

BRITISH HOUSING POLICY

In a remarkably short period, the UK has shifted from a country dedicated to providing, variously, 'Homes fit for Heroes' and a 'New Jerusalem', to overseeing a seemingly endless fall in social housing provision, with predictably dire consequences for society, health and social cohesion.

The birth of social housing

For the majority of the 19th century, the country's housing was determined by the laissez-faire attitude to government that characterised the period. The unprecedented migration from the countryside and burgeoning population meant slum-like conditions for the population. While the Housing of the Working Class Act, passed in 1890, extended the role of local authorities in providing housing and demolishing slums, the watershed moment came in 1919 with the passing of the 'Addison Act'. As Anne Power and John Houghton write:

"The 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act, the 'Addison Act', required local authorities to plan and provide homes for their populations and introduced a direct government subsidy for local authorities to build, with the aim of delivering a startling 500,000 council homes in just five years. Never before had central government given local authorities the duty, let alone the power, to build. Nor had it previously given direct central subsidies for new working-class homes – effectively a blank cheque to build without the brake of raising local taxes." (i)

As would be characteristic in housing policy for decades to come, the impetus to build high-quality, artisan homes was overtaken by a rush towards maximum volume, with a corresponding fall in quality. Nonetheless, an astounding one million homes were built between the wars to accommodate two million displaced slum dwellers.

Another 900,000 were built by the Labour government that was elected in 1945. Remarkably,

the provision of a high quantity of social housing became a key election issue for the subsequent Conservative government. While Macmillan's target of 300,000 homes a year was notable for its commitment to the welfare state, the shoddy quality of the subsequent developments would undermine the policy as a whole. In the words of Lynsey Hanley:

"In terms of its diminishing emphasis on quality and its discarding of Bevan's 'modern village' blueprint... [Macmillan's] 'great crusade' was, in practice, merely a mission to be seen to get things done. Bevan feared building quickly in case he built new slums. Macmillan seemed less bothered by this prospect and passed this crucial lack of foresight into the very fabric of the council-housing landscape." (ii)

From the late 1950s onwards, high-rise tower block became cheap, often shoddily-constructed alternatives to save the council time and money. Their approval in planning applications peaked in 1966 (25 per cent) and fell from then on. The unenviable conditions and hostile response in the press tarnished their reputation, and were part of an ongoing slide in the reputation of state provided housing. Nonetheless, by 1979, around half the British population lived in council housing, as compared to only 12 per cent today.

The death of social housing

A final burst of housing development followed in the 1970s, before the twin blows that would permanently change the housing landscape in Britain: The Right to Buy and Thatcher's wholehearted embrace of neoliberalism. The Right to Buy gave council house tenants the right to buy their homes at a discounted rate, seemingly to facilitate Thatcher's desire that we become a 'property owning democracy'. The results, compounded by decades of neglect, have been catastrophic for the poorest in the country.

The policy coincided with a bar on new local authorities providing more housing, the overall result of which was to demolish one of Britain's prime national assets, in line with the selling-off of other state utilities in the Thatcher era. The consequences were two-fold. Firstly, the loss of revenue for the local authorities and subsequent pressure on housing stock has created a crisis in housing provision, particularly for the poorest. Second, it has contributed to the ongoing problem that comes with state housing provision: social segregation. As Hanley writes:

"In the first fifteen years of the Right to Buy policy, 1.6 million homes were bought from the councils, leaving their housing stock so depleted – particularly in areas where high sales were matched by high demand for social housing, such as the inner London boroughs – that it became almost impossible for anyone not in extreme housing need to become a council tenant. By 1995, 95 per cent of those housed by local authorities qualified for some form of means-tested state benefits. Despite this, depopulation in areas of high unemployment, seen most sharply in the north, caused the least popular estates to empty out almost completely, except to those who were statutorily homeless: the mentally ill, hard-drug addicts, ex-cons and those who had never worked and could expect never to work." (iii)

This dimension of housing, while it did not begin with Thatcher, was greatly exacerbated by her government. Indeed, along with the widening inequality that characterised her time in power. Between 1979 and 1993, unemployment doubled, as did recorded incidences of crime. Thatcher also raised rents and cut housing benefit throughout the 1980s, as well as cutting government spending on housing by 70 per cent. Conditions also worsened considerably, as Nick Davis writes: "By the end of the 1980s, with its assault of housing, there were 1.5 million homes that were unfit for human habitation, 2.5 million homes that were damp - and an epidemic of bronchial illness." (iv)

New Labour, upon coming to power, did everything to continue this approach. Anne Minton writes that, since 2002, state provided housing has averaged 11 per cent of all new homes, as compared to 46 per cent in 1980. Naked subsidies to commercial developers, most notably in the Pathfinder Scheme, were temporarily embraced

prior to the financial crisis of 2008 (v).

Writing in 2012, two features of the state of British housing are particularly prominent. The first is the concentration in certain spaces of society's most destitute and in need of aid in what are effectively ghettos. Similar to the ghettos found in Loic Wacquant's analysis, these areas are isolated from the broader social body, and principally used for warehousing the lower end of Britain's 13 million poor people. The results are ecologies of negative social reinforcement, as residents face crime, lower job prospects and poor mental and physical health. Moreover, as Owen Jones records in *Chavs: The Demonisation of the Working Class*, the inequality and social separation has built a particularly vicious strain of cultural bigotry to this 'underclass', with caricatures of hood-wearing 'neds' becoming common currency in Westminster and the media. The additional displacement and pricing-out of residents when these areas again become desirable, as in the case of Hackney, has been shown to have particularly incendiary social effects, as seen in August 2011.

The second feature is, putting aside the injustice of present housing policy on its own terms, the decline in affordable homes for those who need them breeds social antagonism, particularly given the (understandable) priority given to housing the most destitute first, whether these are young mothers or the few asylum seekers who make it through Britain's labyrinthine asylum process. At its worst, this combination of understandable anger and artificial competition has contributed to the limited success of parties like the BNP in areas like Barking and Dagenham (vi).

In short, housing remains a critical feature not just our politics but, rather fittingly, of our political landscape. Thus, the virtual omission of it from the national debate has profound and damaging consequences.

References

- (i) Anne Power and John Houghton *Jigsaw Cities: Big Places, Small Spaces* (2007) Policy Press, pp. 43
- (ii) Lynsey Hanley *Estates: An intimate history* (2007) Granta pp. 91
- (iii) *Ibid.* pp. 139
- (iv) Nick Davies *Dark Heart: The Shocking Truth About Modern Britain* (1998) Vintage pp. 293
- (v) Anna Minton *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty First Century City* (2009) Penguin
- (vi) Owen Jones *Chavs: The Demonisation of the Working Class* (2011) Verso