

The Brazilianisation of Britain's cities

The impact of globalisation on urban development

Part One

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28 July 1999

The Labour government's Urban Task Force, headed by the renowned architect and city planner, Lord Richard Rodgers, has released its report on the state of infrastructure and social well-being in Britain's cities. Entitled "Towards an Urban Renaissance", the report is the most comprehensive picture of city life in England for more than two decades.

Rodgers believes that the country is suffering an "urban crisis". In the world's most heavily urbanised nation, this can only mean a crisis concerning the dynamics and social conditions of everyday life for millions of people.

Speaking to the *Observer* newspaper on the eve of the report's release, Rodgers remarked, "We are the most unbalanced country in Europe. While most of London is really rich, the other cities of England are extremely poor." The United Nations considers the UK one of the most socially unequal societies in the world. Disraeli's famous evocation of two nations, living separate lives, has never been more apt than today.

Rodgers, a personal friend of Prime Minister Blair, spent a year touring England (Scotland and Wales due to devolution have yet to set up their own city initiatives), often with deputy prime minister John Prescott at his side. He inspected the state of housing, infrastructure and social services. The report's findings paint a disturbing picture of the state of the nation at end of the century. Its findings point to a massive chasm between the lives of people who live at opposite ends of the social hierarchy in every facet of social life. The much fabled north/south divide is deeper than ever, but more profoundly, cities and regions over the entire country are home to grotesque discrepancies between the social classes.

Some towns and villages in the south of the country have become so prosperous that only the wealthy can reside there. Working class people in rural areas can no longer afford to live in the place of their birth because the price of property has shot up due to the influx of wealthy commuters who work in the financial centre of London. Farm cottages are being turned into holiday lets, forcing residents with less collateral to move away in search of a tenancy.

Wealthy investors, often seeking a second home in the country, are buying up whole farms with land of up to 200 acres, because those with less acreage have already been taken. They rent the surrounding land to working farmers who can not afford to buy the property themselves.

Infrastructure is collapsing in many rural areas because of protracted under-funding. Libraries, Post Offices and public transport are disappearing, worsening the disparities between the rich and poor. There is a relentless growth of private sector provision for those who can afford it, while those who cannot are left with decaying and neglected public services.

The growth of poverty and social polarisation is both an inter-regional

and intra-regional phenomenon. Even the severely depressed urban areas of the country contain districts of comfortable upper middle class existence. Affluent leafy urban villages like Notting Hill or Chiswick in the capital, London, share much in common with islands of prosperity in mostly depressed cities like Shadwell in Leeds or Castle Marina in Nottingham.

Yet some areas, predominately in the north, are so deprived and decrepit that those who can afford to leave for more prosperous regions with job opportunities do so. Areas of plenty and poverty are often only a short bus ride from each other, but for their occupants they might as well be on different planets. Leeds, heralded as a city reborn in commercial quarters due to the recent facelift of its High Street, is also referred to as a "two-track economy" because ten of the country's most deprived wards border the city centre.

Inside northern cities there are places where privately owned houses are unable to find a buyer at any price, like areas of Salford in Greater Manchester and Saint Anns in Nottingham. A recent BBC television programme noted that houses in the most impoverished areas bought just a few years ago for £20,000-£30,000 often changed hands today for a few hundred pounds. Some estate agents are offering homes at "three for the price of two" as an incentive to buyers. Row upon row of empty, boarded up privately owned houses exist in neighbourhoods where Local Authority tenants do not wish to live and owner-occupiers have abandoned properties that have become almost worthless. Escalating crime rates in these areas are amongst the highest in Western Europe, as are levels of hard drug dependency.

In parts of Newcastle's West End, one in seven houses are empty and boarded up. In the Scotswood district, ploughed earth marks the location where a block of Housing Association properties constructed just a couple of years ago have been razed to the ground. Since 1981, 2,000 homes have been demolished and 7,000 remain uninhabited in the city. The West End has been the recipient of a £125 million regeneration project from both public and private sources between 1992-97. This was described in the *Economist* magazine recently as merely "slowing the slide" back into deprivation.

The problem is not always a rapid wholesale abandonment of an urban area, but gradual erosion of the population base. Newcastle has lost 10 percent of its population since 1971. This process accelerates during periods of extreme recession and multiple job losses. Most people who live in northern cities have friends and family who have moved south or even emigrated abroad due to the austere economic situation.

Unemployment rates in most of the northern cities are more than double the national average. Britain's major cities have lost 500,000 jobs since

1981, almost entirely in manufacturing. That is the equivalent to a population the size of Sheffield, England's fifth largest city. Vast swathes of derelict inner city land lie abandoned because the heavy industries and manufacturing plants that used to occupy the sites have long since closed down, shifted abroad or relocated to more convenient sites on city peripheries. Poor schools and health services, bad environment, a chronic lack of social and cultural facilities and shoddy housing arrangements means the quality of life in northern cities is very poor, especially for those on low incomes and social security benefits. This contributes to family breakdowns, poverty, deprivation, poor diet, overcrowding and squalor.

