

JOHN ZETTER – INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS AT SAPONI VERNISSAGE

ZURICH 16/1/12

FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS I AM VERY PLEASED TO HAVE BEEN ASKED TO HELP PRESENT THE FINAL REPORT OF THE SAPONI PROJECT.

IN THE FIRST PLACE, PROFESSIONALS SUCH AS MYSELF ENJOY WORKING ON CUTTING-EDGE PROJECTS LIKE SAPONI. THIS HELPS THEM BECOME MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE, WHICH IS HOW THEY MAINTAIN AND POLISH THEIR EXPERTISE. THE CHALLENGES OF PREPARING THE SAPONI FINAL REPORT WERE CONSIDERABLE AND, THEREFORE, CONTRIBUTED TO THIS PROCESS. I HOPE THE QUALITY OF THE FINAL REPORT SHOWS THAT WE HAVE REPAID THE TRUST INVESTED IN THE SAPONI TEAM.

AS CAN BE SEEN FROM THE REPORT, THOSE WHO HELPED PREPARE IT CAME FROM VERY DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS. THIS WAS NOT JUST IN TERMS OF THE COUNTRIES IN WHICH THEY HAD WORKED: THEIR PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUNDS AND SPATIAL PLANNING EXPERIENCE ARE ALSO VARIED. THAT IS ONE OF THE MAJOR STRENGTHS OF THE APPROACH TAKEN. IT ALLOWS A ROUNDED CONSIDERATION OF THE COMPLEX ISSUES RAISED BY SPATIAL PLANNING AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL.

FOR MY PART, I AM A GEOGRAPHER/PLANNER WITH A BACKGROUND MAINLY IN SPATIAL PLANNING AT THE INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL LEVELS. BUT MY ROOTS ARE WORKING AT THE LOCAL LEVEL ON STRUCTURE PLANS FOR BOTH CITIES AND RURAL AREAS. THIS KEEPS A FOCUS ON THE PRINCIPAL AIM OF SPATIAL PLANNING, WHICH IS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE PLACES WHERE PEOPLE LIVE THEIR LIVES. THIS IS THE FOCUS OF THE CASE STUDY FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM WHICH IS FEATURED IN THE REPORT, AND I TRUST PERVADES THE WHOLE OF ITS TEXT.

TO BE “POST-MODERN” FOR A MOMENT, WHAT READERS WILL THINK OF THE SAPONI REPORT WILL PROBABLY DEPEND ON THEIR EXPECTATIONS. IN THAT CASE THOSE WHO WERE EXPECTING RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A VAST NUMBER OF DRASTIC CHANGES WILL BE DISAPPOINTED. THE STARTING POINT FOR THE SAPONI EXERCISE WAS THAT SWITZERLAND - BY INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE STANDARDS - IS WELL SERVED BY ITS SPATIAL PLANNING SYSTEM.

BUT THE WORLD CHANGES, SWITZERLAND INCLUDED. THAT IS WHY IT IS AS WELL, FROM TIME TO TIME, TO BENCH-MARK GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND PROCESSES, INCLUDING THOSE FOR SPATIAL PLANNING. COUNTRIES ALSO NEED TO LOOK AHEAD AT POTENTIAL FUTURE CHANGES WHICH MAY INFLUENCE WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TODAY. TO BE COMPETITIVE IN THE MODERN WORLD IT IS NOT JUST THE PRIVATE SECTOR WHICH NEEDS TO BE EFFICIENT, BUT THE PUBLIC SECTOR AS WELL.

THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT IN A COUNTRY IS VERY MUCH LINKED TO ITS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL NORMS. SO THERE IS NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH. SPATIAL PLANNING, IN PARTICULAR, NEEDS TO BE TAILORED TO NATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES. IN THIS INSTANCE SWITZERLAND WAS WELL SERVED BY PROFESSOR BERND SCHOLL AND HIS ETHZ TEAM, AND MORE GENERALLY BY OTHERS THE INTERNATIONAL TEAM MET

ON ITS 6 VISITS TO SWITZERLAND. IF THE SAPONI FINAL REPORT HAS ANY MERIT AT ALL, IT IS BECAUSE THE EXPERTS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES WERE SO WELL BRIEFED ON THE SWISS CULTURAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT. THIS IS THE SECOND REASON I AM PLEASED TO BE PRESENTING THE SAPONI REPORT TO A SWISS AUDIENCE.

IN THAT CONTEXT, TO INTRODUCE A PERSONAL NOTE, I FIRST CAME TO SWITZERLAND AS A YOUNG BOY IN 1949. I WAS VERY IMPRESSED, COMING AS I DID FROM WAR-TORN AND WAR-WEARY LONDON, TO WHAT SEEMED AN UNSPOILT AND UNTROUBLED PARADISE. BUT IT WAS ON MY SECOND VISIT, TWO YEARS LATER, THAT BESIDES THE SWISS TOWNSCAPE AND LANDSCAPE, THE SWISS PEOPLE IMPRESSED ME.

