
Book Section:
Inch, A. orcid.org/0000-0002-3349-687X (2023) The public good and the power of promises in planning. In: Gunder, M., Grange, K. and Winkler, T., (eds.) Handbook on Planning and Power. Research Handbooks in Planning series . Edward Elgar Publishing , pp. 196-210. ISBN 9781839109751

https://doi.org/10.4337/9781839109768.00021

The public good and the power of promises in planning

Andy Inch

This is the author's accepted version of a chapter published in Gunder, M., Grange, K and Winkler, T. (2023) Handbook on Planning and Power, Cheltenham, Edward Eglar, pp. 196-210

NB. One error has been corrected in this version: I have removed reference to David Beetham on page 3 with Richard Flathman who was the author of the influential argument on the public interest that is mentioned.

<a>Introduction: Exhausted promises and the problem of the public good

> The common destiny... of citizens of any city entails a need to resurrect a work-able notion of the public good.
>
> (Sandercock and Dovey, 2002: 152)

In late capitalist societies state and professional institutions continue to justify the exercise of planning powers through appeals to the public good[i]: the idea that public intervention in land and property development can secure benefits in the wider interests of society. However, the authority of planners to speak as experts and the power of the state to act on behalf of any such interest has been weakened by successive waves of criticism. From at least the 1960s onwards increasingly mistrustful publics have demanded a more direct say in decisions that affect their lives. From the political left, critics have argued that claims to plan for the public good frequently provide cover for exploitation, dispossession and the exclusion of minority groups (Sandercock, 1998).

Perhaps more damagingly, over recent decades planning has been subject to persistent attack from advocates of a neoliberal order who construe any attempt to deliberately steer societal change as an anachronism that distorts economic competition, stifles market freedoms and blocks entrepreneurial pathways to prosperity (Brown, 2015: 221). This has motivated efforts to reform the institutions and practices of state planning with a strong emphasis on limiting intervention in private property rights, effectively redefining the public good as the facilitation of market-led investment and development whilst denying any more expansive basis for public action.

The power of claims to serve the public good also face significant new challenges in an era marked by populist political criticism of democratic institutions and the rule of experts. Antagonism and political polarisation pose with renewed clarity the challenges of constructing any unitary 'public' whose shared interests might be articulated and acted upon.

As a result, the legitimacy of planning's claims to act for the public good frequently appears weak, part of a wider disenchantment with the idea that people can collectively shape their shared futures. At the same time, however, societies globally are facing a conjunction of

major crises, from post-covid-19 pandemic recovery to spiralling inequality and the climate emergency, that require new forms of planned intervention in response to the existential threats to life posed by extractive and predatory models of development. I therefore take the bind of an urgent need for concerted collective action and a concurrent exhaustion of faith in any collective power to act as a defining feature of the contemporary historical moment.

The impasse that this bind generates is related to the protracted unravelling of the neoliberal settlements which have framed dominant understandings of the good across many societies since the 1970s (Brown, 2015). Jens Beckert (2020: 322-23), for example, argues the promises of a good life on which commitment to neoliberal ideas was founded now also seem "largely exhausted…the credibility of neoliberal imaginaries vanished" without the outlines of any successor regime having come into focus.

Moving beyond this impasse, tackling major societal crises and renewing planning as a technology of anticipatory governance all entail the "need to resurrect a work-able notion of the public good" (Sandercock and Dovey, 2002: 152). Mindful of the problematic history and uses of the public good in planning, however, my intention is not to advocate any straightforward rehabilitation of state or professional power. Instead, in the next section below I will argue for a critical engagement with the forms of power at work when claims are made about the public good in planning. I then draw particular attention to the centrality of promissory power and legitimacy in planning, founded on the ways promised futures help secure consent to be governed (Beckert, 2020). Suggesting its role and significance has been rather overlooked in planning debates, I illustrate my argument through an analysis of promissory power at work in a case that Jönsson and Baeten (2014: 55) have described as "emblematic of neoliberal planning practices": the ongoing controversies around Donald Trump's golf course developments in the north-east of Scotland. Overall, I argue that this extreme case helps illuminate key challenges for refounding the promise of the public good in and beyond the impasse of the exhausted neoliberal present.

<a>Planning and the problem of the public good

The continued status of terms like the public good, public interest and common good as key-words, despite pervasive criticism and the fact professionals seem to struggle to define them

(Slade et al., 2018), suggests they signify a central problematic for planning theory and practice. This is often discussed with reference to Richard Flathman's assertion that abandoning the concept of the public interest would mean tackling the issues it defines under another name (see Campbell and Marshall, 2002; Lennon, 2016; Maidment, 2018). Accepting this, I want to suggest an understanding of the public good as a concept operating 'under erasure'[ii] - a category we continue to use whilst at the same time seeking to critically deconstruct, challenge and change its dominant meanings.

My aims in placing the concept of the public good 'under erasure' are threefold: First, to recognise the important space the term delineates without granting it any essential meaning. Second, as a reflection of contemporary realities. The idea that planning serves the public good is frequently questioned, particularly within neoliberal regimes sceptical of regulation and state direction of futures. Finally, because it recognises the term's constitutive political instability and ambivalences. If the public good somehow remains a necessary category for planning, it also remains deeply problematic. Its promises are always subject to capture and any attempt to rehabilitate its power must remain suspicious of the problematic baggage it carries and the exclusions on which its operation has often been founded. At the same, however, power's need to legitimise decisions through appeals to the public good may also create openings through which dominant meanings can be contested.

