RETROSPECT (1): HOUSING POLICY 1901 to 1961 IN DECADES

1901 to 1911

Although the media likes to divide history into decades they have little historical significance. Nonetheless, given that the Census is undertaken every ten years, providing data on housing policy outcomes —scarce in the early 20th century — there is merit in separating housing policy into ten-year periods.

1900 to 1911 has been a somewhat barren decade for housing policy research with historians often moving directly from the 19th century to the 1919 Housing, Town Planning etc. Act. Indeed, there was little new direct housing legislation in the period so analysing housing policy is, in part, a matter of tracing the impact of 19th century initiatives into the 20th century. The 'housing question' was linked to the land issue, perhaps the most important domestic division between the political parties at the time.

The Conservative and Unionist Party obtained a large majority in the 1900 General Election but a 'Liberal landslide' in 1906 resulted in the Liberal Party obtaining 397 seats, the Conservative and Unionists 156 and the Labour Representative Committee 50.

The 1890 Housing of the Working Class Act gave local government not only the power to build in clearance areas but the authority to build outside such districts. Some local authorities, notably the London County Council, from 1889 until 1907 under the control of the 'Progressives' — a loose alliance of Liberals and moderate Socialists — attempted to build council homes but they were harassed by the Conservative central government and reluctant to make a loss on a scheme (see Lund, 2016). Even after the Liberals took control of the central government, very few local authority homes were constructed. About 24,000 council housing units had been built in Britain before 1914 with most in London (9,746), Liverpool (2,895) and Glasgow (2,199). Local authorities continued to clear slums under 19th century legislation and sell the sites to housing association who also acquired other land. Using 1911 Census returns, Spensley (1918) estimated that in Greater London, the trusts and companies owned 107,343 'rooms' — but, even when building, both local government and housing associations had limitations as a response to the 'housing famine'. The problem was that the rents of homes — built to sanitary yet spartan standards — were too expensive for the poorer members of society. Many housing associations, in the form of charitable trusts and model dwelling companies, wanted a 5% return for their investors and local government was highly reluctant to subsidise new

house building. The prevailing attitude was that housing subsidies were 'doles' — 'charity on the rates' as James Nettleford, a leading Liberal housing expert called them (James, 2012) — and likely to undermine the independence of the working classes (Morris 2001). Most of the properties built by local government and housing associations were let to the middle and upper echelons of the working class, such as policemen, skilled and semi-skilled workers, and clerks.

The 1909 Housing, Town Planning etc. Act

The only housing measure in the Liberal Reforms 1906-11 was the 1909 Housing, Town Planning etc. Act, a diluted version of an attempt by the National Housing Reform Council, a Liberal pressure group, to allow local government to acquire land by compulsory purchase and control suburban development. Rather than grant such powers, the Act gave local government the authority to prepare plans for future development aimed at promoting garden suburbs. The legislation was rarely used with the compensation payable for refused developments being the principal obstacle. The Act reflected Liberal Party obsession with the land issue that erupted when Lloyd George produced his 1909 'Peoples' Budget, proposing land taxation at 20% on the 'unearned increments' from land sales and an annual tax on the capital value of undeveloped land. Lloyd George's 'Peoples' Budget' was mainly aimed at raising revenue to finance his social welfare reforms and undermining the power of the 'landed aristocracy' but it was also argued that land taxes would release land for development by reducing gains from land hoarding. The land taxes raised little revenue and were axed by the post First World War Conservative-dominated Coalition government. According to Masterman (quoted in Morgan, 1971, pp 208–9), 'They stamped down the ground over the grave.... And finally – so that there should be no doubt at all to their triumph — they ... returned two millions of the money'.

In what became known as 'the great Edwardian property slump', from 1900 to 1911 residential property values declined by 20% and new investment in residential property plummeted: for example, the index of residential construction in London declining from 200 in 1901 to 75 in 1911 (Samy, 2015).

