

Innocent Fraud *continued*

- **Consumer control?**

The public expectation is that, in the new planning system, communities will be directly involved in the making of plans from the very beginnings of their conception (called "front-loading" in Government guidelines). In reality, full colour brochures produced at tax payers expense; quick presentations to selected groups controlled by public relations professionals; discussion and agendas controlled by professional "facilitators"; are all part of a machine designed to persuade the public to accept something that is already decided. Most of the plans currently being produced by the City Council (called "Supplementary Planning Documents") have little or no front-loading and no open Public Inquiry into how far they really serve the public interest.

- **Shareholder control?**

The public believes that councillors elected by and accountable to local tax payers take the decisions. A number of watchdog committees (called Scrutiny Commissions) are supposed to hold the Executive to account on behalf of tax payers. In reality, only eight out of the seventy councillors make up the Cabinet. These eight part-time executive councillors seem to be faced with a mountain of technical paper and are bound to have little time or technical expertise to deal with it. The remaining majority of Councillors seem to have little or no influence. The Scrutiny Commissioners cannot insist upon change, can only recommend and can be ignored. In reality, the professional officer bureaucracy makes most of the decisions.

- **Public interest and private profit?**

The public assumes that the Local Authority controls private development in the public interest, by applying the rules set out in subject and area plans that have public approval. These plans should have been laid down by a process of open, public discussion of options and choices. In reality, most major development schemes are produced by private developers. They are designed in great detail, without options, often ahead of any public plan, and ahead of any opportunity of public input. Seemingly random members of the public are then invited to presentations where the agenda is controlled by yet another army of professional facilitators, PR firms and technical consultants paid by the developer. Often the result is at best obscure and at worst never known. Yet, in the public interest, the Council will only "encourage" developers to continue to consult the public in this way. No one can blame the developer for pursuing their private interest, indeed they are bound to do that. In reality, the public interest is lost.

So, the disreputable word "consultation" is changed to the more acceptable word "involvement" but the system remains the same. The illusion is that, by taking part in consultation exercises, the choices of the community and public will be implemented. The illusion is that the public calls the tune in Council decisions. The illusion is that private interest in commercial profit is constrained by the public interest in the quality of environment.

Effective community involvement?

Another case of innocent fraud?

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References:

- *¹ *Pocket Penguin 26: "The Economics of Innocent Fraud" ©J.K Galbraith, published by Penguin Books 2004.*
- **² *Credit to Vicky Pollard, a.k.a Matt Lucas in "Little Britain" BBC 1.*
- ***³ *Comments Submitted by the Society on BCC report: "Local Development Framework: Draft Statement of Community Involvement"; ©Bristol Civic Society, published October 2005.*
- ****⁴ *"Public Forum Statement" by the Society, made to BCC Cabinet 8th December 2005; ©Bristol Civic Society December 2005.*
- *****⁵ *Examples are given in the Society's centenary booklet "100 Years of Campaigning for a Better Bristol"; ©Bristol Civic Society, published 2005.*