Placing the idea of the public good under erasure leads me away from any attempt to establish an abstract definition or justification for its use in the sometimes idealist terms of liberal political philosophy. Instead, accepting that contestation over the purposes and limits of legitimate public intervention is inescapable in capitalist societies, I prefer to see the term's nebulous, shapeshifting and malleable qualities as its defining feature (Tait, 2016). In this sense, I see the public good not as a fixed form but a central discursive stake in ongoing power struggles over the meaning and purpose of planning and development, invoked to both question and legitimise the authority to make decisions across various sites where it is recognised as a necessary justification for the exercise of authority. Following a broadly post-foundational understanding I therefore see the public good as an empty signifier that planning and governance processes work to give meaning.

The goal of political struggles over the purposes of planning is therefore to secure, sustain or

challenge the dominance of articulations of the public good. This positions power-relations at the centre of the debate, requiring analysis of the configurations of power and knowledge through which claims to the public good are recognised and come to be accepted as legitimate. At present, there seem to be two broad approaches to the question of power in existing literature on the public good in planning.

Critical scholarship has been more explicitly concerned with power as a distorting influence, exploring how the public interest justification is used to mask the naked operation of capital or obfuscate harms, exclusions and oppressions. This repressive or corrupting conception of power operating under the cover of the public good has been drawn upon to evaluate both the failings of particular articulations of the public interest and to question the wider (im)possiblity of constituting either unitary publics or collective interests in pluralist societies (Davidoff, 1965; Sandercock, 1998). On the other hand, those seeking to rehabilitate the public interest have tended to explore conditions through which the power of planning to make 'situated ethical judgements' about the public interest can be restored as a legitimate form of authority (Campbell and Marshall, 2002; Lennon, 2016; Maidment, 2018).

Reflecting wider debates in planning theory, this scholarship often distinguishes between procedural and outcome-based justifications for planning in the public interest. The former rests claims to legitimate authority on a just process that draws together the publics affected by a given issue and seeks to ensure fair deliberation in decision-making. The latter founds its claims on the outcomes of decision-making, sometimes entailing calls to restore trust in the judgements of representatives, experts and state institutions to determine the nature of the good.

In practice the authority of planning processes typically rests on a messy combination of both procedural and outcome-based sources of legitimacy, each playing an important role in justifying the uses of planning powers (and where their absence may generate legitimation crises). The realisation of either also poses distinct but equally irresolvable challenges, reflecting the essentially contested and undecidable nature of public decision-making. In the rest of this chapter, whilst continuing to hold the public good 'under erasure', I want to suggest that planning theoretical debates might be usefully supplemented by focusing on a third source of authority, based on what Jens Beckert (2020) calls promissory legitimacy.

<a>Introducing Promissory Power and Legitimacy

Beckert (2020: 318) suggests that conceptions of the legitimacy of political authority should be expanded beyond established understandings of input (procedural) and output (outcome)-orientated justifications to incorporate what he calls promise-orientated or promissory legitimacy: 'that political authority gains from the credibility of promises with regard to future outcomes that political (or economic) leaders make when justifying decisions'. For Beckert (2020) promissory legitimacy relates to what we might call promissory power and a wider need to account for the important but under-examined role perceptions of the future play in sustaining or remaking social and economic order.

Though there can be no facts about the future, actors' expectations, their fantasies, aspirations, desires and fears nonetheless play a significant role in shaping continuity and change over time. Future imaginaries therefore play an important and often under-examined role in bridging the constitutive uncertainties that define an unknowable future, coordinating action and contributing to the realisation of ways of life or political projects (Beckert, 2016). When such promises cease to be convincing, however, Beckert (2020) argues that the courses of action they justify cease to persuade people and the legitimacy of political systems suffers as a result.

To illustrate his argument Beckert (2020) suggests that the contemporary crisis of neoliberalism rests in part on the undermining of its promises of reform. He argues that promissory legitimacy played a distinctive role in establishing and sustaining the always contested and contingent neoliberal settlements that took shape from the 1970s onwards and which became truly hegemonic across the global north in the 1990s and 2000s as versions of neoliberal common-sense came to be accepted across the political spectrum.

In this reading, neoliberal hegemony always rested in part on the expectations of future affluence it promised people (for example through the promise of expanded homeownership in the UK, North America or Australia). Whilst versions of neoliberalism remain the default setting in many states globally, Beckert (2020) argues its legitimacy is now in question and that its promissory energies appear increasingly exhausted in the global north, not least since uneven development has entrenched inequalities so that the credibility of neoliberal

promises now rings increasingly hollow (to increasing numbers of the precariously housed left behind by years of rising housing costs). For Beckert (2020), the exhaustion of these promises contributes to various forms of political discontent that have destabilised the post-political regimes that prevailed in the heartlands of late capitalism before the 2008 financial crisis.

If there can be no facts about the future and fictional expectations play a key role in shaping expectations, then how we feel about the future matters too. For Lauren Berlant (2011: 49) promises of the good life provide resources for surviving the 'impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment' by orientating people towards optimistic possibilities. However, attachments to such optimistic desires are always ambivalent and can be experienced and felt in multiple different ways (as hope, fear, anxiety, etc). Optimistic attachments can all too readily become 'cruel' when they persist in 'compromised conditions of possibility' (Berlant, 2011: 24) and Berlant pays particular attention to the dangers of remaining attached to promises in situations where there is little prospect of their being realised.

