# Places and people matter the most[1]

*Barry Quirk*

Place is the starting point.  Place matters on a fundamental and personal level - to all of us; as individuals, as families and as communities.  We live in places and places live in us.  Places give identity and meaning to our lives.

The contours of the British landscape, its rural character, its cities and townscapes and its unique coastlines, have inspired British art, sculpture and literature for hundreds of years.[2]  And the interplay, throughout our history, of popular sentiments about the supposed virtues of 'the country' and the alleged vices of 'the city', has given colour to our nation's complicated culture and politics.[3]  The fabric of place, its rich history and its differentiated geography, gives texture to our lives: to our origins, our journeys and our imagined destinations.

## People in places

Our perspective of place is dynamic.  It is shaped by our age, our personal life events, and broader social changes.  As we move through different stages of life, our relationship with place, and what we expect or value from it, naturally evolves.

Many people live within twenty miles of their birthplace.  I live just four miles from mine.  And for those who live close to their place of origin, their lives are written into the landscape in which they live, and their landscape is written into the memory of their lives.

But most people do not stay in the same place.  They move from place to place - for work, for family, for education and for many other reasons.  Their life journeys take them through many places; some near, some far.  In fact, of the 69 million people living in the UK, around 11 million were born overseas.[4]  That is one in every six people who live here.

In the past four years, long-term international migration to the UK has been at unprecedented levels.  According to ONS, "This has been driven by a variety of factors, including the war in Ukraine and the effects of the post-Brexit immigration system.  Pent-up demand for study-related immigration because of travel restrictions during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic also had an impact."

Close examination of why people immigrate to the UK, shows a range of work related, study and family reasons.[5]  This rise has recently led the Government to tighten the rules for entry into the UK in an attempt to drastically reduce in-migration.

One-third of international migrants have settled in London.  With 40% of the 9 million people living in the capital having been born overseas; in the 2.5 million living in the 10 cities and towns with the highest proportions of people born overseas, it averages 33%; and for the rest of the areas of the UK, with 58.5 million people, it averages 11%.  There is no local authority area in the UK where less than 2% of the population was born overseas.

In England, around 3.7 million people move from one local authority area to another every year.  And of these, 1.4 million people move from one region to another.[6]  The region with the largest net gain from this internal movement of people is the South West - which experiences an increase of around 27,000 people each year.  In contrast, London loses to the other regions, around 100,000 people each year - most of them young families.  That's one million people moving out of London every decade.

And so, for many people, the memory of past landscapes and places where they once lived, may be as ingrained as the everyday image of where they now live.  Whether it is someone from Warsaw now living in the West Midlands, or someone from London now living in the South West.

As a nation we share a strong sense of place.  And not just because we live on an island.  But because we are much more densely populated than other nations in Europe. What happens in one place, spills over into neighbouring places through, what economists call, negative and positive externalities.  This has a crucial bearing on our economy and our politics.

And the relative figures for England's 58 million people are quite staggering. England has 434 people per sq km; this compares to 241 in Germany, 201 in Italy, 122 in France, and just 94 in Spain.  Only the 18 million Dutch residents in the Netherlands live at higher population density than do people in England.

**Place and community**

Living at high population density in an open society inevitably leads to more discussion about how space and place are best shared.  And not just about, "how many new homes should there be and where should we build them?"  There are currently 30 million homes in the UK, the government's intention is to build another 1% each year for the next five years.  Where they finally get built will be the end-product of many thousands of local public discussions and agreements.

Living at high density requires a clear sense about how the 'common good' is defined locally.  Is this piece of land to be held in common; and if so should it be shared by one or several community groups or should it be kept available for all to use?

Helping people to find ways to agree and disagree peacefully through everyday dialogue is an essential civic capability.

But local public dialogue is not just about how to facilitate the new. Its not simply a struggle over place and a claim for resources. It's also about how an everyday 'moral operating system' gets developed in each locality - based on the ordinary virtues of trust, tolerance, forgiveness, respect and compromise.[7]

Councils support and strengthen communities but they also help to bridge communities so that civic dialogue is maintained between differing communities - of place, identity and interest. Dialogue that promotes mutual respect and the traditions of sharing - and not just of public resources and amenities, but of customs, of culture, of food, of sport, and of face to face conversation.

