

Planning and democracy

A letter to the Herald, November 2009

Sir,

Of all this Government's dithering, their refusal until now to tackle the energy crisis is among the worst yet. On the Government's own projections widespread blackouts are predicted across England within the next eight years. This week's new energy strategy is a decade late.

Whether you like the idea of nuclear power or not, it is a necessity if we are to fulfil our energy needs and hit our climate change objectives. Because of the energy shortage we now face, it is also urgent that we accelerate this programme.

But Labour's new quango, the Infrastructure Planning Commission, is the wrong way to go about this. Even aside from the rather Soviet ring to its name, it is a step in the wrong direction: against democracy. And it is not just about nuclear power. This unelected body is to take control of determining planning applications on many large projects including airports, motorways, railways, dams/reservoirs, overhead electric lines, gas pipelines, gas storage and hazardous waste facilities. It will base its decisions on National Policy Statements issued by Ministers as diktats with no substantive vote in Parliament.

This is the same attitude that imposed top-down housing targets on the South East, but failed to provide the things local communities actually need – including proper facilities and more affordable housing.

To restore trust in government and politics we need more democracy not less. If David Cameron becomes Prime Minister, the Infrastructure Planning Commission will be abolished and Parliament will vote on large infrastructure projects. The South East Plan will also be shredded, and local people, through their elected local representatives, will be put back in control of housing development.

Yours

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