

Constructive collaboration is better than 'resistance'

This year should be one for constructive collaboration, not the defeatist hand-wringing that characterised 2019

It was typical of the most disastrous leader of the Labour Party in living memory that his post-election strategy called for 'resistance' to the new government – a government with a thumping majority following an election campaign which persuaded many Labour voters to desert their party for the first time.

So what should be the attitude of London and the mayor to the Boris Johnson administration? The answer, surely, is to continue promoting what it is that good design and planning can bring to the built environment, to push environmental design in all its many forms, and to campaign for decent standards of housing, education and health for all. There may be opportunities post-Brexit to rethink some policies in relation to procurement, for example. The debate about overseas access to professional jobs seems to have been won.

These would not be policies of Corbynite resistance, but nor would they be collaboration in a pejorative sense. In particular Sadiq Khan needs to make friends with his mayoral predecessor to argue the case for investment in London, even if the balance between South and North is being realigned. Boris will understand the argument for backing Crossrail 2, for example, and he does not need (or deserve) mayoral sniping at a time when spending commitments are fluid.

Such an approach would be relatively politically neutral, in the sense that it does not rely on party politics, but instead focuses on aspirations and potential outcomes for the capital. It is also grown-up, since it does not stem from a simple-minded belief that a political party is interested in making things worse because you disagree with its policies. Even though Mayor Khan foolishly nominated Corbyn as Labour leader, and even if the party saddles itself with a clone replacement leader, there is little evidence that he is part of the Nasty Party tendency.

So London should be pushing national government to improve housing, education and health, even if success would improve Boris's chances of being re-elected.

As far as housing is concerned, the multi-dimensional nature of the challenge makes the subject highly appropriate for a wide range of analyses and ideas. They should include the reform of permitted development rules which are creating some of the worst housing units we have seen for many years. The political instincts of some planners have led them to condemn PD root and branch, but this is surely to miss a point: why not convert redundant office buildings for much-needed housing? Immaculately 'Retrofirst', to coin the term devised by the Architects' Journal to prioritise environmentally friendly retrofit.

The problem with PD has been the failure to insist on minimum space standards for such projects. As it happens, Boris Johnson was the only major political figure in 40 years who did anything about space standards, when he pledged to introduce minimums in his first London mayoral campaign. He followed up and delivered, just as he achieved a supposedly impossible Brexit deal. Who is to say that an approach on PD space standards would not reap results? Similarly, his evolving mayoral approach of thinking about housing as infrastructure would be worth a revisit. This year should be one for this sort of constructive collaboration, not the defeatist hand-wringing that characterised 2019. ■

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A letter to Boris

Dear Boris

Don't forget which city still keeps the UK economy afloat and gave you your first taste of leadership

Congratulations on your fat majority. But we hear you won't be taking much interest in London now you have new supporters up north to keep happy. Especially when most of we Remainer Londoners didn't vote Conservative. London is a sea of socialist red, in an ocean of capitalist blue.

Whatever you do, we suggest your new MPs read Janice Morphet's article in this issue of our highly influential planning magazine. It's on page 64. Because after you've blown billions on much-needed transport connections up north, you'll still need to sort out the housing shortage in London. It's top of the to do list and as she reports (she is visiting professor at the Bartlett School of Planning you know), many local authorities are taking matters into their own hands, to tackle the shortages of all types of housing, but there are so many discouragements placed in their way.

And of course, there remains the question of whether local authorities are actually the right vehicle to be owning and delivering housing. You may remember the little embarrassment around Lady Porter's attempts to adjust the colour of Westminster's housing stock a few years ago. Equally, there is nothing more tempting to Labour authorities than to build lots more affordable homes with which to bolster their supporters' political inclinations. There might be some fertile political innovation around who should be delivering social housing.

Assuming, however, that local authorities are insufficiently cynical to gerrymander the provision of housing, you and your 80-strong majority, must acknowledge that neither the planning system, its policies, nor the way social housing is financed tends to encourage increased delivery of homes. Evidenced not least by your own failure as Mayor, and that of both your predecessor and successor, to deliver them in sufficient numbers. That's 20 years of not delivering enough. And it's not any better in those northern towns and cities you are now sucking up to. What use is a planning system that doesn't deliver enough homes of the type and quality we need, some might ask? But it isn't the system or the market that's "broken". It's just the programming that needs tweaking. Here's a few ideas, some from Janice. Some from us.

Revisit the Use Classes Order so Local Plans can specify what precise type of housing needs to go on which sites. Ditch Right to Buy on new council housing – why would anyone build it then sell it at a discount? Don't raise interest rates on borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board, because, as all good capitalists understand, that will tend to discourage investment.

Do encourage local authorities to produce clear annual reports about their property portfolios and force them to demonstrate good management and sensible accounting policies. Especially now so many of them have established wholly-owned subsidiary companies to pursue residential developments. If private companies managed their mega-property portfolios the way many councils seem to, the shareholders might not be happy. Enable councils to recruit more staff and invest in holistic creative planning and development to deliver more homes in partnership with private investors and developers.

Finally, good luck up north because they need help, but don't forget which city still keeps the UK economy afloat and gave you your first taste of leadership.

The Editors