Unfortunately, these issues of civic stewardship, community building, and the revival of local democratic practice are rarely at the heart of debates about the future of local government. The discussion is too often about what should happen inside the council and what should happen between different councils.

Let's face it, policy arguments about institutional change, by horizontally combining authorities or by vertically linking them, are rather meaningless to most people. Indeed, from the outside, these arguments look little more than turf disputes over power, rights and influence between competing local political elites. There is a sense that the public are reduced to being spectators.

**Place and politics**

Almost 100 years ago in the UK, the Equal Franchise Act of 1928 gave women the vote on the same terms as men - at the age of 21. The first general election with universal suffrage was the 1929 general election. Over 76% of the electorate voted. Since then there have been 25 UK general elections. In only two of these elections was the voter turnout below 60%. The first was in the year 2000; the second was last year, in 2024.

Of the 29 million people who voted in the 2024 general election, around 10 million voted for a different political party than they voted for just five years earlier in 2019. The extent to which this represents the changing policy positions of the political parties or the shifting sentiments of the electorate is a moot point. It may be that the electorate isn't responding to the political parties but that the parties are chasing a dynamic electorate.

One problem is however very clear. Where in the mid-20th century there was a strong degree of deference to formal authority, now in the early 21st century there appears to be growing indifference. The decline of deference is to be welcomed. But

in an open democratic society, the incline of indifference is something to be worried about.

Since the turn of the millennium, the gap between electorates and those elected, including the appointed public managers who serve them, has widened considerably.[8] This has led to discontent with incumbent governments and increasing degrees of democratic disillusionment.  As a result, all political parties are considering what they need to do to bridge the divide and better address the core concerns of the electorate.

The rise of more populist political responses is a global trend, but it has a strong presence in Britain.  And it is now strongly present in local government.  The recent local elections in England have introduced a new politics and a new colour (turquoise) to many County Halls and civic centres.  For some councils this may come as a significant departure - in terms of policy priorities and their programmes of action.

But this turn in political control of some councils, will also generate new responses and may herald a new dynamic of competition of ideas in local government.  For politics is arguably subject to Isaac Newton's third law of motion - "for every action there will be an equal and opposite reaction."

Changes in style and changes in substance will undoubtedly occur throughout the sector - as needs intensify and as finances become ever more straitened.  But with at least four more years of a Labour government, it is likely that the largest imprint on local government over the near future, will stem from changes to government policy and the changing pattern of nationally determined resource allocation.

**The sense of a place**

For the late Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, place is not just a backdrop but a living participant in the shaping of identity and history.  In this way, landscape, with its layers of myth, memory, and political conflict, becomes a site of both personal and collective meaning.[9]

Kerri ní Dochartaigh is a modern author deeply influenced by her roots growing up during 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland.[10]  Her book, *Thin Places* is an evocative account of life and landscape around the River Foyle in Derry/Londonderry and beyond.  She recounts an old Celtic saying that Heaven and earth are only three feet apart.  But in 'thin places' that distance seems even shorter.

These 'thin places' make us feel that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, as if we are held in a place between worlds, beyond experience.  Few people on the British side of the Irish Sea will have the experience of a place forged in the intensity of sectarian community violence.  But we all know places that are rich in personal

meaning - places that literally lift our spirits, and that restore our sense of ambition and hope.  Each of us has places that we cherish.  Places where we find joy or contentment, and in which we can rediscover hope and happiness.

Place is central to the purpose of local government.  But the current frame of local public policy seems too closely tied to the case for economic growth and regeneration.  Arguments currently swirl about spatial scale or 'footprint' and about the numbers - of councils, councillors, and citizens.  Not enough of these arguments are tethered to purpose and to function.  And too few are linked to the distinctive capabilities, the comparative advantages, and the vitally important connectivity of places.

Of course, councils need to improve the opportunity and prosperity of their places.  But they need to do this by investing in their people, especially their children and young people, as well as in the social capital that thrives in the communities in their areas.  And they need to help those communities develop their everyday civic virtues so that strangers become neighbours, and neighbours can become friends.

References:

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