

The planning profession

John Muller

Department of Town and Regional Planning, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

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This article is drawn from a paper given by John Muller to the Inaugural Symposium of the South African Planning Institution, held in Sandton on 25 June 1996.

- The establishment of a new institution or society is an important event in the life and history of a discipline - and indeed of a country. It is important in many senses, not least in that enunciated by the renowned Alexis de Tocqueville in his treatise on 19th century American democracy. De Tocqueville put the proposition that a striking feature of the American people was their ability to form voluntary associations to realize their collective aims - not to leave everything to the authorities. This stems from a tradition in which government is not the only, or even the most important, instrument of social action, and is congruent with the long-standing proposition that individuals can form communities but only institutions can form a nation. Perhaps we should remember Lord Butler's words: 'Society in the future may become progressively intolerant of voluntary professional institutions especially if they are the bulwark of private practice, and yet be oblivious to the truth that in these institutions reside a most precious liberty essential to the health of a civilised society'.
- While politics is, in Laswell's familiar formulation, 'who gets what, when, how?', it is premised (theoretically at least) on principles on which depend the happiness, prosperity and beneficial progress of a nation. That premise embodies two fundamental notions, which could be described as permanence and progress or as authority and liberty. This is a dialectical relationship: liberty without restraint degenerates into anarchy; authority by itself is tyranny. Progress requires stability; order always precedes freedom. The problem therefore is how to combine the two to achieve the best for society
- It appears that in this country at this time, the state is attempting to accommodate the dual demands by providing leadership while seeking public involvement. The indications are that the processes of government are moving toward the congressional system which is by nature and intention open and participative - and which draws heavily on the congressional committee arrangement.
- In the end the formulation and passing of government legislation should, on the basis of the consultative procedure, be an exercise in democracy. It should be a balance between authority and liberty, between the responsibilities carried by government and the obligations held by the citizens - in an individual or corporate capacity.
- The political process thus seeks expressions of public opinion, including - quite naturally - the views of those having expertise and experience in the area to which the paper or bill relates. Since it is to be expected that the planning profession would make its contribution to the participatory process, it may be useful to pause briefly to consider in what areas and on what basis the profession would do this. Expressed in another way, why does the planning profession have a particular responsibility to be involved in the workings of government? In attempting to answer this question, I wish to draw on Roweis' notion of occupational

consciousness. He holds that the complexity of societal organization (the division of labour) and its rapid pace of change impel members of professions to develop shared views on the nature of their occupation - the distinctive characteristics of which justifies the existence of the profession and defines the social purposes that it is competent to address and serve. The cohesion, adaptability, legitimacy and social efficacy of a profession depends in part on the degree to which its members articulate and share views on these issues. Here, in other words, is their shared occupational consciousness - which is a precondition for laying legitimate claims to a particular professional or occupational jurisdiction.

- This consciousness is critical in a profession such as planning because it operates in the broad and bumpy field of politics. As Dyckman has said, planning is not politics but it is in politics. Politics is primarily concerned with resource distribution and the role of planning and planners is, inter alia, to provide a reasoned, a rational and a socially sensitive contribution to political decision-making. That contribution is made on the basis of the knowledge, competencies and skills that characterise and are particular to the planning community; on the basis of the conjunction between human knowledge and purposeful human action - or in commonplace planning parlance, on the basis of an understanding of the substantive and procedural dimensions of a human problem or issue.
- I want now to extend the notion of occupational consciousness to what I would call occupational conscience - something that is, I think, at the bedrock of professional life. It has been asserted by Bickenbach and Hendler that a profession is more than a gainful occupation: 'it sets out a social good as its goal and *raison d'être*, and requires those who would call themselves professionals to strive to further that goal. A profession, in short, is characterised by a moral mandate'. Planning cannot locate in a moral or ethical vacuum if it is to enjoy credibility and legitimacy in the South Africa

of today and tomorrow. It does seem to me that the conscienceless conduct of the apartheid years is now being supplanted by a spirit worthy of an authentic professional discipline. Implicitly acknowledging the past and looking to the future, the constitution of the new South African Planning Institution (the birth of which we celebrate today) includes in its list of objectives:

- to foster awareness among the public with regard to matters concerning planning by disseminating information about the nature and purpose of planning and by furthering the interests of all sectors of society and the empowerment of disadvantaged communities.
- to promote public involvement in planning, including the participation of disadvantaged communities and community organisations. Participation should be wide enough to include people who are not formally organised or who have no influence.
- to establish and maintain clear ethical standards and moral values within the profession, particularly in addressing the needs of disadvantaged communities and promoting the alteration of policies, institutions and decisions which oppose such needs.

These objectives, which reflect the influence of the DPASA, are consonant with the position statement of the SA. Council for Town and Regional Planners issued last year: 'With the transformation of the country from an autocracy to a just democracy, it is necessary that the discipline undergo a similar change if it is to have relevance and/or legitimacy now and in the future. The actual nature of that disciplinary change should be fashioned by the existing needs of South African society and by national programmes aimed at addressing those needs. In order to address the needs of South African society in general, it is submitted here that the cornerstone of the code of ethics of planners should be to further the interests of the underprivileged and disadvantaged communities.

Planning actions should thus be geared towards empowering the members of these communities so that they can contribute to the advancement of the nation'.

- Although the purposes of both the SACTRP and SAPI may well be construed as altruistic, it is worth remembering - and therefore worth repeating - Spinoza's contention that codes of conduct can only be recommended intelligently to beings who see those ethical

codes as enriching their personal lives. So, let us enrich ourselves by giving of ourselves in the furtherance of the well-being of the nation. Let us at last grasp the orb of opportunity now presented by the country's government by criticising, disapproving, supporting or assisting wherever appropriate. This can and should be offered on the basis of the exclusive occupational expertise of the profession.¶