Berlant's reading of the ways clusters of promises act as magnets, sustaining people in ongoing relations with an 'extended present', potentially offers a corrective to Beckert's (2020) more categorical declaration of the exhaustion of neoliberal promises. Rather than simply losing their power to attract and enchant, it suggests the attraction of promises may unravel only gradually, following potentially protracted periods of disenchantment.

The idea of promissory legitimacy supplements rather than supplanting existing understandings of input and output-orientated legitimacy and their role in producing, sustaining and justifying the authority to govern. However, it usefully draws attention to a perhaps overlooked dimension of future-orientated, cultural power and the role it plays in securing and sustaining hegemonic understandings of the good. Below I go on to argue that promissory power (and legitimacy) have also been under-examined in debates around the public good in planning. Although Beckert (2020) takes the legitimacy of an entire conjunctural settlement as his focus, in the rest of this chapter I will explore how the idea of promissory power might help to reframe understandings of the seemingly fragile legitimacy of the public good in planning.

<a>Promissory Logics of Planning

I am not the first to suggest planning and urban development might be productively analysed through the lens of either fictional expectations or promises. Rachel Weber (2021: 504) explores how 'urban governance rests on a foundation of expectancy and speculative future-thinking' orientated towards ever-expanding asset values, where constitutive uncertainty is managed by calculative practices, market devices and interactions amongst market actors that serve to stabilise expectations. Simone Abram and Gina Weszkalnys (2013: 3) and other contributors to their edited volume take, 'the idea of the promise of a planned future at the heart of much planning activity' as a point of departure to explore how the power of plans is premised on frequently elusive promises of a better future. As a result, they argue planning can be conceived as 'a kind of compact between now and the future, a promise that may be more or less convincing to the subjects of planning, and more or less actualized' (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2013: 9).

Conceptually, Abram and Weszkalnys (2013) draw on linguistic philosophy to explore parallels between promises and plans as illocutionary speech acts, performative statements that are more than simple assertions, producing obligations and expectations about future actions on the part of both promisers and promisees. This parallel allows them to link the histories of planning to other foundational technologies, like promissory notes, that have been used to project control over the open but unknowable future inaugurated by modernity. The future-orientation suggested by the idea of the promise (where promises commit actors to a future course of action), whilst intrinsic to planning has not always been a central focus of scholarly attention in the field (Isserman, 1985; Connell, 2009). In particular I don't think its full implications for the forms of power involved in conceptions of the public good have been fully or explicitly addressed

Acknowledging the promissory structure of planning frames situated judgements about the public good as both frequently dilemmatic and contested decisions about the future consequences of present actions, and also as performative utterances that seek to create (more or less) reasoned expectations about what could or should be in the future. For John Searle (1964) promises are 'institutional facts', existing within a system of rules that give rise to obligations, commitments and responsibilities. The existence of this system (sometimes

called a convention or game) effectively enables statements of fact about what is ('they made a promise') to entail normative commitments about what ought to be ('they ought to keep their promise'). Conceived in this way, might planning systems too be imagined as (more or less successful) ways of creating 'institutional facts', capable of bridging the problematic gap between knowledge of 'what is' and situated judgements about 'what ought to be' (Campbell, 2012) by binding actor-networks into shared courses of action?

Plans (and decisions) seek to 'normalise' (Connell, 2009) the future, projecting paths through constitutive uncertainties about what is yet-to-be so that actors' can reasonably expect to know how things will change. However, the best laid plans 'gang aft agley' [iii]. They are always prone to failures, lapses and slippages due to the unforseen and often unavoidable vicissitudes of time and the obduracy of material change. Taking seriously its promissory dimensions leads Abram and Weszkalnys (2013) to focus on the limits of planning as a future-orientated technology of power. The scope for gaps to emerge between the hopes, desires or fears articulated in plans and what comes to be is only increased by the complexity and mutability of the relational webs through which they operate. Judgements about the public good rarely result in the neat resolution of conflict, generating scope for ongoing political turbulence and challenge as repressed political energies resurface. As a result, like promises themselves, the future-orientated commitments in plans are frequently broken and always shrouded in uncertainty, perhaps particularly under neoliberal regimes where implementation relies so heavily on potentially volatile market dynamics.

Constitutive uncertainty about future outcomes heightens the importance of trust relations in planning (Tait, 2011). Planning systems, like promising as an institution, effectively operate on trust that promises to uphold the public good are offered in good faith and that every effort will be made to honour them. This creates considerable challenges for securing the legitimacy of both planning activity and the activity of planning. Where trust is absent or actors are prepared to deliberately misuse it, whether by making false promises or later reneging on commitments, there may be both direct consequences for promisees but also longer-term implications for the promiser and the legitimacy of the institution of promising.

<a>Promissory Power and Persuasive Storytelling

Considering planning as a technology of promissory power may therefore help to focus attention on some key challenges involved in planning for the public good, including the future-orientation of 'situated ethical judgements', the concomitant challenges of dealing with uncertainty and the importance of trust. Beckert's (2020: 319) focus on promissory legitimacy also, however, presupposes a different meaning of promissory power as a persuasive force, generating compelling fictional imaginaries that help coordinate action by securing consent to ruling ideas and regimes since:

> By projecting their desires and fears regarding future events into these imaginaries, actors can cope with the uncertainty of the future and at the same time contribute to shaping this future.

