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Stonehouse—An Obituary for a New Town

In 1973 the Secretary of State for Scotland confirmed the designation order for Stonehouse, the fifth new town to receive Glasgow's overspill population. In May of 1976, after £4,000,000 had been spent, and only two days after the first families had moved in, the newly-appointed Secretary of State, Rt. Hon. Bruce Millan, announced in Parliament that the further development of Stonehouse would no longer proceed. The decisions which led up to the designation of Stonehouse and their subsequent reversals illustrate the transition to what might be termed the emerging post-Barlow philosophy in town and regional planning. An appreciation of the factors responsible for the abandoning of Stonehouse illustrates an important change in town planning attitudes.

The planning philosophy (emanating from the 1940 *Report on the Distribution of the Industrial Population*—the Barlow report) of containing the peripheral expansion of the large industrial cities through green belts and syphoning off congested populations into new and expanded towns exercised a considerable influence on British planning until very recently¹. Indeed this philosophy was applied with increasing enthusiasm during the 1960's with the designation of the Mark II and Mark III new towns, so much so that the decade might be given a 'neo-Barlow' label. And nowhere—apart perhaps from London—was the Barlow and neo-Barlow philosophy applied with greater vigour than for Glasgow. That story, at least in outline, is well enough known².

In 1946 the *Clyde Valley Regional Plan* argued that in order to ease the congestion of the inner areas of Glasgow, without resorting to peripheral expansion, some 250,000 of the city's million population ought to move away. To assist in this, four new towns were recommended. In 1947 the first of these new towns, East Kilbride, was designated. Nine years later, a second was designated at Cumbernauld³. Then in 1960 Glasgow published the first quinquennial review of its development plan in which the city announced that it intended demolishing nearly 100,000 unfit properties⁴. Redevelopment was to be

undertaken at lower residential densities than had previously existed and because there was relatively little extra land available for development within the city, and because the Scottish Office wished to continue containing the outward growth of Glasgow by preserving the green belt, some 60,000 overspill outlets would be needed.

In 1957 Scotland had its own Town Development Act and this enabled Glasgow to make overspill agreements with other local authorities, but it was soon realized that, anxious as local authorities were to make overspill agreements, they were somewhat laggardly in providing the accommodation. New towns, at least based on the experience of East Kilbride and Cumbernauld, were seen to be a more effective and quicker way of supplying overspill dwellings. Consequently a fourth new town, Livingston, in East Lothian, was designated in 1962 to serve Glasgow⁵. As the 1960's drew to a close, however, the Scottish Office became concerned that even with Livingston the overspill programme was not proceeding at a satisfactory rate. There had been hopes that 6,000 families per annum would leave Glasgow under official overspill schemes. Only two thirds of that target was met.

It is true that Glasgow was proceeding with its slum clearance schemes at more than a satisfactory rate⁶. But this was possible only because too many of the replacement dwellings were being built in the city at unacceptable high densities largely through the expediency of providing high rise flats⁷. As far as the Scottish Office was concerned that trend would have to be reversed. Furthermore, by the mid-1960's the Scottish Office had (a) raised its planning standards for redevelopment schemes in order to provide more space for recreational areas; and (b) placed greater stress on ensuring that more space was available for industrial development in the city⁸. This meant that even less land would be available within Glasgow for housing than had been anticipated in 1960. The net result was that the number of overspill outlets required was increased by 3,000 per annum.

By 1967 it was argued that the reasons for the under-achievement of the official overspill targets was largely the failure of the local authorities with overspill agreements to meet their targets, and especially those lying beyond a 40 kilometre distance from Glasgow. To counteract that situation, therefore, the Secretary of State for Scotland gave his approval for the building of a new community under the Town Development Act to hold 30,000 persons at Erskine some 19 kilometres west of Glasgow⁹. But even this was not thought to be sufficient, and a search for other likely sites was underway. By then, however, the Royal Commission enquiring into Scottish Local Government was sitting, and the Scottish Office did not want to prejudice the Commission's findings by undertaking major developments. Even so, the Scot-

tish Office did turn its attention to the possibility of establishing a further overspill settlement under the 1957 Act, like Erskine, at Stonehouse in Lanarkshire.

The site had potential, being ripe for development and convenient for Glasgow. Indeed, only the pressure of the large Burghs of the County had prevented it from being designated an overspill area in the early 1960's. The Scottish Office already viewed it as a possible industrial growth area and in 1967 Lanarkshire County Council undertook a feasibility study and decided to use 7,000 acres there for its own council housing programme. There is little wonder that Glasgow Corporation and the Scottish Office reconsidered the site in the late 1960's to take overspill.

