

## **ROBERT GRIEVE: AN APPRECIATION**

*Douglas Robertson*

The death of Robert Grieve marks the passing of an era. He represented a generation of planners who had a clear strategic vision of what was required for the future. While the main theme in Grieve's work within Central Scotland was dominated by the perceived need to move the Scottish economy away from what was viewed as a debilitating structure dominated by heavy engineering, towards one based on the production of consumer products, he was always able to clearly relate these economic objectives to the wider betterment of society. The driving force behind his work was always his basic humanity and intense desire to improve the quality of life for his fellow Scots.

Grieve worked in an era when the State, through the Scottish Office, was steadily increasing its power base, replacing the previous fractured municipal form of government. Regional plans, set in motion by Tom Johnston during the War, opened the corporatist era which lasted well into the 1980s. Post-war reconstruction was very much a 'top down' solution, and that was the case whether the planning decisions were made by Central or Local Government. Although the motives which drove the post-war corporatist era were laudable, with hindsight they are rightly criticised for producing a grandiose and (at times) arrogant form of planning. Grieve in his later years readily acknowledged these failings. His personal enthusiasm for New Towns, for example, was tempered by the knowledge that they contributed greatly to the immense economic problems which continue to afflict the city of Glasgow. Yet it should be noted that Glasgow, for its part, chose to view planning solely as a means to retain its population and therefore its political power. Hence Glasgow focused on housing and roads: economic issues would be resolved through nationalisation of the much despised capitalist enterprises. Glasgow's city fathers, in the 1950s and 1960s, proved incapable

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of appreciating the importance of taking a holistic view when planning the city's renewal.

Grieve's disillusionment with planning, in his later years, largely stemmed from this separation of its physical and economic components. From the mid-1960s onwards the Scottish Office downgraded strategic planning, seeing economic planning, largely focused through the development of the New Towns, as being the key motor to bring about change within Scotland, ensuring that the conditions to enable businesses to flourish always took precedence. As a result, comprehensive strategic planning soon fell away: ironically at the same time a more locally accountable strategic planning framework was being established, with the creation of regional government in 1975. In a number of pleasurable and enlightening conversations with me over the last eight years, Bob Grieve expressed his frustration with Central Government's abandonment of this strategic focus. Local government strategic planning also came under his critical eye. Given that the Regions had no real economic clout, a situation compounded by rapid de-industrialisation, they quickly become fixated on the pursuit of individual projects, avoiding any attempt to promote a proper strategic overview. As a profession, planners become incapable of understanding, let alone formulating, strategic plans.

The main problem, in this context, was that it was Central government which held all the real power and influence over all the key planning issues, for it controlled the economic agenda. Yet, in Scotland, it has never been democratically accountable to the people for whom it planned. It was perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Grieve was a strong supporter of Scottish 'Home Rule'. He also held a healthy scepticism, however, of what benefits would accrue from such an institution if it merely mirrored a Labour Town Council.

In his later life he became a strong proponent of the need to ensure that local communities were given a clear role in planning. His report on Glasgow's housing was highly complimentary about the work of the community-based housing associations which had transformed tenement slums into desirable residential neighbourhoods (Grieve 1986). This was achieved through a partnership between Government (operating through a quango), the affected local communities and the local authority. While their individual motivations may have differed, all held and agreed the same strategic view, namely, that the slums should be eradicated but the tenements, and the communities they housed, saved. But, although housing regeneration can be very successful, of

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itself it is insufficient to bring about the wider social and economic improvements needed in these communities.

The renewal of Glasgow ably illustrates the repercussions of this abandonment of strategic thinking. Glasgow over the last twenty years has promoted a housing regeneration agenda, largely funded by the Scottish Office. Yet the city has been disconnected from the Government's economic agenda. So while the housing conditions for the majority have improved, the economic prospects for its citizens have continued to falter. Industrial policy still encourages employment to re-locate to the New Towns and to Lanarkshire. Until a clear understanding of the need and importance of strategic planning is resurrected, there seems little prospect of Glasgow effecting its regeneration through the promotion of 'visions' (City of Glasgow District Council 1995).

While there is a need to engage in a wide-ranging discussion about the future role of the City of Glasgow, that debate must be set within the wider Scottish context. Glasgow's future will be determined by the attitudes of Government and its citizens, as well as by its 'movers and shakers'. Their view should be properly canvassed and be used to inform an agreed strategic plan for the city, setting it within its regional, national and European context. Only with a clear commitment to revive the principles of strategic planning can the panoply of agencies, which purport to be pursuing 'visionary' regeneration agendas, be made to pull in the same direction. Glasgow has, for too long, suffered from these bodies too often pulling in opposite directions while professing to be following the same path. Partnerships mean nothing if the strategy is not mutually agreed. The challenge is to devise a new approach to strategic planning which does not replicate the mistakes of the grandiose versions of the past. Constructing a strategic plan for Clydeside, in which Glasgow is acknowledged to be the key centre, would be a fitting tribute to Robert Grieve. At a time when the administrative structure for Scotland seems destined to change, a reformed strategic planning system would prove to be a critical tool.

### **REFERENCES**

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