For present purposes, this raises important questions about the role of promissory power in shaping how claims to the public good in planning come to be believed.

Judgements about the public good are often presented in quite sober terms as reasoned evaluations. But less focus has been placed on what makes arguments about the good persuasive, including the emotional and affective resonances implied by any attempt to shape the future. Plans seek to mobilise positive feelings, channelling optimism about the future. Their power is rooted in their ability to 'grip' people, shaping expectations and motivating action.

Throgmorton's (2003) exploration of planning as persuasive storytelling about the future is salutary in placing such power dynamics at the heart of contemporary planning work. He charges planners with the task of becoming persuasive storytellers. However the idea of planning agencies as the authors of persuasive fictions may risk over-stating their power. For a start under neoliberal regimes planning often operates as a largely regulatory activity assessing the projects, and promises, of prospective developers. More generally, if societies produce dominant (if always contested) fictional images of the future, such as those Beckert (2020) identifies with neoliberalism, we must also consider how the persuasive power of plans is shaped by their fit with wider images of the good life. As Gunder's (2014) Lacanian psycho-analysis of power in planning suggests, the fantasies that sustain the work of planning agencies are always over-determined by larger ideological fictions.

In this sense we might identify dominant promises in any given culture as ideological fantasies that acquire what geographer Richard Peet (2002) describes as hegemonic depth and weight, their effectiveness judged by the extent to which they come to seem like everyday, common-sense understandings. Plans and projects which align with such promises will resonate with people but anything that runs against the grain of a dominant common-sense is likely to seem out of place. Assessments of the public good in planning inevitably occur within such contexts and situated judgements about the changes they promise reflect the depth and weight of prevailing conceptions of the good.

Whilst this should not be taken to imply that planners' situated judgements (or persuasive stories) can be somehow read off from broader hegemonic formations, it is a reminder that they are not made by free-standing liberal individuals, impartial experts rationally weighing up disinterested facts, or through localised instances of inter-personal deliberation that can be bracketed off from wider social mores. Instead, paying attention to promissory power requires analysis attuned to the complex ways cultural forms of power permeate hopes, aspirations and expectations.

In this section I have argued that the idea of promissory power may contribute to understandings of planning's problematic relation to the public good by centring attention on the ways claims to the public good seek to shape expectations about an uncertain future. I will now turn to a notorious case of broken promises to further explore how promissory power can be used to understand the contested legitimacy of neoliberal planning for the public good in Scotland.

<a>Shifting Sands, Broken Promises

It sounds like the set up for a joke: 'did you hear the one about the president who promised the earth and tried to hold back the tide?' More seriously William Walton (2018) has described it as a 'great planning disaster' because of the way processes were bent for a high-profile, celebrity property developer promising to build a golf course and tourism resort 'of a scale not previously seen in the United Kingdom' (DPEA, 2008: 215). The proposal contravened plans and involved the almost certain destruction of a beautiful, protected dune system on a remote stretch of coast in north-east Scotland[iv]. The trade-off presented was

therefore a familiar one: damage to a sensitive natural environment in exchange for massive, but far from certain, economic investment. The speculative promises won out. Having seduced local and national political elites, they were afforded determining weight by a planning system that saw economic growth as an overriding priority and effectively equated development with the public good.

Fast forward through eleven years of persistent controversy to late 2019. The golf course has been built. Stabilising works have damaged the dynamic qualities that made the dunes worthy of protection but most of the promised jobs and investment have not materialised. Still, the local authority is doubling down on the deal. They again vote against the provisions of their own development plan, this time to grant permission for the building of a second golf course at the resort and then for 550 houses to be built.

The planning officer presents this as a step towards realising what was promised in the original proposal, its implementation delayed first by the global financial crash of 2008 and then the oil price collapse of 2014 which hit Aberdeenshire's offshore oil and gas economy hard. Others are not so sure. 2921 objections are received against the housing proposal, including a petition with 18,722 signatories. One local councillor, Martin Ford, who had stood against the initial proposal refuses to vote this time. He argues that 'Aberdeenshire Council's standing and reputation had been damaged by being associated with the site owner', Trump International Golf Links Scotland (TIGLS) (Aberdeenshire Council, 2019).

In December 2020 the dunes formally lose their status as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), prompting an ecologist who had advised TIGLS to tell a national newspaper:

> They should have to sign up to deliver what's in their proposal…That's where the Trump Organisation have let Scotland down. They have not delivered in terms of their economic promises. That frustrates both sides of the debate.
>
> (Quoted in Paterson, 2020: paragraph 9)

<a>Uses and abuses of the public good in Scotland's neoliberal planning regime

So what can this long running saga of unfulfilled promises tell us about promissory power, legitimacy and the public good in in planning?

The original controversy speaks to many key themes in existing accounts of the public good in planning. Most obviously it offers further proof (if any were needed) of the manifold ways power seeks to bends processes and outcomes to its will. From a critical perspective, the public good can seem little more than an 'alibi' (Abram and Weszkalnys, 2013:10), providing convenient cover for the naked pursuit of elite interests.

