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Regeneration 'Con-Demned'?

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Community-led regeneration is a laudable ideal, but unless the means of *enabling* the regeneration of distressed communities are put in place, many could be left facing further degeneration, deprivation and destitution, says **Lee Pugalis**

What is now referred to as the 'credit crunch' or merely the 'crunch' in policy discourse and everyday vernacular has had far-reaching implications, including disturbing socio-spatial manifestations on a global scale. Broadly speaking, the economic downturn has widened the chasm between the have-lots and the have-nots in the UK (spatially clustered in places of choice and last resort, respectively). The pattern of the usual suspects of de-industrialised towns and cities, former coalfield communities, deprived inner-city neighbourhoods and edge-of-centre housing estates displays remarkable similarities with a map of the geography of recession.

In the aftermath of an economic tsunami, calls to rethink and recast regeneration, principally from the perspective of how future regeneration will be financed,¹ were given fresh impetus by the election in May 2010 of a Conservative and Liberal-Democrat (Con-Dem) Coalition Government. Since taking office, the Con-Dems have sought to introduce a 'radical' transformation of public service delivery and the shaping of places under the auspices of a 'Big Society' – where the emphasis is on people having greater involvement in the decisions affecting their area.

The election of a new government can often whip up a policy maelstrom and induce uncertainty, but it can also ferment hope of a brighter future, through, for example, an injection of fresh ideas and new ways of

working. With this in mind, the article examines the role that regeneration may play in delivering the Con-Dems' ideal of a Big Society. The analysis that follows focuses primarily on the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) report *Regeneration to Enable Growth: What Government is Doing in Support of Community-Led Regeneration*,² published in January 2011.

Regeneration in the lead-up to the general election

It is fair to say that in the lead-up to the general election 'regeneration' as a policy measure, or indeed political trope, was marginalised as an issue in the campaigning strategies of all three of the major political parties (see Table 1). Despite an apparent cross-party consensus on the importance of 'localism', it was as if regeneration policy was out of vogue. The absence of regeneration in political discourse was also evidenced by a profound neglect of spatial awareness across the majority of mainstream 'centralist' policies. The Liberal Democrats' manifesto promise to refurbish the shipyards in the North of England and Scotland was a notable exception.

Against this backdrop, academics and practitioners were left pondering the significance of the silencing of regeneration within the political/policy lexicon. In light of recent developments, it is now worth questioning whether regeneration has been 'Con-Demned'.

Table 1: Political narratives and proposals

Conservative Party	Labour Party	Liberal Democrat Party
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Replace Regional Development Agencies with business-led Local Enterprise Partnerships o Reform the benefits system through the introduction of a single Work Programme – delivered by the private and voluntary sector with payment contingent on 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Retain the Regional Development Agencies; establish a Regional Growth Fund and enhance the role of Regional Ministers o Devolve powers over skills, economic development and transport to groups of local authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Replace Regional Development Agencies, with powers returned to local authorities o Introduce a one-year job creation programme and paid work placement scheme for young people o Break up the banks; establish regional stock exchanges, an infrastructure

<p>results</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Enhance local authority financial freedoms, including an ability to offer discounted business rates o Reduce the public sector budget deficit and prioritise an economic recovery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Reform of the Housing Benefit system o Guaranteed work placement for those unemployed for over two years o Rebalance the economy through industrial activism 	<p>bank and local enterprise funds</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Rebalance the economy through green technologies that protect the environment and refurbish the shipyards in the North and Scotland
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It is by no means uncommon for the political status of regeneration to ebb and flow as one ‘wave’ of place-shaping seeps into the next. Since the Con-Dems shook hands on a deal to form a Coalition Government, the broader place-shaping landscape has been turned on its head as regeneration has faded from the scene. Perhaps pre-occupied with reducing the public sector budget deficit and planning for an economic recovery, in November last year, the Coalition Government published its landmark White Paper, *Local Growth: Realising Every Place’s Potential*,³ which was virtually silent on the matter of regeneration.

However, since then the Localism Bill has emerged, and more recently the DCLG has published the *Regeneration to Enable Growth* report. On the surface at least, these moves indicate that the Coalition are not ideologically opposed to the practice of regeneration – but are such indications merely tokenistic? It is crucial to examine what lies beneath the surface.

The Local Growth White Paper

The publication of *Regeneration to Enable Growth* is set firmly within the context of the Local Growth White Paper. The latter intended to provide a road-map for delivering the Con-Dems’ primary goal of *rebalancing* the economy (see Box 1). In his foreword to the White Paper, Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg sets the scene for the Coalition’s local growth policy shift as a means of delivering the Government’s ‘first priority... to return the nation’s economy to *health*’ (emphasis added).³ Claiming to be more spatially sensitive by ‘bringing an end to the top down initiatives’ and ‘ending the culture of Whitehall knows best’, Clegg reasserted the intent to rebalance the economy through State-led restructuring. The role of planning and spatial

governance – as part of the broader practice of place-shaping – is a crucial plank in the Con-Dems' rebuilding (and dismantling) strategy.