Impact

The Census provides the only representative information on housing conditions in 1911 and this is limited and difficult to interpret due to definitional problems. The number of dwellings in England and Wales was 6,709,784 in 1901 and 7,036,868 in 1911, whereas the number of households was 7,036, 978 in 1901 and, in 1911, 7,970,660 (Vision of Britain, 2019, a and b). In 1901, 8.2% of the population of England and Wales lived in *overcrowded* conditions, an improvement on the 11.2% recorded in 1891, a

limited advance perhaps due to the very low new build rate being mitigated to a limited extent by the sub-division of larger homes as the middle-class started to move to the suburbs.

Of course, there were wide variations across England and Wales in housing conditions with overcrowding ranging from 36% in Jarrow to 0.5% in Bedford with overcrowding in inner-cities increasing between 1901 to 1911 (Wohl, 1977).

Overall housing conditions in Scotland were far worse than in England and Wales with 45% of Scots lived at a density of more than two people per room (Knox, undated) albeit that the rooms were somewhat larger than in England.

Those looking for an explanation of the growing working class unrest on housing conditions (Englander, 1977) that erupted in the 1917 Glasgow rent strike should examine the new house famine from 1901 to 1911 that continued post 1911. Whilst the Liberals and Conservatives squabbled over the land issue, working class housing needs were ignored.

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1911 to 1921

The post 1900 property slump continued after 1911 and the steep decline in new house construction during the First World War plus rapid increases in private landlord rents produced widespread working class unrest that prompted extensive state intervention in the forms of rent control and subsidised council housing. However, such state intervention was short-lived and, in 1920, robust efforts were made to return to a free market in housing supply.

The General Elections of January and December 1910 were fought on constitutional issue of House of Lords powers and only Labour's manifestos contained references to housing. In the December election the Conservatives won the most seats but the Liberal Party under Asquith formed a government with the support of the Irish Nationalists.

'The great Edwardian property slump' got worse after 1911 but there is evidence suggesting that investment in private renting was in sharp decline whist owner-occupation was increasing (Samy, 2016). Many Conservatives attributed the slump to the growing 'rates burden' and attempts were made to shift local expenditure to national taxation. As a Conservative backbencher, Sir Arthur Griffith-Boscawen who, following the ratepayer revolt against the 'Progressives' on the LCC, had become Chair of the LCC Housing Committee, introduced two Bills to Parliament in 1912 aimed at providing limited central grants to local authorities to enable them to supply houses in inner areas. His objective was to 'spread the burden over the broader shoulders of the taxpayers' (quoted in Daunton, 1987, p 56). There was little enthusiasm for the Bills among Conservative leaders, and the Liberals opposed the measures on the 'subsidies' equals 'doles' argument. W.J. Nettleford, Liberal Unionist and Chair of Birmingham's Housing Committee, asserted that argued that 'wages follow rents, and therefore [subsidies] would only result in providing capitalists with cheap labour' (quoted in Daunton, 1983, p 290).

House-building declined dramatically on the outbreak of the First World War and worker migration to the munitions factories produced large rent increases. Agitation against these rises erupted across the UK in places such as Northampton, Newcastle, Birmingham, Dudley, Birkenhead, Poplar, Coventry and Weymouth. There was an unsuccessful rent strike in Leeds in 1914 prompted by a sudden rent hike imposed by the local landlord association. In contrast, the Glasgow rent strikes were a triumph. The story of the how the 1915 Glasgow rent strikes — organised by Mary Barbour and the Glasgow Women's Housing Association with trade union support— led directly to rent control and security of tenure has been well-told many times but it is worth emphasising that the call for rent control was linked to the demand for state supported local authority housing.

Working-class agitation against private landlord rent increases was the major factor in transforming central government's role in housing supply. Post-1915, the Ministry of Munitions, under Lloyd George, subsidised dwellings, and by 1918, it had built 10,284 homes, with showcase schemes at Gretna and Woolwich Arsenal. In an attempt to attract and retain armament workers, the housing estates contained public houses, canteens and community centres. Marr (2009, p 165) detects 'the real origins of the modern welfare state' in Lloyd George's munitions estates.

