

# Fiddling while Rome burns?

**A**s we rush headlong towards 2013, it is likely that, way ahead of Britain's obsession with industrial strategies, this year will be remembered for the ongoing Eurozone crisis, the West's struggle with recession, China's slowdown, president Obama's re-election and war in the Middle East.

That is, of course, quite right. Yet, as realisation finally dawned in government circles that the UK probably should have rebalanced its economy in favour of wealth-creating industry long before the 2008 crash, this past 12 months have seen rather more introspection, even posturing, than leadership or transformational action.

Yes, there's no denying that the Business Secretary's rendition of an industrial strategy for Britain was, and remains, a good and worthy endeavour. And indeed moves are already afoot to bring Vince Cable's business bank kicking and screaming out of theory and into reality. Similarly, recent months have been littered with news of government funding redirected towards key areas of engineering, science and skills.

But now we have Conservative peer Lord Heseltine's 228-page report (bizarrely entitled 'No Stone Unturned'), with no fewer than 89 recommendations – which the Coalition says need further careful thought and debate. Ironical, given that those self-same recommendations centre on slimming down Whitehall (with the notable exception of creating a National Growth Council, headed by the prime minister), with more power and money devolved to reconfigured local councils, newly mandated to stimulate development and growth through local businesses and institutions.

Reaction from august bodies, such as the CBI, the British Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors, has been broadly sympathetic. Aside, that is, from worrying about the implications of a protracted period (and vast sums of money) being wasted on restructuring an already top-heavy bureaucracy. Oh, and concerns about just how those with a vested interest in the status quo might cope with newly empowered and highly paid civil servants and local government officials.

That said, most acknowledge the virtue of Heseltine's appeal for long-termism, in terms both of industrial finance and of policy continuity. Indeed, one wonders whether Cable himself wakes wishing he had thought more radically for his industrial strategy.

And so the navel-gazing goes on. While it may be churlish to accuse the political establishment of fiddling while Rome burns, the fact is industry cannot wait any longer. Strategy or not, we need to get behind transforming skills, energy provision, our tired physical infrastructure and, again, financial support. It's time to get back to basics.

Brian Tingham BSc CEng MInstMC FSOE FIPlantE FIRTE, Editor