MY FAMILY WAS TRAVELLING FROM VENICE TO LONDON BY TRAIN. DESPITE HAVING TICKETS AND RESERVATIONS OUR SEATS WERE ALREADY TAKEN WHEN WE BOARDED THE TRAIN. EVEN AFTER A LOT OF GUESTURING AND SHOUTING THE TRAIN OFFICIALS WERE APPARENTLY UNABLE TO DISLodge THE OCCUPANTS. HOWEVER WHEN WE REACHED THE SWISS BORDER OUR SEATS - AS IF BY MAGIC - WERE SUDDENLY VACATED AND WE COULD OCCUPY THEM. IT IS FROM SUCH EXPERIENCES THAT FAVOURABLE OR UNFAVOURABLE IMPRESSIONS OF OTHER NATIONS ARE FORMED.

SO WITH MY POSITIVE FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF SWITZERLAND – REINFORCED OVER THE INTERVENING PERIOD BY REGULAR VISITS AND STUDY TOURS – WHICH OF THE REPORT’S INSIGHTS WOULD I PARTICULARLY DRAW ATTENTION TO. I HOPE YOU WILL NOT THINK THE THREE POINTS I AM GOING TO MAKE ARE SIMPLY BECAUSE I COME FROM A VERY CENTRALISED, NON-FEDERAL COUNTRY. ALSO, THEY ARISE PARTICULARLY BECAUSE I WAS CHOSEN AS THE TEAM MEMBER TO FOCUS ON TRANSFRONTIER ISSUES RELATED TO SPATIAL PLANNING. (I TOOK IT AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE SWISS SENSE OF HUMOUR THAT I WAS CHOSEN BECAUSE I CAME FROM A COUNTRY WITH ONLY ONE VERY SHORT LAND FRONTIER).

THE FIRST POINT I WANT TO MAKE IS - AND THIS RELATES VERY MUCH TO THE GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF SWITZERLAND – THAT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WILL HAVE TO BECOME SOMEWHAT MORE INVOLVED IN SPATIAL PLANNING. THE REASON IS THAT THE FOREIGN POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSNATIONAL PROJECTS AND THE USE OF LAND AND WATER RESOURCES WHICH CROSS NATIONAL BORDERS WILL BECOME STRONGER, MORE FREQUENT AND MORE COMPLEX.

THE SECOND INSIGHT TO SHARE TO HIGHLIGHT – AND THIS RELATES VERY MUCH TO THE HISTORY OF SWITZERLAND – IS THAT CO-ORDINATION BETWEEN DIFFERENT LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT, ALREADY A FEATURE OF SWISS GOVERNANCE, WILL REMAIN A HIGH PRIORITY. THIS MAY ALSO TEST YOUR CONSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS.

THIRDLY, WE LIVE IN A MORE INTER-CONNECTED WORLD AND THE LOCATION OF SWITZERLAND - MOSTLY SURROUNDED BY LARGER EU COUNTRIES – WILL MEAN THAT THE SPATIAL IMPLICATIONS OF SECTORAL POLICIES WILL NEED TO BE MORE CLOSELY EXAMINED. I NEED ONLY DRAW YOU ATTENTION TO THE INDIRECT INFLUENCE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION’S COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY ON RURAL SWITZERLAND.

I WOULD LIKE TO END BY MENTIONING THAT ON 1ST JANUARY, WHEN NEW YEAR’S RESOLUTIONS ARE TRADITIONALLY MADE, THERE WAS AN EDITORIAL COMMENT IN A LEADING BRITISH NEWSPAPER – “THE GUARDIAN” – UNDER THE HEAD-LINE “CAN’T

WE BE MORE SWISS?”. I WONDERED INITIAL WHETHER THE QUESTION WAS BEING ASKED ABOUT SPATIAL PLANNING AS A PRELUDE TO MY VISIT HERE. BUT NO, THE ISSUE WAS WHETHER THE UK SHOULD STAY IN THE EU. AND THEN LAST WEEK THE QUESTION SEEMED TO BE REVERSED WHEN THE BANKING SCANDAL ERUPTED IN SWITZERLAND AND THE SWISS SEEMED TO BE BECOMING MORE LIKE THE BRITISH.

BUT THESE ARE NOT THE ATTITUDES THAT THE SAPONI FINAL REPORT REFLECTS.THE QUESTION IT ADDRESSES IS NOT WHETHER SWITZERLAND SHOULD COPY OTHER COUNTRIES, BUT HOW IT CAN LEARN FROM THEM WHILE BEING TRUE TO ITS OWN CULTURE AND TRADITIONS.