PLANNING AHEAD?

Possible policy changes to come

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In July 2020, Housing Minister Christopher Pincher said that the Government wanted to see "better planning for nature". Also in July 2020, in a speech on environmental recovery, the Environment Secretary, George Eustice, announced a consultation on changing the approach to environmental assessment and mitigation within the planning system, to"front-load ecological considerations in the planning development process" and "protect more of what is precious".

Media coverage of the speech suggested that some wildlife groups were offering a cautious welcome, but green groups are concerned the reforms could lead to weaker protections for rare habitats and species. Dr Jeremy Biggs, co-founder and director of the Freshwater Habitats Trust, said "If the agenda is less box ticking and better science-based conservation action, then that is welcome. But if we hastily ditch protection of threatened species and habitats in the name of planning reform, that will make it difficult to stop the decline of nature, never mind reversing it."

The Government launched a consultation on revised permitted development rights on 3 December 2020. Main points of the consultation include:

- A new PDR to allow change of use from the new use class E (commercial, business and service) to C3 residential.
- An amended PDR for the extension of schools, colleges, universities and hospitals, to support the faster delivery of schools and hospitals and other public infrastructure improvements.
- A similar right for prisons and defence sites, which would allow prisons (but not other residential facilities such as immigration removal centres) to expand their facilities.
- Faster decisions on applications for planning permission: for relevant planning applications, the statutory period for determination would be reduced from 13 weeks (or 16 weeks in the case of development requiring an Environmental Impact Assessment) to 10 weeks.

BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

How long will the Union survive?

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Writing for Carnegie Europe, Peter Kellner summed up an emerging view: "Brexit may well contribute to the breaking up of the United Kingdom. Only a brave gambler would bet on both Scotland and Northern Ireland still belonging to the UK in 2040."

During 2020, polls across the devolved administrations showed growing momentum for greater independence from Westminster. In 2014, polls in Northern Ireland said that 65% wanted to remain in the UK but, in 2020, support for the status quo has fallen to 34%, with 35% preferring a united Ireland outright. In Scotland, a range of surveys during 2020 have indicated that those wanting independence are ahead, on average by 7%. Support for Welsh independence has risen from 10% in 2012 to 23% in late 2020, but Wales remains less likely to choose independence.

Different factors have combined to push the independence agendas - the most prominent being Brexit which went against the wishes of Wales and Scotland. For some people in Scotland, independence offers the chance of re-joining the EU (although this may be on worse terms). The other major issue has been coronavirus. Nicola Sturgeon and Mark Drakeford have been seen as better leaders than Boris Johnson during the pandemic - and that has shown many how different independence could be.

In Northern Ireland, a demographic shift to a Catholic majority combined with the fudge of the BREXIT deal which sees greater economic ties with Ireland creates a demographic and economic logic for Irish reunification - perhaps in the next 10–20 years.

Looking ahead, different models emerge for the islands of Britain and Ireland. One is that there would be four separate states (England, Scotland, Wales and a united Ireland) but seeking enhanced economic and political co-operation. A second would be a yet-to-be-defined federal structure with substantial autonomy granted to relatively small political units, including in England. A third might be a much looser collaboration of sovereign states building on a cyberspace economy where high value content creators move around and high value trading relationships will be with other high value creators - wherever they are.

Independence will not be an easy choice and carries risks in a changing world.

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