A wave of industrial strikes erupted in 1917, many unofficial, involving miners, engineers and munitions workers. The government established regional committees to investigate the unrest and housing featured as a major grievance. Widespread resentment of landlord 'profiteering' dented the prospects that private landlordism could be trusted with the post-war task of building houses for the working class. Support for subsidised council housing came from the Tudor Walters Committee report, mainly written by Raymond Unwin, a Fabian socialist. The report associated municipal housing with planned estate layout, recommending that new estates should have a 12 per acre density. It made the point that the new houses would need to meet the requirements of future generations, hence its recommendations that a bath in a separate bathroom should be a standard fixture, each house should have a garden and some should have a 'parlour'. It also claimed that, although subsidies may be necessary in the short term, 'ultimate economy in the provision of dwellings will depend on the relation between the average rental secured over a long period' and the initial dwelling cost (Tudor Walters, 1918, para 27).

Austen Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer, was cool on subsidised state housing but Lloyd George dismissed Treasury objections stating:

> Russia had gone almost completely over to Bolshevism … and in a short time we might have three-quarters of Europe converted to Bolshevism. None would be left but France and Great Britain. Great Britain would hold out, but only if the people were given a sense of confidence – only if they were made to believe that things were being done for them.... We must give them the conviction this time that we mean it, and we must give them that conviction quickly.... Even if we could do all we wished to do during the coming year, it would cost us £71,000,000. Even if it cost £100,000,000, what was that compared with the stability of the State?
> (Lloyd George, 1919, p 529)

1919 Housing and Town Planning etc Act made it mandatory for each authority to assess its housing requirements and compile a plan to meet this need. It granted 'open-ended' central subsidies to local

authorities to meet housebuilding costs above a set rate contribution. 213,000 homes were completed under the Act's provisions but, in 1921, the 'open ended' subsidies were terminated.

The portents of this axe were detectable in Conservative Party attitudes to subsidised council housing. The 1918 *Conservative Party General Election Manifesto: the Manifesto of Lloyd George and Bonar Law* declared:

> Plans have been prepared, and will be put into execution as soon as the new Parliament assembles, whereby it will be the duty of public authorities and, if necessary, of the State itself to acquire land on simple and economical basis for men who have served in the war, either for cottages with gardens, allotments, or small holdings as the applicants may desire and be suited for, with grants provided to assist in training and initial equipment.

There was no reference to subsidised local authority housing and, as mentioned earlier, Austen Chamberlain tried to obstruct Lloyd George's council house building programme. Moreover, as the 1919 passed through Parliament, a number of Conservative MPs introduced clauses to provide loans directly to builders as an alternative to state housing.

The 1921 cut was prompted by an 8% fall in UK GDP from 1919 to 1921 and demands for 'economy' in public spending. The Geddes Committee, set up to make recommendations on public expenditure cuts, whose conclusions were published in 1922 (Geddes, 1922) but known to the government in 1921, condemned housing subsidies as 'wasteful' and recommended a 'vigorous policy of sale' of the homes built under the 1919 legislation. Moreover, there was an attempt to restore the market in rented houses. The 1920 Increase of Rent and Mortgage Interest (Restrictions) Act allowed private landlords to increase rents by 40%, phased over three years.

Trapped in the Conservative dominated coalition and with the 'Bolshevik threat', if it ever existed (see MacKenzie and MacKenzie, 1984: Larsen, 2013, receding, Lloyd George reluctantly agreed to ending the subsidised housing programme. He also agreed to the axing of his land tax. The Conservative-dominated post-war Coalition government removed all land taxation traces from the statute book. According to Masterman (quoted in Morgan, 1971, pp 208–9), 'They stamped down the ground over the grave.... And finally – so that there should be no doubt at all to their triumph – they ... returned two millions of the money'.

Outcomes

The 1921 Census revealed that the excess of private families over occupied dwellings in England and Wales was 304, 450 above the 1911 figure and 334,685 more people lived in overcrowded housing (2 or more people per room) [Vision of Britain, 2019] In Scotland 22.6% of the population were overcrowded (Rodger, 1989). Some commentators identified a 'new overcrowding' problem. London County Councillor Major Barnes (1926, p 10) stated:

> Overcrowding in London is developing a new and sinister aspect. No longer is it confined to areas where poverty and squalor have been notorious for years. Hard-working, self-respecting people who have had good homes in their time … are now living in hidden dens that are not fit to house the most degraded human beings.

