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‘People and Planning’ 50 Years On: the Never-Ending Struggle for Planning to Engage with People

Francesca Sartorio

Cardiff University

Glamorgan Building

King Edward VII Avenue

Cardiff CF10-3WA

Orcid ID 0000-0001-6684-5629

SartorioF@cf.ac.uk

‘People and Planning,’ the Report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning to the Minister of Housing and Local Government, to the Secretary of State for Scotland and to the Secretary of State for Wales was printed in the Autumn of 1969. The Committee, comprising 26 members and Chaired by Mr. Arthur Skeffington, MP for Hayes and Harlington, had been appointed in March 1968, following the passing of a new Town and Country Planning Act just two months earlier, ‘to consider and report on the best methods ...of securing the participation of the public at the formative stage in the making of development plans for their area’ (Great Britain, 1969: 1). To use the words of the Minister for Housing and Local Government, Anthony Greenwood there was a feeling that, “... attitudes have got to change: we have got to get rid of

the idea that the planners and the planned are on different sides of the fence, and we must study ways of getting them talking together” (Hansard, 1968).

My gaze on ‘People and Planning’ is that of the external observer, not being British myself and not having lived in the UK over the past fifty years. I discovered a dusty copy of the so-called ‘Skeffington Report’ in the Cardiff University library by chance, at some point in 2014. I became fascinated by it, with its evocative drawings and a language that we rarely see in government reports anymore. Both the graphics and the narrative talk of a changing society and government, of the good life, of planning as a practice to underpin ways of living and using space together. The report sees participation as a positive feature; good for government, good for the people and good for policies. The relative freshness of the report might have something to do with the fact that it was the first of its kind, the UK system having been one of the first to introduce statutory public participation, and planning having been among the first public services in the UK to do so (Damer and Hague, 1971). Coming ‘first’ on so many fronts made it a pivotal document, able to lead debates in the UK and abroad, contributing to the definition of what public participation is (and, more importantly, what it could be) within planning, and producing exemplary suggestions shaping how engagement has been devised in other countries. To sum things up, this is a document of which to be rightfully proud.

Since I came to Skeffington ‘from the outside’, I had to spend some time trying to understand what was ‘around it’ at the time, and this is what I would like to briefly highlight, to complement the thoughts of the other contributors to this *Interface*.

The document was produced by a Committee chaired by Arthur Skeffington, a barrister by profession and Labour Party Member of Parliament for Hayes and Harlington. He was born in 1909 and died just two years after the publication of the report, whilst still in office. The Committee was made up of 26 members; most – with the exception of Mrs J.E. Baty, Miss A.M. Lees, Mrs V.D. Neate and Mrs M.J. Watson - middle aged men, well-educated and comparatively well off: a table of wise men which, though I have not been able to access further detail, I would assume were also mostly white.

As for the document itself, its language and hope for the development of successful participation remain extraordinarily contemporary. Even the choice of language is similar to what we would use today, see for example the framing given for undertaking the report:

'It may be that the evolution of the structures of representative government which has concerned western nations for the last century and a half is now entering a new phase. There is a growing demand by many groups for more opportunity to contribute and for more say in the working out of policies which affect people not merely at election time, but continuously as proposals are being hammered out and, certainly, as they are being implemented. Life, so the argument runs, is becoming more and more complex, and one cannot leave all the problems to one's representatives. They need some help in reaching the right decision, and opportunity should be provided for discussions with all those involved.' (Great Britain, 1969:3).

It is perhaps the drawings that most set it apart as a product of its time; hand sketched ink images that evoke English village life, heritage (the high street, the market, the theatre, the woodlands and its birds, farmland) and the threats to it (the motorway, bingo halls, supermarket developments). Looking at the drawings makes it easier to understand where the Committee members were coming from, what they were thinking of, and possibly hoping to recreate or preserve. To me they talk eloquently of white, British, middle aged, middle class, gendered (male) experiences of village life, framed within very particular social and spatial formations that might have then been under threat, or may have been generally fantasized about, since they no longer existed, or had already changed considerably by this time.

ADD IMAGE 1 HERE

Image credit: (from Great Britain 1969, 11¹)

As for political context, the 1968 Planning Act had already introduced the statutory requirements for publicity and participation in the development plan system, following work by the Planning Advisory Group in 1964 on how to avoid dissatisfaction with planning decisions. Arthur Skeffington and his Committee were tasked with providing examples and guidance as to how publicity and participation could be developed locally in practice. There is little background beyond this to such a ground-breaking change to how people are seen within the system, and the tone and values advocated by Skeffington also seem to have had shallow, if any, roots in legislative terms. In societal terms though, the narrative in ‘People and Planning’ absorbs, digests

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and reflects a lot of the changes that had been developing in the 60s for a planning audience, including academic and popular debates on this and the other side of the Atlantic. Those debates seem to have been crystallised into a document which advises on good practice, provides a set of clear paths for engagement in the new development plan system, invokes mindsets and tools, principles and technology, recruiting mechanisms and schedules. Despite going straight into looking for best practice examples, there was nothing within the system itself to have anticipated this development. Following the 1947 Planning Act, publicity was not seen as something particularly worthwhile or important in planning. And so it seems legitimate to ask what might have prompted such a flurry of activity around the definition and practice of a wholly new concept, participation.

Social scientists and policy analysts would say that anything that gets suddenly and strongly institutionalised will take off with difficulty unless there is strong societal support for it. And so maybe it is not a surprise that, after some delay, participatory practices in planning – with some notable and rare exceptions - adopted the routine, formulaic, tick-box-exercise shape that mostly took over across the country. According to the work of fellow academics, nobody much likes participation. Criticisms abound from all sides: the citizens, planning officers and elected members – and yet, we keep going. It seems bizarre, on the basis of such widespread dissatisfaction, that the next big thing in participation in English Planning would be the Localism Act of 2011.

At the time of the Skeffington Report, the UK had a Labour government, but there was also considerable pressure for development in many areas, particularly in the South East and other

Conservative strongholds. Concerns about the impacts of post-war planning had led to the emergence of growing movements for the preservation of heritage. Nationally, tensions arising from the plight of more disadvantaged groups were rising – in the late 60s British industry was in decline and the pressure to increase competitiveness in production was having real effects on workers lives – whilst the shockwaves of the uprisings of 1968 were still fresh in many minds. In the 2010s, a Conservative-led coalition took power as the country tried to pick itself up from the recent global recession amidst continued concern about the impacts of new housebuilding in Conservative strongholds. On the surface, then, these two historical moments were quite different. However, in governmentality terms, these were both moments of crisis, when – unless challenged more profoundly - governments had to create new technologies for governing if they were to continue doing more or less the same things. Whenever we want to perpetuate the status quo, things need to change (Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1958). So although both 1969 and 2011 might be read as moments of apparent great opening, scraping beyond the surface, we see that they were perhaps not that open after all.

However, in as much as the Skeffington Report speaks of its time, its use so far speaks of ours. It might not come as a surprise that the implementation and adoption of the recommendations proposed by the Skeffington Report have never been reviewed, not even in the early 90s when New Labour came into power and introduced audits and appraisals across almost every imaginable area of public policy. To this day, the UK government has not looked at how we *do* participation at a local level as no systematic study has been officially commissioned. So there remain key questions for us, whether we are academics, scholars, researchers or practitioners; to try and understand, not just *why* this is the case, but also, in developing new frames, to be able to

interpret *what* spaces of engagement mean today, *what* they might mean within a more progressive environment for planning, and *how* we can contribute to enlarge these spaces and make them more meaningful for all.

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