That this is a social question rather than a geographic one is emphasised by the fact that the majority of inner city London boroughs are amongst the most deprived in the country. Urban commentators have begun to refer to areas of the inner cities as the "second world" because of their extreme poverty and deprivation. Death rates are one third higher for those in the most deprived areas.

The same week as the urban report was released, the British Medical Association revealed that children in the UK have the worst health in Western Europe, with low birth weights comparable to those in Albania. A whole generation is growing up suffering from malnutrition, growing up a head shorter than their parents because of the lack of protein in their diet.

The report suggests that the widening inequality witnessed over the past 20 years parallels the shift from a largely industrial economy to one dominated by the service sector. This has led to a widening of wage differentials, which finds expression in the spatial inequalities inside cities.

Half of all inner city housing stock is social housing and currently there exist 1.5 million residential and commercial properties lying empty up and down the country. Because of serious under-funding, the residualisation of social housing has gone further and faster in Britain than in any other country in Western Europe. Workers who could afford to buy their council property on the more attractive estates have done so or moved into privately owned properties.

In places where the population is declining, death rates are higher than in the areas where the population is growing—says a study from Bristol University published in the *Lancet* medical journal recently. The report states: "Areas with unfavourable social and physical environments are the ones people will, if possible, leave to move to attractive places." Consequently the less mobile live in poor housing, suffer from poor health and pollution, are more likely to be jobless and die earlier in life. Salford and Glasgow have death rates 30 percent higher than the national average.

A Health Survey for England 1999 concluded that living in a northern inner city was bad for your health. Working class people were more likely to suffer from bad health, asthma, obesity, high blood pressure and are more likely to smoke. In May of this year, a Friends of the Earth report concluded that the North West, Yorkshire, Humberside, Teeside and South Wales were the most polluted areas in the UK. Industrial pollution, the report continues, is to blame for foetal abnormalities, high rates of cancer, childhood asthma, higher cancer rates and other fatal diseases. The worst polluters are industrial transnational corporations like ICI, Glaxo and Octel. London, which has little industry left, is amongst the cleanest areas.

The Rodgers' report notes that 1,700 people leave northern areas every week, usually on an internal diaspora to the southeast. Cities like Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and Liverpool have lost almost one third of their populations in the last twenty years. Simultaneously London and its surrounding areas expand by 20,000 people per year. A joint report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (a charitable organisation) and the Chartered Institute of Housing, published the same week found that in the period from 1994-97 an average of 23,000 people moved from the north.

Simultaneously the southeast gained 70,000 people from the rest of the nation.

The city of Reading in the southeast is home to a burgeoning service economy that has attracted companies like Oracle and Microsoft. It has just 2,000 people claiming unemployment benefit. Employers are struggling to fill vacancies for jobs, so much so that they are attempting to recruit homeless people and recently released prison inmates in an attempt to fill 3,500 vacancies at a new shopping centre.

Because of the population influx, the southeast is also struggling to meet the demand for new homes. London's population has grown from 6.9 million in 1991 to 7.1 million last year. The report estimates that 1.1 million new homes need to be built before 2016. House prices have rocketed in both the southeast and the more affluent areas of the north, while average house prices in Bradford in the north have fallen by 5 percent and in Doncaster by 11 percent by comparison.

The London Housing Federation found that the steep rises in prices for rented property in London is driving out the very workers upon whom London's essential public services depend, like nurses and teachers. These workers have seen their wages fall in real terms and can no longer afford to live in the capital. Even living in the relatively less expensive areas on the city periphery proves difficult due to the heavy costs of commuting. For £20-30,000 you can purchase a decent if unfashionably located terrace house in the northern cities. Add another £5,000 and you have just enough to buy a parking space in Covent Garden, London. While the average price of a semi-detached house in the north east of England has barely risen above £52,000 over the last three years, in the south east it has shot up to £102,000, and to considerably more in parts of Greater London. A recent report by the Nationwide building society remarked that, "Prices for quality homes will continue to rise, while prices for poor homes continue to fall as the market increasingly polarises over the next ten years."

Inner London is now the wealthiest single region in Europe, with a per capita GDP more than double that of the European average. The capital enjoys a GDP three times higher than the poorest British regions like Cornwall, South Yorkshire, Merseyside and West Wales. Britain in aggregate is one of the four poorest countries in the European Union. It has the sharpest distinctions between rich and poor regions in Western Europe. Against London's rating of 222, the EU average for GDP per person is 100. Cornwall, South Yorkshire and Merseyside all fall below the EU poverty line of just 75.

Faced with these gaping social inequalities and their impact on the urban environment, Lord Rodgers and the task force have recommended a number of measures based on buzzwords like design excellence, social well-being and environmental responsibility. They range from the banal and axiomatic to measures that will violently widen existing polarisation through the active promotion of regionalism and law and order programmes.