This was most apparent in the ways procedures were circumvented after the initial planning application for the golf course and resort was refused on the casting vote of Martin Ford, then chair of the council's Infrastructure Services Committee. Rather than accepting the decision as the legitimate outcome of established institutional processes and exercising their right to appeal against refusal of planning permission, TIGLS immediately reissued threats to pull their investment to an alternative site in Ireland unless it was reversed. Threats and promises have a lot in common, both are performative speech acts that aim to shape future expectations. Although they feel morally distinct, it can sometimes be hard to distinguish between them. The power of investors and developers to trade with public authorities through both promises and threats has been a prominent feature of neoliberal spatial politics.

In this case back channels of influence were quickly opened at the highest level, including to then First Minister of Scotland Alex Salmond (Wightman, 2011). In a highly unusual move, the Scottish Government then 'called in' the application before the decision could be formally registered, effectively unmaking the decision so that they could consider the application anew themselves. The alacrity with which senior members of the Scottish Government moved to open channels of communication with TIGLS (which was only fully revealed later through freedom of information requests) and the technicality on which the application was 'called in' combined to create a strong impression of institutional processes designed to uphold the public good being hurriedly bypassed. The promises were too big and the threats too real to allow due process to prevail. The decision to approve the application following a subsequent public inquiry surprised no-one and seemed to simply confirm what Libby Porter (2014) condemns as the 'conceit of procedure'. It was, after all, made by the same ministers who had engineered the extraordinary call-in in the first place.

Forums like council committees and public inquiries, where evidence is deliberated over

before decisions are reached play an important role in ensuring procedural legitimacy for decisions. They are designed to enable the performance of due democratic process and scrutiny in accountable ways, including through formal roles and rituals of staging that entail the (uneven) recognition of various actors' rights to be involved in decision-making processes. In this way, however, they reflect the ambivalences of appeals to the public good. Democratic processes are seen to be required but need to be contained and therefore often function in tokenistic ways. If Martin Ford's casting vote illustrated that such procedures can at times threaten to disrupt the claims of the powerful in the name of the public good, the events which followed revealed all too clearly how they can be ignored when politically valued outcomes are threatened.

<a>Situating judgements about promised futures

Procedural requirements to perform an assessment of the public good did nonetheless require local and then national planners and decision-makers to weigh up evidence about the prospective costs and benefits of the proposed development over time, and across various spatial scales from the local to the national (Maidment, 2018). As a result it is also possible to see in this case the dilemmas involved in making situated judgements about an uncertain future. Such weighted assessments are a particularly pronounced feature of the discretionary planning systems operating across the United Kingdom where plans are not binding and decisions are made on the merits of individual proposals brought forward by prospective developers.

Martin Ford's (2011: 46) own written account of the case provides a relatively rare, first-person reflection from the perspective of a local councillor placed in an 'extraordinary' decision-making role in this system. His summary of the decision councillors faced thoughtfully acknowledges some of the distinctive challenges involved in arriving at judgements in contexts where there can be no facts about the future and incommensurable values need to be measured against one another:

> Ultimately, the judgement councillors had to make was whether the benefits that could reasonably be expected in Aberdeenshire and Scotland outweighed the environmental damage that would be caused if the resort was built…it was partly a

measure of the relative importance of very different things to fourteen councillors acting as representatives of the wider public.

During the public inquiry considerable weight was placed on technical evidence, including an economic assessment prepared for the Council who had come out as staunch supporters of the application. Although there are necessarily limits to evidence-based policy-making about the inherently uncertain future impacts of present decisions, technical studies often seem at risk of being taken as 'facts' with the potential to predict the future.

The assumptions underlying technical assessments can be hard for non-experts to scrutinise and may therefore be seen to obscure decision-making by rendering technical what are ultimately political value judgements. Doubts were persistently raised by objectors about the projected scale of the economic benefits promised by the development and there are clearly significant incentives for those promoting development to talk up the potential benefits of schemes in the hope of influencing decision-makers. Academic studies suggest there may be significant 'optimism biases' systematically built into the professional projections produced to support proposals (Flyvbjerg, 2013), but research often struggles to get close to the ways client demands may influence claims made in reports.

Scottish Government planners acknowledged that the prospective economic benefits were subject to considerable uncertainty and that pursuing them would involve breaking the obligations implied by the SSSI designation (DPEA, 2008). Their recommendation to approve the development also therefore involved an investment of trust in the promises being made by TIGLS.

<a>Broken, false or infelicitous: How can we trust in promises?

Ultimately the economic forecasts that informed the initial decision remain unproven since the proposed development has not materialised. Estimates of the investment that would be generated have nevertheless proven to be powerful fictional constructs, influential in shaping present expectations of decision-makers if not in predicting future events.

The fact the proposed development remains unbuilt renders all too clear the weaknesses of a market-led planning regime that has effectively handed promissory power over to those

promoting projects and which frequently lacks effective powers of enforcement to ensure that promises are kept. Working with a non-profit in Scotland called *Planning Democracy* over the last ten years this is a frequent and recurring complaint of community groups, generating significant suspicion and mistrust amongst the publics whose interests the planning system claims to serve (see Yellowbook, 2017). Many become suspicious of the perverse incentives that exist for developers to over-promise, relatively safe in the knowledge that processes for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of proposals are weak. There is also a relative lack of available sanctions where promised benefits do not materialise, regardless of how this might be gradually undermining the legitimacy of the system amongst affected publics.