Meanwhile the Scottish Office had set up a working party composed of its own civil servants and representatives from Glasgow Corporation to examine the city's overspill needs. The working party, using the estimates of the Scottish Registrar General, argued that despite the redevelopment that had already been undertaken, 100,000 more new or rehabilitated houses were still needed—65,000 beyond the municipal boundaries. After taking into account houses which could be expected to be provided under existing overspill agreements (including Erskine) and those expected to be built by the private sector, there was still a short fall of 17,000 houses¹⁰.

The Scottish Office recognized that, from past negotiations with local authorities, it had become clear that the only way of carrying out a large development by 1981 would be by establishing yet another new town¹¹. Consequently the Stonehouse project was upgraded to a new town, the official announcement being made by Mr. Edward Heath, on his first visit to Scotland after becoming Prime Minister. The designation order was confirmed in 1973 and the development was to be undertaken by the East Kilbride Development Corporation (renamed the East Kilbride and Stonehouse Development Corporation) which was coming to the end of its original work.

Whilst these moves were underway the Scottish Office, primarily because of its quest to find overspill sites within the Clyde Valley, commissioned a study of West Central Scotland. Paradoxically, however, it was the publication of the consultative draft report¹² of this study in May 1974 which focused attention on criticism of the overspill policies in the region which ultimately resulted in abandoning Stonehouse as a new town.

The report highlighted the rapid decline in the city's population—a decline which was accelerating in the period during which the study was being prepared. Between 1970 and 1973 the city's population had fallen by 58,000 to 850,000. Most of this outward movement

of population was caused either by Glaswegians moving out of the city to owner/occupier settlements beyond the municipal boundaries, or Glaswegians leaving the region altogether seeking employment.

Important questions were therefore posed about the degree to which further population ought to be encouraged to leave the city through official schemes. Had not the city's population almost reached its optimum size? Certainly it would soon reach the 750,000 that the *Clyde Valley Plan* had thought desirable. Furthermore the city was beginning to move from redevelopment to the rehabilitation of its housing stock. This shift in policy alone would mean that less overspill outlets would be required, if only because residential densities would not be reduced to the degree formerly suggested. To make matters worse, the *West Central Study* stressed that it was the younger, more enterprising of Glasgow's citizens who were leaving the city under formal overspill schemes. They were the ones the city could least afford to lose. The new regional plan argued that there was still a need for some formal overspill from Glasgow, but that the established new towns should meet that demand. Rather the Stonehouse project should be postponed. If the regional economy improved then less people might leave the region, in which case Stonehouse might have a useful overspill role to play. But judgment on that score had to wait on events.

The *West Central Plan* provided the Stathclyde Regional Council, when it was established as a result of the reformed structure of Scottish local government, with a foundation upon which its planning policies could be based. The influence of the advisory plan on policy was demonstrated with the publication of the *Strathclyde Regional Report* published in 1976¹³. This report was produced as a result of a directive by the Secretary of State that each regional authority in Scotland should produce with all possible speed outline planning policies upon which the regional structure plans would be based. The Strathclyde Report generally reiterated the attitudes of the regional plan to new towns but recommended categorically that Stonehouse should be abandoned. The case against the project had been strengthened by the fact that the out migration from the city was continuing to accelerate, whilst the birth rate began to fall markedly.

As a result of the forecasts based on these figures, the view became established that by 1981 Glasgow district was likely to find that it had a surplus of municipal houses. The priority now, therefore, was to improve the quality of the existing housing stock and the overall housing environment of the city, and to encourage the city's people to stay, rather than to encourage them to leave. If the Stonehouse project were allowed to continue then the regional authority would, of course, have been compelled to meet the costs of a number of important services,

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the most expensive being schools and sewerage facilities. Such monies, as far as the region was concerned, would be better spent in areas of greater need—especially as the recently-published results of the 1971 census had demonstrated that in terms of multiple deprivation Glasgow still headed the national league table. Indeed, further overspill could result in the under utilization of facilities, currently provided or about to be provided within the older areas at a considerable cost.

Yet well before Stonehouse was scrapped, the East Kilbride and Stonehouse Development Corporation realized that Stonehouse's major role should not be seen as an overspill outlet for Glasgow. In the *Stonehouse Outline Plan of 1974*, the chairman of the Development Corporation noted that the project should go ahead largely because of the new jobs that it would attract into the region¹⁴. This argument was based on the growth area philosophy underpinning the new towns which had been established in a white paper of 1963¹⁵. It was hardly a view which would commend itself to those working on the West Central Plan or the regional planners. Both the West Central Plan and the Regional Report argued that new industry coming into the region would be better located in the older areas, where the traditional industries were declining and where unemployment was consequently highest.

