, it is with deep suspicion that one considers two planning reforms outlined last week and, cunningly, on the same day.

First, was the 'good news' Householder Development Consents Review, which aims to allow homeowners to expand their homes without having to ask the planners.

This will allow conservatories and extensions to be approved with simplified permitted development orders' and end vexatious objections and delays.

This reform, made necessary by the home-improve-



**MARKET WATCH**  
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ment mania of recent years, is probably a good thing, although it does mean putting up with your neighbour's eyesore.

At the same time, the Treasury wheeled out its tame economist Kate Barker to come up with a plausibly researched attack on the 'unnecessary complexity' surrounding planning approval for major projects – presumably such as nuclear power stations, motorways through the countryside and, say, expanding Stansted airport.

Getting these approved is taking longer than is justified by the need for democratic consultation, declares Barker, apparently quite unaware of the hilarious irony of such a remark.

Two-thirds of businesses, she says, are 'dissatisfied or very dissatisfied' with the planning process – which, given that most would prefer no planning controls at all, you might take as a positive endorsement of the status quo.

Under Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, the nobbling of the planning process was not very subtle. Even though no one wanted them,

England is now divided into non-elected regional assemblies – stooges, in other words – which now make strategic planning decisions, rather than the more democratically bolshy county councils.

As a result, decisions to impose thousands of houses on Maidstone, Kent, are now made by the unrepresentative South East England Regional Assembly based in Guildford, Surrey.

Barker is considering abolishing this layer of planning by regional assemblies, but we will have to wait until later in the year to learn of her alternative.

**D**on't expect local empowerment, however. Her master, Gordon Brown, wants planning decisions to be quicker and local people to be more compliant, and Barker will deliver.

Two years ago, her cure-all for housing and the plight of first-timers unable to get on to the property ladder was simply to build even more homes.

But, as we reported last week, multiple home-owning buy-to-let investors and non-UK resident speculators are buying up to 70 per cent of new developments. Building more won't in itself solve the plight of first-timers.

In planning, as in much else, central government, with its Soviet-style bungling, is more the problem than the solution.

**TAKE-OFF:**  
Will Kate Barker's planning reforms push through controversial projects such as Stansted?



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