However, as will be shown in the post *Retrospect: Housing Policy 1921- 1931*, the attempt to restore a free market in housing prompted a sharp increase in support for the Labour Party — yes, it was housing that did it — producing a Labour-led Coalition government and a reformulation of Conservative Party housing policy.

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1921 to 1931

Despite two short periods of minority Labour governments, in the 1920s the UK government was dominated by Conservative Party. The general direction of housing policy was towards the restoration of free market in housing, albeit that this was modified towards support for owner-occupation as the ideal tenure. Central assistance for local authority housing supply was gradually reduced and rent control was relaxed. However, the attempt to restore a free market in housing was stalled by working-class opposition.

Having ditched Lloyd George, the Conservatives continued to move towards a free market in housing with the 1923 Rent and Mortgage Interest Restriction Act introducing 'creeping decontrol', whereby houses came out of protection (control and tenure security) when tenants died or moved away. On March 3rd 1923 the Conservatives lost Mitcham, normally a safe Conservative seat, to Labour in a by-election fought almost entirely on the housing issue and the party performed badly in other by-elections.

In a series of *Spectator* articles published in 1923, Conservative MP, Noel Skelton, advocated a 'property-owning democracy', asserting that a Conservative vision was necessary to counter socialism that was rapidly capturing the moral high ground amongst working class opinion leaders and Neville Chamberlain, Minister for Health and responsible for housing, made some tentative steps towards Skelton's idea in the 1923 Housing Act. A low fixed rate subsidy for private enterprise and local government was introduced but local authorities could only build after demonstrating that private enterprise could not meet local housing requirements. Moreover, the long-established Small Dwellings Acquisition Acts were amended to allow local authorities to issue more mortgages to better paid workers to enable them to buy private sector houses. However, it was too little, too late. In the 1923 General Election the Conservatives lost 86 seats and a Labour formed a minority government with Liberal support. Although protectionism was the dominant issue, housing featured strongly in Labour's campaign.

The 1924 Housing Act was the major social reform enacted by the Labour government. John Wheatley — in 1915, a 'Red Clydesider', by 1924, the minister responsible for housing — had radical intentions, wanting 200,000 municipal houses per year, high central grants to local government for house-building, low rents and long-term planning. Civil servants diluted Wheatley's radicalism (Jones, 1969) but the 1924 Housing Act was an important legislative measure. It removed the restrictions on local authority house building imposed in the 1923 Act, gave central grants for 40 years to local government at a higher rate than the 1923 Act and extended the time that subsidies could be paid under 1923 Act. Moreover, Wheatley made an agreement with builders and unions

promising a long-term rolling house-building programme in return for fair wages and reducing restrictive practices (Vaughan, 2009).

The 1924 General Election, the outcome of a non-confidence vote in the Labour government, produced a large Conservative majority. Issues other than distribution politics can determine election results and, according to many commentators, the Zinoviev letter — a fraudulent document published by the *Daily Mail* four days before the election — was very influential in the election result. The letter, claimed to be a directive from Grigory Zinoviev, the Head of the Communist International in Moscow, to the Communist Party of Great Britain, ordering it to engage in seditious activities and saying that resumption of diplomatic relations by a Labour government would hasten the radicalisation of the British working class. This would have been a major interference in British politics and its alleged connections between Labour and communism turned many Liberal and some Labour voters into Conservative supporters as a 'bulwark against Bolshevism'.

The 1923 and 1924 housing subsidies continued in parallel throughout the rest of the 1920s but the Conservatives had opposed the 1924 Act and, at a Cabinet meeting in February 1926, Neville Chamberlain gave assurances that 'it is his desire and intention to bring the Wheatley Scheme to an end as soon as practicable and also to proceed actively with the policy of the sale of Addison Houses' (Cabinet, 1926, p 306). Subsidies to local authorities were slowly reduced and new home quality deteriorated. Houses with 'parlours' became rare with a fixed bath in the kitchen often replacing a bathroom.

After the 1929 General Election, Labour became the largest party in Parliament with 287 seats; the Conservatives obtained 260 and the Liberals 60. Without foreign policy distractions, the condition of the people dominated the election campaign. Labour's message was clear.