It was also recognized that within the present national economic climate, the principal source of any economic growth in the region must come not from new incoming firms, but rather from the expansion of indigenous industries. What was needed, therefore, was not new growth areas like Stonehouse, but means to encourage firms in the older areas to prosper.

The Secretary of State was impressed with Strathclyde Region's case for dispensing with Stonehouse, and announced his decision on the town only hours after receiving the *Regional Report*. This decision must have been assisted by the replacement of William Ross as Secretary of State by Bruce Millan. Although Ross was out of office when Stonehouse was designated, it was under his regime, during the late 1960's, that the overspill mechanism for Glasgow was built up.

Even so, for students of policy change, important questions remain. Why was Stonehouse designated in the first place? Did the factors responsible for the abandonment of Stonehouse only manifest themselves after 1973? The answer to the second question is, obviously not. The West Central planners had identified reasons for at least reserving judgement on Stonehouse before the designation order had been issued (although the draft plan had not then been issued). A major, and more general, reason why Stonehouse went ahead is that the government machine—at central and local level—and the thinking that is embedded

in it, cannot respond quickly to changing events and new understandings of existing situations. With hindsight it is easy to argue that in the late 1960's the Scottish Office and Glasgow were wrong to enlarge the overspill programme, but seen within the context of the time the city had a chronic housing and congestion problem to deal with and overspill seemed to be the easiest solution to apply.

Yet, more specifically, one also has to take into account the lack of confidence the Scottish Office had in the old Glasgow Corporation. After all, the Corporation, in the early post-war years, had vigorously opposed the green belt; had, during the 1950's, built the huge, soulless and notorious housing estates such as Easterhouse and Castlemilk; had been responsible during the 1960's for substantial multi-storey block schemes; and had created one of the worst post-war housing environments in any British city because of its insistence on a low municipal rent policy. The history of the 1960's demonstrates that the Scottish Office had only limited real powers to check these occurrences. The Scottish Office could, however, play a more active role in Glasgow's affairs through the control it had over new towns. Hence its strong commitment to them.

In mitigation for the Scottish Office, however, it should be pointed out that no strong case was put at the public inquiry into Stonehouse as to why the new town should not proceed. It should also be noted that in September 1974, soon after the West Central Plan's findings were made known, the Scottish Office dramatically reduced the 1981 Stonehouse target to 13,000. A further point is that the new towns of the region, especially the East Kilbride Development Corporation, had proven records of success. Very good housing environments were made available for Glaswegians which would not otherwise have been provided. And the new towns probably did attract jobs into the region which otherwise would not have come. By allowing the East Kilbride Development Corporation to build Stonehouse, the Scottish Office would at least give a 'winning team' the opportunity to continue with its successes.

Yet the Scottish Office was not immune to the wider changes in planning thought which manifested themselves during the 1970's. The Scottish Office began to accept that more resources ought to be focused directly in the inner areas of urban settlements like Glasgow. And the reform of local government seems to have inspired more confidence in the ability of the newly-formed authorities to deal with Glasgow's problems than in the old, so much so that there are indications that responsibility for the existing new towns of Strathclyde will be transferred to the regional council.

According to the Scottish Office, resources intended for Stonehouse

will be redeployed to the inner areas of Glasgow¹⁶. A team is currently being assembled (overseen by a Government committee chaired by Hugh Brown, Minister of State in the Scottish Office with special responsibility for housing) consisting of representatives from the Urban Renewal Unit of the Scottish Development Department; the Scottish Special Housing Association; the Scottish Development Agency; Glasgow City District Council and Strathclyde Regional Council. Over the next eight or nine years it is anticipated that this 'team' will spend £120,000,000 regenerating and rehabilitating the East End of Glasgow. It is anticipated that many of those currently employed by the East Kilbride and Stonehouse Development Corporation will be employed on this project.

In a sense, the good and even outstanding work of the East Kilbride Development Corporation in the past, in terms of providing good housing environments and attracting industry, is being encouraged to continue within the context of Glasgow. The East End team might be seen as a sort of Development Corporation, with all the implications that has for getting things done (always providing the circumstances are favourable).

If one takes a wide view of the history of post-war urban and regional planning in Britain, a striking feature is the development of new modes of thought and policies emanating from Scotland. It is not suggested that the shift in resources from Stonehouse to the inner urban areas is a new mode of policy created north of the border, but it is the first example of such a policy being implemented in Britain. Stonehouse does have the doubtful privilege of being the first new town designated under the New Town Acts to be axed. And the associated East End project is unique in the urban planning field. Future development should, therefore, be watched with interest.

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