Rodgers calls for an "urban renaissance" and adds, "We must rediscover the spirit of urbanity across the country." Behind calls to re-establish cities as the cradle of civilisation, and to take European cities such as Barcelona and Rotterdam as role models for regeneration, are recommendations for fiscal incentives to encourage people to come back and live in the city centres. These include abolition of stamp duty (tax) on house sales, lower council taxes and VAT, tax incentives for urban developers and compulsory purchase orders to ease the tasks of local government and clear obstacles for developers.

Rodgers had planned to aid the refurbishment of 30,000 substandard homes by persuading the government to cut the rate of VAT from 17.5 percent to 5 percent on labour and materials for renovation. Within days of the publication of the report, this was all but ruled out by Customs and Excise.

Lord Rodgers states that he wishes to make high-density city living

desirable, partly through the promotion and gentrification of high-rise living like that brought about in the famous Trellic Towers block of flats in London. Some of the most fashionable areas of London, he remarks, like Chelsea, are among the most densely populated areas in Europe. Indeed the world's present population could live on a piece of land the size of the West African state of Senegal if it had a comparable density to Chelsea's population. This is all very well, but Chelsea is one of London's wealthiest areas whose inhabitants are not subject to the stresses and strains of life on low incomes and unemployment, urban pollution and shoddy public housing. A high density inner city district living in the social conditions that predominate more generally, would be a recipe for squalor and chaos.

Dilapidated public sector housing stock is not to be resurrected by a huge investment in refurbishing, but raised to the ground in a scorched earth policy. This was first advanced in the government's "New Deal for Communities", which threatened the destruction of estates that failed to "turn themselves around". If an estate retains high numbers of the unemployed and welfare dependent, then it faces being dynamited. This, in New Labour rationale, will break-up the culture of (welfare) dependency they claim exists.

Private firms will be encouraged to build on the cleared inner city sites by being granted permission to construct executive homes on city peripheries in the high value greenbelt in return. A "social mix" of private and public housing, top heavy with the former, will then be built on the bulldozed sites. The implicit tone of these developments is that those people living in public housing require the "civilising influence" provided by close proximity of the more "respectable" social layers living in the privately owned houses. The old forms of council estate formation have been denigrated for the folly of being "single class" developments that only housed the poorer echelons of the working class.

The report calls for the setting up of "Urban action zones", which will mean inviting private finance to make a profit from running schools, hospitals and public facilities. These plans are accompanied by measures to "crack down on anti-social behaviour". The unifying theme to these law and order initiatives is the new orthodoxy of "Social Exclusion", which asserts that an "underclass" exists at the bottom of society that must be disciplined and wrenched from its dependence on social welfare. The problem, the government maintains, is how to discipline the poor. How to destroy the "something for nothing culture"? The distinction between poverty and crime has become so effectively blurred by governmental responses that all issues are viewed through the prism of a feckless and indolent subclass responsible for their own wretched existence. Hence the adoration for "tough on crime" and "tough love" measures for infractions against quality of life indicators and US style "zero tolerance zones" introduced by the Home Secretary Jack Straw. The government regularly utilises tabloid-style rhetoric to savage the most underprivileged for their supposed lack of morality. Ministers advocate the resurrection of "good old Victorian values" to purge the poor of their antisocial mores, like the adoption of children born to poor single parents.

Government programmes talk of "Helping the poor to help themselves" by pulling the "marginalised" into "mainstream" society, whilst the inequalities of distribution and opportunity within this mainstream are being continually exacerbated. In shorthand this equals the destruction of the welfare state and the introduction of market principles into every facet of social life. Legislation already brought forward by the government includes the Crime and Disorder Bill, which seeks to stigmatise so-called "neighbours from hell". This involves placing "Anti-social behaviour" orders on those convicted of offences as trivial as cooking food whose smell others find odious. Each order is tailor-made to whomever it applies to; it can ban them from communicating with their neighbours, put them under curfew notice and place whole areas of town off limits for them. Those convicted can be forced to sign draconian tenancy agreements that

bind them to fulfill conditions which are clearly infringements upon civil rights. Failure to co-operate can lead to prison terms of up to five years and/or eviction.

Local councils have enthusiastically adopted the measures and now employ anti-social behaviour units including lawyers to make sure convictions stick, housing enforcement officials and professional witnesses. The civil rights group, Liberty, opposes the bill on the grounds that it is likely to breach Article 6 of the European Convention of Human Rights. The method by which the orders are obtained in a civil hearing, where the standards of proof required are lower than in a criminal court, is causing concern for legal experts. Orders of this draconian nature will send thousands of people into a type of neighbourhood purgatory, where the actions and behaviour legal to the majority of people will be illegal to those dubbed social pariahs.

Existing governmental measures to regulate the poor include compulsory marriage counselling, citizenship classes for schoolchildren, mentors for young offenders and lessons on family responsibility for errant mothers and fathers. The Urban Task Force suggests the widespread usage of super-caretakers and neighbourhood watches, ostensibly to maintain the estates but more likely to keep a close eye upon residents in conjunction with the police and other authorities.

Part Two



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