> The Labour Party is the Party of the Workers' Home. In 1924, it revived the policy of building Houses to be let and not sold. It will return to that policy until there are enough Houses let at Working-class Rents. It will deal drastically with the Slum disgrace and will provide the necessary money grants for both purposes. In the meantime it will protect tenants by continuing the Rent Restriction Acts.
>
> (Labour Party Manifesto, 1929)

The Conservative Party manifesto (1929) was far more cautious on the housing issue. It praised its reduction in subsidies as resulting in lower rents because subsidies were 'keeping up prices'! New powers would be granted to local authorities to encourage the reconditioning of older homes and there would be no more rent decontrol until the housing shortage had been overcome.

Only 11,000 slums had been demolished by 1930 (Stevenson, 1977) and Labour's Housing Act 1930 introduced a local authority subsidy specifically directed at clearing slums that would run in parallel with other Acts aimed at building for 'general' needs. Indeed, Greenwood, Labour's Health Minister, wanted to increase such subsidies but met with civil servant resistance The Housing Act 1930 included provisions for local authorities to declare 'improvement areas', where local authorities could use the clearance subsidy to improve an area by measures such as converting houses from multiple occupation. Labour also attempted to allow local authorities more extensive powers to use planning controls in slum areas but the legislation was 'butchered in Parliament' (Garside, 1988, p 40).

The 1931 United Kingdom general election was held on Tuesday 27 October 1931 and saw a landslide election victory for the National Government formed two months earlier after the Labour government disintegrated in disputes about austerity measures. 470 only 52

In 1931 UK GNP was in rapid decline by 4.7% and the UK National Debt had increased to 170% of GNP. Housing was included in the economy programme thought to be necessary to restore economic growth. The May Committee on national expenditure recommended the ending of 'general needs' housing subsidies, stating: 'We view with deep concern the steadily growing charge upon the Exchequer … for the housing of the working classes' (May, 1931, p 220). See post 1931 to 1941 for an account of housing policy in the 1930s.

Outcomes

In 1929 Sir Ernest Simon summarised the housing situation stating:

> We have built over a million houses since the war… but we have done nothing for the poorer workers…. Overcrowding is certainly no less, the condition of the houses is quite certainly much worse.
>
> (Simon, 1929)

Between 1921 and 1931, 1,406,000 houses were built in England and Wales, about 510,000 by local government, the rest by private enterprise (Holmans, 2005). In 1931 households exceeded dwellings by 1,180,000 (Holmans, 1999). In Scotland around 4,500 dwellings per annum were built by private enterprise and about 9,000 by local government (English, 1982).

Overcrowding in Scotland, measured at 3 plus per room because rooms in tenements were larger than the typical two up, two down occupied by the English working class, was 14.9%. The comparable figure for England was 1.5% (Adams, 1978). More information on overcrowding by district became available in 1936 and will be considered in the post relating to 1931/1941.

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1931 to 1941

During the 1930s there was a large increase in UK housing output but this was strongly concentrated in the owner-occupation sector with the Conservative Party's 'property-owning democracy' taking a major forward step. Whereas in the 1920s, with a low house-building rate, house prices increased, in the 1930s, with a high house-building rate, prices declined (Samy,2016) raising questions about Mulheim's recent claim that sustained new house construction will not reduce house prices (Mulheim, 2019). Did the high level of new house-building improve the housing conditions of the least advantaged via 'filtering' (extra houses creating vacancies down the housing chain)? Unfortunately, there was no Census in 1941 and the 1951 Census included the impact of low house-building from 1940 to 1945 and the destruction of homes in the Second World War, so this question is difficult answer this question.

Slum Clearance

In 1932, the Conservative Minister for Health, Hilton Young, called the slums 'a public health problem … not a first line problem of housing; it is a problem of ridding our social organism of radiating centres of depravity and disease'. Subsidies were 'appropriate in this region as a measure for the protection and preservation of the public health'. Ending the 'abnormal and artificial machinery' of the 'general needs' subsidy meant a return to the market in renting and owner-occupation – forms of provision that were 'normal and natural to the economic life of the country' (all quotes from Yelling, 1992, pp 88–91). ' General needs' subsidies, scheduled to last 40 years under the 1924 Housing Act, were axed. This left only the slum clearance subsidies in 1930 Housing Act available to local authorities for new house building to which extra central grants for flats on 'expensive sites' and, in 1935, a subsidy for overcrowding relief were added.

