



“Scotland’s towns are a vital component of the Scottish economy and society”

Interview: Professor Leigh Sparks

Town life

Kate Shannon

Local Government Correspondent

Professor Leigh Sparks has recently been appointed chairman of Scotland’s Towns Partnership (STP)

In July last year, the National Review of Town Centres, led by leading Scottish architect Malcolm Fraser, published a series of proposals to revitalise Scotland’s town centres. Just some of the key recommendations included bringing forward a ‘town centre first’ principle, whereby

public bodies consider how they can support town centres before contemplating development elsewhere; working with housing providers to bring empty town-centre properties back into use as affordable housing; and broadening the appeal of town centres with a mix of leisure, public facilities and homes.

Scotland’s Towns Partnership (STP) is the collective partnership and support body for Scotland’s towns, and internationally recognised and respected towns and retail expert, Professor Leigh Sparks is now chairing the group. Sparks is Professor of Retail Studies at the Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling.

He said: “Scotland’s towns are a vital component of the Scottish economy and society, as has been well recognised in the Government’s Town Centre Action Plan response to the Fraser Review. I am delighted to be asked to take on the role of chair of Scotland’s Towns Partnership at such a critical yet exciting time. STP has through the work of its partners been a valuable resource and encouragement for those working

in and with Scotland’s towns. I am really looking forward to working with colleagues to continue to secure a strong, positive future for Scotland’s towns.”

Originally from Wales, Sparks studied for his first degree, in geography, at Cambridge and it was here that his interest in retail began. He told *Holyrood*: “During my second year at Cambridge I got a scholarship to go to Northern Queensland, where I went to work for the town council, this was in the mid-70s. I was told I had to do a project over the summer while I was there and my choice was either to do a project on the use of the local swimming pool or on the use of the regional shopping centre. The problem was the swimming pool in question was shut, so I did my project on how people used the regional shopping centre in Townsville, Northern Queensland.

“After that I became very interested in retail and retail change. After Cambridge I went to the University of Wales and did my PhD on superstores and hypermarkets. Quickly following



“If we think about retail change over the past few years, clearly we’ve become increasingly concerned as a country with the idea that somehow there is a crisis”

on from that, I moved with my supervisor to the University of Stirling in 1983. I became a lecturer, then senior lecturer and professor here at the university.

“That period of the early ’80s was a time of big change in Stirling. It had been hit very heavily in the Thatcher cuts of the early 1980s so it was about entrepreneurship and developing new areas and new ideas. With my professor at the time, John Dawson, we set up the Institute for Retail Studies and took retailing as a subject area into the university and we expanded from that. I became Professor of Retail Studies here in 1992 and have been here ever since.”

Sparks said one of the joys of working in retailing is it is a fast moving industry, which has changed “phenomenally” over the course of his career.

He said: “If we think about retail change over the past few years, clearly we’ve become increasingly concerned as a country with the idea that somehow there is a crisis. It’s typically referred to as a crisis of high streets and is often seen through the lens of a retail crisis. For example, the UK Government invited Mary Portas to do the Portas Review, which was a review of high streets. Just before that, I was involved with the Centre for Scottish Public Policy (CSPP) and asked to run a policy group on town centres, with the thought being that it is not purely a high-street problem; it is a town-centre problem and a town problem.

“What we have is not just a recessionary issue or a retail consumption problem but it is recessionary [issues] overlaying a much stronger structural change. That change is partly retail, partly consumer, partly technological but the way we live our lives and what we expect in different places has changed fundamentally. We talk about out-of-town retailing but if you look at any place, just think about the other things which have been decentralised. Take Stirling, look at where the schools have moved to, look at where the cinemas have moved to, look at where the car showrooms have gone, where the offices have moved to, where are the hotels, the football ground has moved out – all of these things have been decentralised, you therefore have [to ask] the question, why do people bother coming into town centres?

“If there is no one coming into town centres, you won’t get good retail and you won’t get good high streets. What’s become increasingly clear post the Fraser Review and the Government’s response to it, is that there is a need for a single body to bring everything together. Actually, having policy work within

Scotland’s Towns Partnership makes more sense. We want to have a single voice for Scotland’s towns, which pushes forward the agenda that Scotland’s towns are valuable places and actually therefore help government, work with them and talk with them around what we need to do both in policy but on a practical level.”

Sparks believes people have a strong sense of identity when it comes to their town. “When you ask people where they are from, they don’t say they’re from a high street or a region, they talk about a place and a town,” he said.

“We have to build on that and re-imagine what town centres can look like. If you see the problem as a retail problem then I think you miss the point. Many of the previous uses of towns can now be done online, so we need to see something that is different – creative spaces with community involved, people and leisure with a sense of place around it, as opposed to a shopping centre which can be great, particularly in bad weather, but which is quite impersonal.”

Speaking about the Fraser Review, Sparks said the document, importantly, focused on towns and places.

He added: “One of the issues the Government states in their response and which has been picked up from the Fraser Review is going forward, we cannot have a top-down approach. We can’t afford to throw around the amount of money required to fix every town in Scotland, even if we thought there was one way of doing it, which there isn’t. We can’t afford to do that so it has to come from the bottom up, from communities working together and identifying what’s different about them and distinctive about their sense of place and town, and what they need to do to put things back together in their town centre.

“Derek Mackay has said he’ll come back to Scotland’s Towns Conference this year in Paisley and he will report his progress. It’ll be interesting to see how that stacks up but there is a sense of momentum, though I do worry people thought that there was a quick fix. We’ve been neglecting town centres for the past 30 or 40 years, so it isn’t going to be a quick fix. It is going to be about places understanding themselves and bringing the assets they think they need. There are a lot of things coming together and I’m optimistic things are happening that we need to shout about rather more. You could add BIDS to that; they have expanded reasonably well in Scotland. They’re not suitable for every area but at the end of the day, as with every aspect of this, it’s about finding what is right for a specific place.” ■