Box 1: The Local Growth White Paper's key aspirations

The Local Growth White Paper sets out a broad framework that is intended to:

- o shift power to local communities and business, enabling places to tailor their approach to local circumstances;
- o promote efficient and dynamic markets, in particular in the supply of land, and provide real and significant incentives for places that go for growth; and
- o support investment in places and people to tackle the barriers to growth.

Consideration of the concept, practice and merits of regeneration is largely absent from the White Paper, save for a few fleeting mentions. The only paragraph of any substance pertaining to the regeneration policy field is annexed on page 50, stating that: 'Outside London, the Homes and Communities Agency will continue to have an important role at the request of local authorities and under local leadership by providing expertise on housing and physical regeneration. Regeneration should be targeted on areas most in need of support ... The approach that will be put in place is built around the following strands: handing more power to communities to drive regeneration; supporting places to generate investment and enabling communities by providing the tools to decide what happens and where; and bringing its resources to bear for the benefit of local areas.'

Reading the White Paper as a whole, it is as if regeneration is no longer a meaningful policy or service improvement tool. This is all the more perplexing and disturbing when one considers the rhetoric of the Big Society. But is there redemption for regeneration as a means of enabling growth?

Regeneration to enable growth – guiding principles and supporting pillars

The premise of *Regeneration to Enable Growth* is explicit (page 3, emphasis added): ‘When at its most effective, regeneration can be at the *heart* of this approach – driving economic growth... And, conversely, economic growth can help regenerate and *breathe economic life* into areas.’ Knowingly or otherwise, the report follows Le Corbusier’s proclamation in 1933 that ‘the world is sick’.⁴ Regeneration, as an urban policy instrument and practice, is thus scripted as a means of addressing place-based socio-economic ‘ills’. Consistent with Nick Clegg’s foreword to the Local Growth White Paper, urban issues have been represented as metaphorical illnesses where salvation or prognosis can be sought through a form of curative urbanism. Such a pathology of space demarcates between healthy and diseased spaces.

Despite the report claiming that ‘a new approach is needed’, an approach that is ‘localist’, the report remains firmly couched in the neo-liberal urban policy orthodoxy of the previous Labour administrations (and the Conservatives before them) an approach that bluntly conceptualised regeneration as a sub-set of economic development.⁵ The ideology underpinning the Coalition’s regeneration narrative takes its lead from ‘the market knows best’ mantra of the Local Growth White Paper. Here, planning is scripted as a barrier to growth, alongside an overly simplistic view that ‘mainstreaming’ regeneration activity will fill the void left by the withdrawal of targeted programmes of support.

Regeneration to Enable Growth is set within a broader political narrative which makes the case for ‘rebalancing the economy’. Yet, if the act of ‘rebalancing’ is to be instructive in multi-dimensional ways, thus transcending from a novel political trope to a strategy for action, then the spatial (regional disparities, for example) and social (for example deprivation and inequalities) dimensions of rebalancing Britain need to be given credence alongside fiscal, sectoral and trade measures.

In terms of the content of *Regeneration to Enable Growth* there is little to comment on. Filed under ‘good practice and guidance’ on the DCLG website, at face value it is welcome to see; but behind the façade there is little

else – less than four slim pages of text padded out with 20 pages of tables, which collectively fail to provide little by way of good practice or guidance. The policies, rights and funds are merely an accumulation of what the Coalition has already implemented, announced or intends to legislate for. While the brevity of *Regeneration to Enable Growth* is welcome, as is the announcement that central government’s role within regeneration will be ‘strategic and supportive’, the report does not silence the din and distress of stakeholders across the political spectrum arguing that in the haste to reduce the budget deficit, regeneration has been mercilessly ‘Con-Demned’.

The Con-Dems’ regeneration ‘strategy’ proclaims to be based on four pillars:

- o reforming and decentralising public services;
- o providing powerful incentives that drive growth;
- o removing barriers that hinder local ambitions; and
- o providing targeted investment and reform to strengthen the infrastructure for growth and regeneration and to support the most vulnerable.

While the anonymous civil servant authors refrain from using the terminology of ‘mainstreaming’, this is precisely the regeneration strategy that has been hastily devised – ‘mainstreaming’ in the sense that little central government support will be earmarked for bespoke area-based intervention. The four pillars are not distinct to regeneration; indeed, it is argued here that they have been slavishly appropriated from the White Paper, with the fourth pillar crudely inserting ‘regeneration’ as a framing device or polysemic trope that can mean many things to many people.

Lacking any attempt to define regeneration and anchor it in policy and spatial terms by considering its scope, remit, goals, barriers, drivers and methods, *Regeneration to Enable Growth*’s guiding properties and source of best practice is disputable. Regrettably, the lack of attention to policy and the lack of analysis on each of the prescribed regeneration pillars suggests that it is set to become the latest in a series of government publications characterised by varying degrees of unsupported rhetoric.