The switch to subsidies for slum clearance and overcrowding relief produced a striking change in the type of houses built. The higher grants on offer to construct flats on 'expensive' sites produced a very large proportion of four- and six-storey walk-up flats, sometimes in large blocks surrounding a central courtyard. Their austere exterior 'seemed to emphasise that they were rough places for rough people' (Branson and Heinemann, 1973, p 211). Hobhouse (1994, p 3) describes Birchfield House in Poplar as:

> intended to re-house people from clearance areas and one of the LCC's euphemistically named 'simplified' five-storey blocks of flats. It had a communal washroom/bathroom shared between every two or three flats.... Although all tenants had their own WC and

scullery (with a sink), these were not usually within the flat but situated adjacent to the bathrooms and, like them, were reached across a common passage or landing.

Overcrowding

In 1933, a Departmental Committee on Housing was set up to 'consider and report what, if any, further steps are necessary or desirable to secure the maintenance of a proper standard of fitness for human habitation' (Moyne, 1933). Its report stated that 'overcrowding is a more serious problem to health than deficiencies which can be met by reconditioning' (Moyne, 1933, p 7). The 1931 General Election, contested on the 'financial crisis', masked the housing issue but Labour made large gains in local elections between 1932 and 1934. The Conservatives needed to response on housing that came by associating overcrowding with the sanitary idea. Hilton Young (1934) stated that 'where people are improperly crowded together, especially at night, their disease flourishes'.

The 1935 Housing Act contained a complex but stringent overcrowding definition (see Lund, 2017 for the definition) designed to minimise the problem (White, 1977). Larger kitchens and living rooms were counted as available for sleeping and children aged less than one were not counted. This definition was used in a comprehensive survey revealing that 341,000 households (3.8%) were overcrowded with, of course, wide area variations. 20.6% of households in Sunderland were overcrowded and 43.1% in Coatbridge, Scotland. The survey estimated that 200,000 extra houses were required to eradicate overcrowding but, despite extra central subsidies being made available, very little action was taken. A less austere overcrowding definition, excluding living rooms and larger kitchens as sleeping accommodation, would have increased the overcrowding figure to 853,119 (Bowley, 1946).

Reconditioning

Neville Chamberlain, Minister for Health in the 1920s, attempted to construct a 'slum prevention by reconditioning' strategy for the inner cities and elements of this approach were incorporated into the 1930 Housing Act. Using the 1930 Act and nineteenth century legislation many local authorities adopted robust reconditioning measures. According to Moore (1980), 123,000 dwellings were made fit by statutory measures between 1930 and 1936 and 332,000 made fit by other action.

The Moyne Committee (1933) embraced reconditioning, recommending that local authorities should acquire unfit properties, make them fit for human habitation and then pass them to housing associations to manage. This was part of a plan to exclude local government from the management of newly acquired property and their existing stock (see Lund, 2016).

'Live in Kent and be Content'

Between 1930 and 1934 private enterprise built 790,000 houses, between 1935 and 1939, 1,230,000. This building boom was the outcome low interest rates; available credit, cheap suburban land, almost free of planning control and cheap labour as building workers left the depressed North for work in the South. It was sustained by builders and Building Societies selling suburbia, mainly in the South, as a 'lifestyle choice' involving the respectability of homeownership. Suburban living meant family togetherness, a new house with a garden, indoor toilet and labour saving devises, powered by 'clean electricity', It meant establishing roots in a semi-rural, safe environment, a vision reflected in mock-Tudor designs, street names — 'Acadia', 'Brook', 'Oak' and the labels posted on the homes such as 'Dunroamin', 'Chez-nous' and Primrose House. As developers pushed for more sales and building societies more borrowers, deposits became lower and agreements were made to protect lenders from mortgage defaults, producing more owners from amongst the better paid working class.

Private renting

Following Labour gains in local elections between 1932 and 1933 the Conservative Party became circumspect on rent decontrol. The 1933 Housing Act divided dwellings into three categories. The largest houses became decontrolled, the 'middle band' remained subject 'creeping' decontrol but the smallest houses could not become decontrolled piecemeal and some, already decontrolled, were returned to regulation.

