

SERPLAN A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FOR THE SOUTH EAST

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This summarises the Society's third response to the proposed changes in Local Government

1. Local government has twice been reorganised in the last thirty years and a third reorganisation is now taking place. The rationale for this is the stimulation of democracy. Turnout at local elections is low, hence the proposals for annual elections, supermarket polling booths, elected mayors or cabinets, rolling registers, referenda, etc, etc. This process is time-consuming, disruptive and expensive, including legislation. As compared with, for example, health, education and transport it is of low electoral concern.

2. Turnout at general elections is high because power and resources are at stake. Political parties offer genuine change. Turnout at local elections was formerly much larger because local authorities had control of their own tax resources and because they were deeply involved in local transport, health and education, etc. Centralisation, rate-capping and displacement of responsibility to quangos have reduced them to relative impotence. Compared with issues like abortion, animal rights, armaments and road building, etc, for which thousands petition and demonstrate, local government is regarded as trivial and boring. The self-evident remedy is to restore powers and make resources available to county and district councils etc.

3. This not what Serplan proposes. So-called "regions" which have existed for thirty years as consultative bodies are now promoted to the key position in policy making and enforcement. They are located in government offices like Guilford and their Regional Development Agencies, etc. are quangos or qualgos. The small number of county councillors on them is nominated, not elected. The cooption of businessmen, etc, is also not democratic. How independent of Whitehall the regional offices will be is highly questionable. Moreover, the SE. Region which stretches from Bedford in the north to Southampton in the south and from Oxford in the west to Dover in the east, excluding London, makes no kind of geographical, economic or historic sense as compared, for instance with a Wealden Region of Surrey, the Sussexes and Kent.

4. Regionalisation is part of a larger scheme.

According to the Labour election manifesto, the devolution of power to Welsh and Scottish Assemblies is to be paralleled by the creation of Regional Assemblies to strengthen their regional identities and claims for resources. A National Assembly for England might have been more proportionately appropriate. Eight regions plus Wales and Scotland (and Northern Ireland) competing for limited resources sounds precisely like "divide and rule". It is hard to believe that Whitehall or the Treasury would grant them the independent tax-raising powers necessary for the coordination and control of sustainable education, planning, transport, etc.,

5. It is also known that the present government proposes that only Single-tier Unitary Authorities will be permitted to survive into regionalisation which means that County Councils, so strenuously supported in the recent struggle must disappear. This will obviously not be unopposed and we may confidently anticipate another long, strong and expensive struggle, and a messy compromise (eg the Medway Towns Unitary Authority within the County of Kent) to resolve the matter.

6. If there are to be elected Regional Assemblies with only unitary authorities beneath them, county councils must disappear and it will be difficult to maintain and justify District Councils at more than Parish Council level. As Lesley Cumberland argued at our meeting in October, unitary authorities could not be less than half-a-county in size - eg East Kent centred on Canterbury - and that for the necessary quality of representative, there should be no more than 12-15 councillors to represent the area, and that they should be paid, in comparison with the current situation, in which the smaller the area (parish, district and county councils), the larger the number of councillors and the smaller the power and resources to be expended.

7. Existing local authorities are already overburdened with continuously updating Structure Plans, Local Plans and Local Traffic Plans, all of which happen to include the environmental safeguards for which societies like ours have campaigned for years. (They also, however, invariably include sanctioned exceptions.) In this Serplan document they are now required to liaise and coordinate with even more bodies and to furnish more and more returns and undertake even more monitoring. Are their resources to be correspondingly enhanced so that they can continue to provide adequate essential services? We look forward to hearing what Dover District Council thinks about it.

8. The Serplan publication is unnecessarily repetitive and glossy and, consequently, more expensive. Committee members have variously described it as "Pie in the Sky", "the Road to Hell", and "totally impractical", "big on promises, short on action".