William Walton (2018) points to the way reforms to the planning system in Scotland, driven by neoliberal concerns that existing regulatory requirements were a barrier to development, have exacerbated these problems by simultaneously reducing scrutiny of proposals and the resources required to ensure promises are kept. To prevent further great planning disasters he suggests a need to rethink planning consents as a form of legal contract. In terms discussed earlier, this might be seen as a call to strengthen the power of planning decisions as 'institutional facts', binding actors to their promises.

Based on Trump's past behaviour as a property developer, Walton (2018) also questions whether the trustworthiness of an applicant for planning permission should be explicitly considered[v]. Linked to the long-standing evasion of questions of land ownership in planning (Krueckberg, 1995), the identity of landowners and developers has not traditionally been seen as a valid land-use planning concern in Scotland. This has effectively excluded important questions from the planning system's working definition of the public good, leading to a studied (and perhaps naïve) default presumption that applicants will act in good faith.

As Abram and Weszkalnys (2013) recognise, constitutive uncertainties about the future mean it can be hard to determine why planning promises go unfulfilled or, in the term they borrow from J.L Austin, prove infelicitous. However they also acknowledge the importance of being able to assess whether a promise is being made in good faith, and whether genuine efforts have been made to fulfil the obligations it entails. Notorious both for his 'alternative' relationship to the truth and boasts about doing whatever it takes to get his way in

negotiations (Leonhardt and Thompson 2017), the involvement of Donald Trump in this case renders these questions in particularly stark terms. Were the promises that so seduced decision-makers sincere? Could they have been cynically broken or are they the unhappy outcome of always uncertain development processes? Might they yet be honoured (and would that still be judged in the public interest)?

<a>What makes promises persuasive?

In his account of the initial decision made by the Infrastructures Services Commission, Martin Ford (2011) is careful to clarify how his thinking was guided by the legal and institutional logics that frame what is and is not considered a valid planning consideration in Scotland. He recognises that 'the scale of the application and the combination of on-going press coverage, strong objections and an intransigent applicant with vocal supporters, all put pressure on Aberdeenshire Council' (Ford, 2011: 41) but seeks to bracket these considerations out. The 'extraordinary' events that subsequently unfolded, however, show promissory power overwhelming faith in established planning procedures.

This begs the question of what made TIGLSs clearly speculative promises so persuasive to decision-makers? Optimistic projections of potential economic benefits were found to be credible and afforded determining weight in decision-making within a wider context, marked by 'a generalised belief that development is beneficial' (Jönsson, 2014: 233). It seems clear they resonated with powerful imaginaries that various actors and institutions were predisposed to value.

Within the Aberdeenshire region, O'Sullivan (2019: 243) identifies 'raw civic boosterism' amongst local business lobbies, premised in part on the desire to diversify a regional economy whose prosperity is heavily reliant on the oil and gas industries. This was powerfully reinforced by a vociferous local media who fostered a febrile atmosphere, vilifying those who voted against the proposal as 'traitors'.

Nationally, the reforms to the planning system in Scotland discussed above sought to foster a culture that was 'open for business' and would actively facilitate development (Inch, 2018). As Jönsson and Baeten (2014) persuasively argue, the willingness of a compliant government to yield to TIGLS's threats illustrates many of the key features of neoliberal planning. Under

neoliberal rule, promissory power has been largely yielded to private enterprise and the seeming weakness of states and public authorities in the face of foot-loose global capital has been a defining feature of the entrepreneurial remaking of spatial governance.

Even before his divisive term of office in the White House all of this was powerfully embodied in the figure of Trump as a global, celebrity entrepreneur (Jönsson and Baeten, 2014). Although it elicited almost equally strong opposition from those who saw it as brash, gaudy and untrustworthy, the Trump 'brand' infused the proposal with a particular atmosphere and a charismatic power, resonating with hegemonic neoliberal imaginaries of elite wealth creation and the attraction of high net-worth tourists as a pathway to prosperity. These promises of an affluent future clearly seduced business and political elites. Organisations including VisitScotland and the Scottish Council for Development and Industry were quick to extol the proposal as an exemplar of 'the vision and innovation that will be required if Scotland is to grow in reputation and success as a tourism destination for recreation and business' (DPEA, 2008: 111)

In this way the case illustrates how situated judgements are always over-determined by the wider cultural contexts in which they are made and the imaginaries circulating within them. Certain promises are always likely to resonate with dominant or powerful ideas, lending them a persuasive power and affective grip that acts on and through peoples' understandings of the good, their aspirations and feelings about the future.

<a>Beyond the Cruel Promises of Neoliberal Planning?

In their report on the public inquiry in late 2008, government-appointed planners suggested that 'if developed, we find that the economic and social benefits could only be audited in 7-10 years, while the adverse environmental effects would build from the start of construction' (DPEA, 2008:215). What then does the decision to grant further permissions in 2019, despite the fact that only a fraction of the projected economic benefits had materialised, tell us[vi] about the promissory power of neoliberal planning?

