

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

In 2018 the Conservative Government commissioned the late Sir Roger Scruton to become the honorary Chair of the BUILDING BETTER, BUILDING BEAUTIFUL commission, which was to review the then current Planning System in the UK.

Sir Roger saw the task of conservatism as “making ourselves at home”. He believed we have a moral obligation to make our buildings and their settings beautiful and adaptable. He brought back the notion of public beauty to architecture, and his report restored hope to both urban and rural residents who had lost faith in the then current Planning System. But it brought out fear and anger in the architects and developers who had prospered from cheap, single purpose, short horizon products. Scruton insisted that the social life and amenities of communities are, for home buyers and families, more important than the “cookie-cutter estates favoured by developers”. The traditional, well-trying architecture of old towns and villages was not to be ignored by planners and builders. They had been built to a human scale, with conformity to their settings.

By owning or renting a property one becomes a trustee for the future, not just a temporary exploiter. Homes need to be set in well-supported communities, not just abandoned in endless sprawls of identical units. Therefore, local people need a say in what is planned and delivered, in order to maintain a local character. His report castigated the ugliness and sterility of much “modern architecture”, the greed of developers and the major housing companies, along with the lack of backbone in local authority planning departments.

However, Sir Roger’s plea for humanity and beauty to be restored to national and local planning arrangements, went ignored. The financial clout of the backers for the Conservative Party prevailed, and we have instead a centralised system that gives developers free rein and turns local authorities into agencies securing building rights,

instead of defending their residents and constituents. An important opportunity for a democratic and humane Planning System has been missed. The consequences for cities like Wells and its surrounding towns and villages will be dire. If the further attempts to reduce the layers of democracy by getting rid of Parish Councils are successful, the only defence our local residents will have against central planning dictats, e g for 3000 new houses in 5 years in Wells and St Cuthbert's Out, will be an appeal to James Heapey. Local residents making objections to yet more Gladman, Bovis or Wimpey estates will find they have no one else to represent them. Planning has been taken over by Westminster, and Mendip, Wells and its parishes are, if they survive, to do as they are told.

Written by Councillor Pablo Foster 2020