While this article does not advocate a return to Labour’s dense policy guidance, which displayed all the hallmarks of centralist managerial

predispositions (as exemplified in the 159-page tome *Transforming Places; Changing Lives. A Framework for Regeneration*⁶), the Con-Dems have swung too far the other way. Little, if any, evidence is presented by way of rationale for this new strategy, which betrays a lack of understanding of the complex and wicked issues faced by different places and their communities. There is substantial merit – and scope for innovation – in pursuing a more permissive policy and governing approach that advocates local solutions for local issues. However, at the time of writing, Whitehall's grip on fiscal tools, legislative levers and the purse strings goes against the grain of genuine localism. If Whitehall's grip does not loosen over future months and dedicated resources are not set aside, then the consequences for communities in need of regeneration could be disastrous.

With economic imperatives likely to continue to ride roughshod over environmental aspects and social considerations, as has tended to be the case over the past few decades of regeneration policy and practice, the Coalition Government has arguably missed a great opportunity to mobilise regeneration as a primary vehicle for localist place-shaping and the delivery of its Big Society aspirations. With most of Labour's regeneration programmes terminated at the end of March 2011, and considering that the Coalition's Regional Growth Fund, the first round of bidding for which was massively oversubscribed, is a politicised beauty contest more concerned with 'buying jobs and waving flags', there is a strong case and genuine concern that regeneration has been abandoned – for the next few years at least.

What next for regeneration?

In championing the rise of a Big Society and the concomitant fall of the Big State, rhetoric such as that on *shifting* power to local communities has been a mainstay of the Coalition Government's first year in power. Ministerial pronouncements have tended to coincide with rebukes towards QUANGOs, public sector bureaucracy, top-down targets and Whitehall diktats.

While it is unrealistic to suggest that regeneration was not in need of a major rethink – in terms of how to reconcile social, environmental and economic forces; how it could be administered; and how it could be resourced – the Coalition, eager to make their mark, may have 'Con-Demned'

regeneration, supported by their style of devising policy on the hoof. It is contended here that their various acts of dismantling regeneration policy (for example the Regional Spatial Strategies), institutional infrastructure (for the example Regional Development Agencies), and funding streams (for example the Working Neighbourhoods Fund), together with the associated loss of tacit knowledge and human capital, are, as yet, to be replaced with anything remotely sophisticated for *enabling* the regeneration of distressed communities.

Community-led regeneration, drawing on local place-knowledge, creativity and vigour to coproduce places, is a laudable ideal; but with little else for communities to draw upon, the Coalition Government has renounced all responsibility, save for a few market-based mechanisms, such as the New Homes Bonus, that are likely to be less favourable to communities most in need. Consequently, the Con-Dems could be resigning many communities to further degeneration, deprivation and destitution.

Post-recession – assuming that England does not enter a ‘double-dip’ – it is increasingly evident that the economic drivers of the much heralded urban renaissance over the last decade will not be the same as those required to ‘rebalance’ the economy (to invoke another example of the Coalition’s rhetoric). The urban growth (and regeneration) model of the past decade was propagated on the back of consumption-fuelled property development, itself supported by public sector subsidies and investment, cheap credit and rising land values. Such a ‘growth’ model ‘maxed-out’ the credit of UK plc. As a result, regeneration funding streams have dried up as the State retrenches.

Approaching a new year of Coalition rule, a considered approach from Whitehall to regeneration and the broader shaping of places remains elusive. The Communities and Local Government Select Committee’s inquiry into regeneration is thus both timely and of critical importance. No doubt the intent of the Select Committee to hold an inquiry was the impetus for DCLG’s hastily prepared *Regeneration to Enable Growth*. But whatever the reasons, regeneration has an opportunity to demonstrate its value(s), and hopefully convince the Coalition that regeneration is far too important to the social, environmental and economic fabric of a Big Society to be ‘Con-Demned’.

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Notes

- 1 M. Parkinson, M. Ball, N. Blake and T. Key: *The Credit Crunch and Regeneration: Impact and Implications*. Independent Report to the Department for Communities and Local Government, Jan. 2009. www.communities.gov.uk/publications/regeneration/creditcrunchregeneration
- 2 *Regeneration to Enable Growth: What Government is Doing in Support of Community-led Regeneration*. Department for Communities and Local Government, Jan. 2011. www.communities.gov.uk/publications/regeneration/communityledregeneration
- 3 *Local Growth: Realising Every Place's Potential*. Cm 7961. Local Growth White Paper. HM Government. TSO, Oct. 2010. www.bis.gov.uk/policies/economic-development/local-growth-white-paper
- 4 Le Corbusier: *The Radiant City: Elements of a Doctrine of Urbanism to Be Used as the Basis of Our Machine-Age Civilization*. Faber & Faber, 1967 (First published 1933)
- 5 L. Pugalis: 'A framework for regeneration: more questions than answers'. *Economic Development – Journal of the Institute of Economic Development*, 2008, Issue 106, 7
- 6 *Transforming Places; Changing Lives. A Framework for Regeneration*. Department for Communities and Local Government, Jul. 2008