It might be interpreted as a kind of path-dependence. Once they had conceded the principle of the development and the damage to the site's environmental qualities was done, the council was locked into its relationship with TIGLS, however infelicitous. But might it not also

be interpreted, following Berlant (2011), as an increasingly cruel attachment to an optimistic promise of future affluence whose realisation looks increasingly improbable? The idea of diversifying an economy reliant on oil and gas through high-end luxury tourism, itself premised on carbon-intensive air travel and the hope that benefits from global wealth inequalities would trickle into a regional economy, never looked a great bet to many (to say the least). From the vantage of mid-2021 and a global pandemic that has shut down tourist economies it surely seems even less so, especially if Scotland is going to take promises to 'end our contribution to climate change by 2045' seriously (Scottish Government, 2020a).

Donald Trump's misadventures in Aberdeenshire offer a particularly vivid illustration of the ways the public good has been reworked under a neoliberal planning regime where development has come to define the public good to the detriment of public trust and therefore the legitimacy of the planning system in Scotland. There are some tentative signs that governmental aspirations may now be moving beyond the over-whelming fixation with 'sustainable economic growth', recognising a need to begin to measure well-being and to struggle for just transitions (Scottish Government, 2020b). Still, it seems too early to tell whether the promises of neoliberal planning are truly exhausted. The struggle to rework deep-seated associations between development and the public good will not be easily won, even if the promises on which they rest seem increasingly illusory.

<a>Conclusion: refounding the promise of the public good

I started this chapter by arguing that we may be living through an historical impasse, marked by the seeming unravelling of neoliberal hegemony and the bind caused by an urgent need for action amidst an apparent exhaustion of faith in collective agency. In this context, restoring a workable notion of the public good seems a necessary, if problematic, aspiration for planning theory and practice. Using the example of Donald Trump's golf course developments to exemplify the uses and abuses of the public good in planning, I have suggested that the term needs to be held 'under erasure', reflecting a need for permanent suspicion of the ways power works to define its meanings, and the power that can be derived from claims to plan in its name.

I have also argued that any attempt to re-establish the authority of the public good in

planning needs to pay attention not just to procedural and outcome-based justifications of planning activity but also the distinctively promissory character of claims to the public good. Doing so centres attention on the future-orientation of judgements about the public good as reasoned attempts to shape expectations about an inherently uncertain and unknowable future. Thinking about planning as an often-complex set of promising relationships raises important questions about the ways plans and decisions might be strengthened as 'institutional facts', or by reconsidering the willingness of planning systems to trust in the speculative promises of landowners and developers.

More than this, however, I have argued that it invites consideration of the often-overlooked nature of promissory power in planning, who wields it and what it is that makes certain promises so persuasive. I see this as a corrective to a focus in existing scholarship on the public good as a product of well-intentioned, carefully reasoned judgements which arguably detracts from analysis of the ways wider ideological fictions grip actors, shaping and influencing their expectations and aspirations.

Over recent decades, promissory power in planning has been ceded to developers and the promoters of spectacular projects. Neoliberal promises may or may not now be exhausted. Either way, they seem incapable of responding to the conjunction of crises societies now face in ways that will enable just transitions towards liveable futures. The struggle remains, therefore, to articulate powerful and compelling new promises, capable of motivating new publics with new conceptions of the good to collectively shape new futures. The forms that the public good takes in planning in the future will be shaped in significant part by the outcomes of such struggles over the persuasive power of promises.

References

Aberdeenshire Council (2019), *Aberdeenshire Council: Minutes*, 26 September accessed 30 June 2021 at https://committees.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/committees.aspx?commid=1&meetid=19374

Abram, S. and G. Weszkalnys (2013), 'Elusive Promises: Planning in the Contemporary World. An Introduction', in Abram, S. and G. Weszkalnys (eds), *Elusive Promises: Planning in the Contemporary World*, Oxford: Berghann Books, pp.1-34.

Beckert, J. (2020), 'The exhausted futures of neoliberalism: from promissory legitimacy to social anomy', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, **13** (3), pp.318-330.

Beckert, J. (2016) *Imagined futures. Fictional expectations and capitalist dynamics*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Berlant, L. (2011), *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Brown, W. (2015), *Undoing the Demos*, New York: Zone Books.

Campbell, H.(2012), 'Planning to Change the World between Knowledge and Action Lies Synthesis.' *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, **32**(2),135–46.

Campbell, H. and R. Marshall (2002), 'Utilitarianism's bad breath? A re-evaluation of the public interest justification for planning', *Planning Theory*, **1**(2),163–187.

Connell, D. (2009), 'Planning and Its Orientation to the Future', *International Planning Studies*, **14**(1), 85–89.

Davidoff, P. (1965), 'Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners,* **31**(4), 331-338.

Directorate for Planning and Environmental Appeals (DPEA) (2008), '*Report to the Scottish Ministers: Case reference: CIN/ABS/001'*, Falkirk: Directorate for Planning and Environmental Appeals.

Ford, M. (2011), 'Deciding the fate of a magical, wild place', *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, **4**(2),33– 74.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2013), 'How Planners Deal with Uncomfortable Knowledge: The Dubious Ethics of the American Planning Association', *Cities*, **32**(June), 157-163.

Gunder, M. (2014), 'Fantasy in Planning Organisations and their Agency: The Promise of Being at Home in the World', *Urban Policy and Research*, **32**(1), 1-15.

Inch, A. (2018), 'Opening for business? Neoliberalism and the cultural politics of modernising planning in Scotland', *Urban Studies*, **55**(5), 1076-1092.

