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**From:** Angela Kelly

**To:** Angela Kelly

**Sent:** Tuesday, June 24, 2008 8:30 AM

**Subject:** AK Re: Not in our backyard!\*The Independent\*Tuesday, 24 June 2008

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# THE INDEPENDENT

Tuesday, 24 June 2008

## Not in our backyard!

By Andrew Grice and Ben Russell

More than 60 Labour MPs are threatening to derail plans to weaken people's long-standing right to oppose the building of new nuclear power stations and airport runways in their own "backyards".

Ministers want to hand the final decisions to an unelected quango, and Labour whips are trying to head off a backbench rebellion when the Planning Bill is debated in the Commons tomorrow. Sixty-three Labour MPs have threatened to vote against the measure and ministers are set to offer concessions to avert an embarrassing first Commons defeat for Gordon Brown - one which would prompt further questions about his authority.

At present, major projects such as power stations, ports, airports, roads, railways, dams, water plants, hazardous waste facilities and critical gas and electricity works are subject to public inquiries, where lawyers for residents, pressure groups and developers do battle - sometimes for years - before government-appointed inspectors recommend whether the schemes should go ahead. Ministers then take the final decision.

Under the Bill, an independent infrastructure planning commission would decide whether to approve such projects. Environmental groups and MPs from all parties have condemned the proposals as an affront to democracy. They say the final say on such developments should not be handed to an unelected quango but should be retained by ministers accountable to the public.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England warned that the shake-up would remove democratic control over all the most contentious planning decisions. "This is crunch time for planning in this country," said Paul Miner, its senior planning campaigner. "Airport expansion and new power stations are huge matters of public concern. If ministers are serious about moving towards a greener future and more prudent use of resources, they should take the hard decisions this involves. MPs must stand up and be counted and use their votes to make sure we continue to have democratic accountability in our biggest planning decisions."

Naomi Luhde-Thompson, of Friends of the Earth, added: "The Planning Bill is undemocratic, marginalises community voices and does nothing to tackle climate change. The Government's proposals mean local people will not be properly involved in decisions that could fundamentally affect them. Major projects such as roads, airports and power stations will be pushed through without local people having a proper say.

"The existing inquiry process allows people to question the developer, call witnesses and present evidence at a public inquiry. In the new system, all of these rights are removed, with only limited opportunity for people to raise concerns, and no requirement for the developer or decision-makers to respond."

Last night, the Labour rebels held talks with the Communities Secretary, Hazel Blears, and the Planning minister, John Healey, to demand that the Government's role is strengthened. It seemed ministers were likely to give some ground, with one government source saying: "We are not seeking confrontation, we are seeking compromise."

The vote has been delayed twice to give ministers more time to head off a defeat. Mr Brown has been telephoning potential Labour rebels, who have signed a Commons motion saying the proposed planning commission would have "inordinate and unprecedented" powers.

Two weeks ago, the Prime Minister narrowly survived a vote to extend to 42 days the maximum time that police can hold terror suspects. A defeat on the Planning Bill, at a time when Mr Brown has an overall majority of only 67, would raise further questions about his authority.

Labour rebels have tabled amendments to the Bill to ensure that ministers retain the final say. John Grogan, one of the leaders of the revolt, said: "You should not be able to build a new power station or a big new airport without a politician being prepared to stand up for it and being responsible. The politicians should not be able to stand up and say, 'it's not us gov, it's the planning commissions'. There is a limit to the virtues of government by expert." John McDonnell, the Labour MP for Hayes and Harlington, added: "This is a straightforward case of accountability. Even if you just put a secretary of state's name on the decision, it allows you to understand who is responsible. You cannot devolve these issues to a group of hand-picked bureaucrats. In my constituency there is the issue of Heathrow airport. It will be a huge issue in my constituency but also a major argument over global warming."

The Conservative leader, David Cameron, said: "**This quango is going to be almost entirely divorced from the processes of**

**democracy. That is wrong. People need a planning system in which they feel they have a say - both at national and local level. That is why this Bill is getting such widespread opposition from so many different quarters."**

Steve Webb, the Liberal Democrat environment spokesman, said: "The Planning Bill is a Trojan Horse for airport expansion, new nuclear power plants and other controversial projects. The Government has got fed up with consultation and public inquiries. The worry is that it is about railroading through plans. If we do not get the amendments through, we will ask ministers about these projects and they will say, 'Sorry - not my decision'."

The Government insists the new system would be more democratic because MPs would debate national policy statements on energy or transport to lay down detailed guidelines for planning decisions and set out the principle of developments such as new nuclear plants. The commission would then decide detailed planning applications on about 45 cases a year. Developers would be required to consult local communities and the commission would hold public hearings into applications. All interested parties would still have a right to put their case to the commission. Ministers say the hearings would be less dominated by lawyers.

Stansted campaign would be silenced

The public inquiry into the expansion of Stansted airport, around which a stream of retired solicitors, teachers and other professionals have mobilised in protest, is a good example of the sort under threat from the new law.

When hearings began last May, environment groups co-ordinated protests outside while inside, Friends of the Earth, the Stop Stansted Expansion (SSE) group and the National Trust gave statements against the plans of the airport's owner, BAA.

The inquiry has heard both sides of the case: the plans - for a new terminal by 2015, with 68 million passengers a year by 2030 - will create up to 13,000 jobs, boosting the economy by £9bn, according to BAA. But the new runway and terminal would be built on 442 hectares of land, with 13 listed buildings being destroyed. Essex County Council is firmly opposed, while the SSE has described the plan as "going beyond environmental vandalism and ... tantamount to a declaration of war on the local community and global environment".

High-speed rail: the future?

Journey times between London and Manchester could be cut to little more than an hour under ambitious plans to build a new generation of rail routes. Network Rail yesterday announced a feasibility study into the construction of five high-speed rail links from the capital to major cities.

The new lines would be built alongside existing routes out of London in the largest rail investment since the 19th century. They would be next to the West Coast line to Birmingham, Manchester and Glasgow; the East Coast line to Edinburgh; the Great Western to Bristol, the Midland main line to Sheffield and the Chiltern route to Birmingham.

London to Manchester would be 74 minutes; London to Sheffield 71 minutes. The moves follow predictions of a 30 per cent rise in passengers in the next decade. Network Rail said: "There is a huge case to be made for an expansion of the rail network."

Nigel Morris