

Town & Country Planning



The case for national heritage areas
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Planning for people, not targets

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As the government embraces the 'abundance agenda' **Johannes Novy** asks whether deregulation will lead them to build the right things, in the right places, for the right reasons

From red tape to red flags

When it comes to housing and infrastructure, the UK government's aim is to 'build baby build' – wind farms, nuclear power plants, data centres, transport links and, above all, new homes. To realise this ambition it has focused on cutting red tape and streamlining planning rules. This is reflected in a raft of reforms already passed or currently moving through Westminster, which have drawn much attention and debate.

Secretary of State for Housing Steve Reed visits a new development in Houghton Regis, Bedfordshire – one of thousands of sites the government hopes will help deliver its target of 1.5 million new homes by 2029

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From red tape to red flags

What has received less attention is how Labour's approach mirrors developments elsewhere – from Germany's Bau-Turbo ('construction turbo') law to recent measures in Canada and the US. The argument that rigid, slow-moving regulatory frameworks are holding back development is not new. What sets the present moment apart is how this logic has permeated the political spectrum, and the verve with which many centre-left and centre-right politicians alike are embracing deregulation as a lever to delivering homes, infrastructure and opportunities.

Building as diagnosis and cure

The drive to build faster responds to urgent problems: ageing infrastructure, low productivity, housing shortages. It is also informed by wider concerns about liberal democracies, where construction challenges act as both symptom and symbol of crisis and as a practical bottleneck to overcome.

In this context, the 'abundance agenda', articulated in Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson's book *Abundance*,¹ takes on a particular importance; parts of it read like a blueprint for what many liberal democracies now attempt. The authors argue that America suffers from self-inflicted 'scarcities', and that 'progressive' states and cities underperform because red tape, regulatory complexity and bureaucratic inertia hinder building and innovation. Their remedy is a new 'theory of supply' and 'way of thinking about politics, economics, and growth'. They argue that 'to have the future we want, we need to build and invent more of what we need' – by removing barriers to the supply of essential goods and services (housing, clean energy, care, and education), and to the innovation that underpins future progress.

Though not without its critics, the book's 'liberalism that builds', has become highly influential in the US and beyond: UK Chancellor Rachel Reeves recommended *Abundance* as her summer reading in *The Times* in 2025, and echoes in Labour's current rhetoric are hard to miss – one commentator described Prime Minister Keir Starmer's 'deliverism' as 'a kind of experiment for the abundance agenda'.²



Will Labour's ambition to 'build baby build' deliver the sustainable homes and communities that people need?

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Part of the appeal of the *Abundance* manifesto is its versatility.³ Its critique of red tape resonates with state sceptics, yet it is not anti-statist: it calls for rebuilding the state as a catalyst for abundance – one capable of investing, coordinating, and taking risks at scale. Just as important is its simple, optimistic story. Where complexity and conflict dominate, *Abundance* offers comfort: ‘scarcities’ – from housing and infrastructure to public capacity – are ‘chosen’, the product of policy and process rather than fate, and ‘we could choose otherwise’. It promises win-wins where trade-offs seemed unavoidable.



From red tape to red flags

An ambiguous message

For planners, *Abundance* tells an ambiguous story. Many agree that land-use governance is overloaded; one doesn't have to be an expert to appreciate the authors' frustration with rules obstructing housing and infrastructure, from parking mandates to participatory processes weaponised by Nimby (Not in my back yard) interests. But is regulatory overload really the root cause of the housing crisis? And is it fair to imply that environmental regulations are chiefly responsible for delaying critical infrastructure projects?

Unsurprisingly, Klein and Thompson's tale draws criticism. Many argue that it dramatises bureaucratic obstruction while glossing over other obstacles: funding constraints; labour and material costs; procurement problems; investment following profit rather than need; scarcity as a business model, and regulatory gaps.^{4,5} Some have pushed back against Labour's 'get Britain building' agenda from this angle, insisting that the housing crisis is not only driven by planning constraints, but also by speculative markets, developer power, insufficient guarantees on affordability and tenure, and a lack of council and social rent homes.

The cost of deregulation

Another cause for unease will be the scant attention *Abundance* pays to the costs of deregulation. It may be easy to agree that many rules go too far, but the authors are vague about where that boundary lies⁵ and dismissive of why measures such as labour and environmental protections exist in the first place. As economist Paul Krugman put it, 'We could have a bigger economy if we were willing to have filthy air and a lot more injured workers, but that's not a trade-off we want to make'.⁶

One of the book's central metaphors is the 'everything bagel': well-intentioned requirements accumulate until the resulting complexity and costs make it nearly impossible to build the housing or infrastructure we need. What receives less emphasis is the risk of swinging too far in the other direction. We do not just need housing units or infrastructure, but communities and places people cherish; not just economic

➤ Projects such as Hazelmead in Bridport prove that it's possible to meet housing need while providing affordable, sustainable homes that people cherish

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From red tape to red flags

growth, but social and environmental value – or at the least, not the sacrifice of the latter in pursuit of the former.

That this needs saying is damning. As political scientist Clayton Nall cautions, ‘More physical throughput is not always welfare enhancing’.⁷ Building more is not the same as building well – a distinction that risks being lost in debates about speed and scale in the UK, Germany and beyond. More troublingly, amid accelerating climate and ecological crises, these debates risk crowding out voices arguing that the current moment calls not for building more, but less, and that economic models premised on endless growth are untenable. Klein and Thompson envisage technocratic fixes and strengthened state capacity steering society toward abundance, while leaving existing social relations intact. It is easy to see why this appeals to centrist politics, and equally why post-capitalist and degrowth advocates are sceptical and call instead for an ethics of care, sufficiency and equity.

We do not just need housing units or infrastructure, but communities and places people cherish



Abundance of what and at what cost?

Planners do not speak with one voice, and not all support building less or radically rethinking our economic system. Yet they should agree on one principle: the task is not simply to build more, but to build the right things, in the right places, for the right reasons. As the abundance debate asks what holds us back, and as arguments over speed and scale dominate discourse, planners must spell out that the ‘more’ that matters is not material output, but abundance of opportunity, community, sustainability, beauty and human flourishing. Reaching this requires asking (and answering) hard questions

that neither Klein and Thompson's 'supply-side liberalism' nor Labour's current framing seem keen to take on. These include questions about the political economy and ethics of the built environment and society more broadly. They also involve confronting the trade-offs that define development: between growth, equity and sustainability, and between the imperative to deliver and preserve democratic and participatory governance.

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Notes

- 1 E Klein and D Thompson: *Abundance: How we build a better future*. Avid Reader Press, 2025
- 2 S Klein: 'Can abundance save the left?'. *Renewal*, 15 Sep. 2025. <https://renewal.org.uk/blog/can-abundance-save-the-left/>
- 3 C Nall: 'What's Missing From Supply-Side Progressivism?'. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 92(1), pp. 134-139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2025.2575704>
- 4 See note 2, above
- 5 S Vaheesan: 'The Real Path to Abundance: To deliver plentiful housing and clean energy, we have to get the story right about what's standing in the way', *Boston Review*, 9 Jun. 2025. www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-real-path-to-abundance/
- 6 P Krugman: 'Regulation, productivity and the meaning of life'. *The New York Times*, 7 Feb. 2023. www.nytimes.com/2023/02/07/opinion/regulation-productivity-epa-osha.html
- 7 See note 3, above