Isserman, A. (1985), 'Dare to Plan: An Essay on the Role of the Future in Planning Education and Practice', *Town Planning Review*, **56**(4),483–91.

Jönsson, E. (2014), 'Contested expectations: Trump International Golf Links Scotland, polarised visions, and the making of the Menie Estate landscape as resource', *GeoForum*, **52**(2014), 226-235.

Jönsson, E. and G. Baeten (2014), '"Because I am who I am and my mother is Scottish": neoliberal planning and entrepreneurial instincts at Trump International Golf Links Scotland', *Space and Polity*, **18**(1),54-69.

Krueckberg, D. (1995), 'The Difficult Character of Property: To Whom Do Things Belong', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, **61**(3),301-309

Lennon, M. (2017), 'On the 'subject' of Planning's Public Interest', *Planning Theory*, 16(2),150-168.

Leonhardt, D. and S.A. Thompson (2017), 'President Trump's Lies: The Definitive List', *New York Times*, 14 December, accessed 29 June 20121 at https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/23/opinion/trumps-lies.html

O'Sullivan, M. (2018), 'Planning for growth in Scottish city-regions: 'neoliberal spatial governance'?' Unpublished PhD Thesis, Glasgow: University of Glasgow.

Paterson, K. (2020), 'Scotland Let Down by Trump Over £1 Billion Boost Fail', *The National*, 13 December, accessed 27 June 2021 at https://www.thenational.scot/news/18940631.scotland-let-down-trump-1-billion-boost-fail-ex-advisor-says/

Peet, R. (2002) 'Ideology, discourse and the geography of hegemony: From socialist to neoliberal development in post-apartheid South Africa', *Antipode*, **34**(1), 54–84.

Porter, L. (2014), 'Possessory politics and the conceit of procedure: Exposing the cost of rights under conditions of dispossession', *Planning Theory*, **13**(4), 387-406.

Reuters (2021), 'Court action seeks probe of Trump's Scottish golf course buys', 24 May,

accessed 27 June 2021 at https://www.reuters.com/business/legal/exclusive-court-action-seeks-probe-trumps-scottish-golf-course-buys-2021-05-24/

Sandercock, L. (1998), *Towards Cosmopolis,*Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Sandercock, L. and K. Dovey (2002), 'Pleasure, Politics, and the "Public Interest": Melbourne's Riverscape Revitalization', *Journal of the American Planning Association*, **68**(2),151-164.

Scottish Government (2020a), 'Update to the Climate Change Plan 2018-2032: Securing a green recovery on a path to net zero', Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government (2020b), 'Scotland's Fourth National Planning Framework Position Statement', Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Searle, J. (1964), 'How to Derive Ought from Is', *The Philosophical Review*, **73**(1), 43-58.

Slade, D., Gunn, S. and A. Schoneboom (2018), *Serving the Public Interest?,* accessed 27 June 2021 at https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/2005/servingthepublicinterest2019.pdf

Tait, M. (2016), 'Planning and the public interest: Still a relevant concept for planners?' *Planning Theory*, **15** (4), 335-343.

Tait, M. (2011), 'Trust and the public interest in the micropolitics of planning practice' *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, **31**(2), 157–171.

Throgmorton, J. (2003), 'Planning as Persuasive Storytelling in a Global-Scale Web of Relationships', *Planning Theory*, **2**(2), 125–51.

Walton, W. (2018), 'Donald Trump's Golf Resort in Aberdeenshire, Scotland: The 'Greatest' Incomplete Planning Disaster in the World?', *Oslo Law Review*, **5**(3), 175-196.

Weber, R. (2021), 'Embedding futurity in urban governance: Redevelopment schemes and the time value of money', *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, **53**(3), 503-524.

Wightman, A. (2011), '*Donald Trump's Ego Trip: Lessons for the New Scotland'* accessed 26 June 2021 at http://www.andywightman.com/docs/trumpreport_v1a.pdf

Yellowbook Limited. (2017), *Barriers to community engagement in planning: a research study*, Edinburgh: Yellowbook Limited.

[i] I use the term the public good here as a synonym for others such as the public interest, collective or common good. For reasons of space I bypass important debates about the statist connotations of public-ness. Whilst this raises important questions, my view is that the scale of the crises societies' now face requires concerted collective action and that the state, however problematic, is the only actor capable of playing this role.

[ii] The term is originally from Heidegger via Derrida, my use of it here comes from Stuart Hall's writing.

[iii] The original Scots from the Robert Burns poem 'To a Mouse, On Turning her Up Her Nest With the Plough' is usually translated into English as 'often go awry'. The poem continues, 'An' leave us nought but grief and pain/ For promis'd joy!'. The links it draws between plans, promises and (painful) feelings resonates with the argument here.

[iv] My analysis here is not based upon original empirical research and draws extensively on the work of others, supplemented by a review of recent press and official documents. In particular the following sources have been key: Ford (2011), Wightman (2011), Jönsson (2014), Jönsson and Baeten (2014), Walton (2018), O'Sullivan (2018).

[v] Amidst wider investigations into Trump's financial affairs calls in the Scottish Parliament and Courts for the Government to issue an "unexplained wealth order" to establish how the cash purchase of this site was funded may yet strengthen such calls (Reuters 2021).

[vi] And coincidentally, just as then President Trump was being voted out of power in extraordinary circumstances, his reputation under scrutiny as never before.