At the building boom zenith more private sector homes were built to rent but the trend in the 1930s was for private renting to decline, a consequence of slum clearance and selling to owner-occupation on vacant possession assisted by local authorities providing mortgages under the Small Dwellings Acquisition Acts.

Outcomes

It might be expected that the large increase in housing and the low population growth would have produced 'filtering'. As the upper middle class moved into suburbia their large town houses were sub-divided into rooms, hence the evocative phrase 'ragged urchins play on marquetry floors' (Harris, 2012). Notting Hill in London is a good example (BBC, 2016).

The crude households to dwellings deficit in England and Wales declined slightly between 1931 and 1941 (Holmans, 1999) but households formation responds to housing supply so there is little informative in this statistic. Under constant pressure from the Scottish Office, claiming the severity of housing conditions in Scotland, and perhaps aware of the potential for working class militancy, central government subsidies were a little more generous than in England. In 1937, the Scottish Special Housing Association was formed to build homes in 'distressed' areas. Wary of 'Greeks bearing gifts', many Labour politicians did not welcome the association. In Glasgow, the council was anxious to protect its direct labour organisation, which, by the late 1930s, had build 66% of Glasgow's council houses. In Scotland, public sector house construction averaged 16,000 per annum and private enterprise about 8000 per year (English et al, 1976). The post-1935 private sector building boom reduced the UK deficit of houses to households by 810,000 (Holmans, 2005) but a 500,000 shortfall remained and many of the houses were in poor condition with 60% not having running hot water.

What stands out in 1930s housing policy is the way that private enterprise both created and responded to the demand for owner-occupation and how local authority became a state 'residual' function concentrated on slum clearance leaving those unable to afford homeownership and not living in clearance areas few opportunities to improve their housing conditions.

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1941 to 1951

There was no Census in 1941 but the experience of war helps to explain the disjuncture between the 1930s, when new housing supply was concentrated in the owner-occupied sector, and 1945 to 1951 when most new homes were provided by local authorities.

Housing was the number one issue in the 1945 General Election. Obtaining 47.7% of the vote, Labour secured 393 seats in the House of Commons. The Conservatives, with 39.7%, obtained 210 seats. The Liberal party won only 12 seats.

Housing policy during the war

Perhaps anticipating the working class unrest during the First World War, the government quickly froze rents and granted security of tenure to private renters for the duration of hostilities. The Beveridge Report listed 'squalor' in the five giants on the road to reconstruction but said little on the housing issue and failed to find a solution to the 'rent problem' in establishing a national minimum income (Beveridge, 1942).

In 1944, the Coalition government started to plan for housing when the War was over. As Malpass (2003b, p 646) has remarked: 'as far as housing is concerned there is little evidence of a distinctively Labour flavour to the policies that were to emerge before the end of the war'. The Coalition government split its housing plan into 'immediate' measures — linked to the need to absorb manpower when the war was over — and a long-term programme. Extensive local authority participation in the 'immediate' measures met with broad backing from the Coalition partners but the long-term programme —3/4 at million houses in 10 years — had large=scale private enterprise involvement. There was some support for setting up a national Housing Corporation, both to provide mortgages at cheap rates and to build houses via housing associations and local government (Malpass, 2003a).

The 1944 Housing (Temporary Accommodation) Act was an important element in housing supply after the war. It set the framework for by building 500,000 prefabricated houses, mainly using aircraft factories, with a planned life of up to 10 years, within five years of the end of the Second World War. In the event 156,000 prefabs were completed. With fridges, built- in ironing board and small gardens they were very popular but expensive for 'temporary' accommodation —albeit that some survive today — and cold. Bevan announced the axing the prefabs programme in 1948 calling them 'rabbit hutches'. The Ministry of Works commissioned prefabs from manufacturers, local authorities requested accommodation and prepared sites but the Ministry of Works allocated prefab numbers to local authorities, supervised their construction and owned them when built (Prefab Museum,

2017) — a rare example of the central commissioning of housing, an idea revived by Theresa May in 2016. According to Michael Foot, Ministry of Health officials were fearful that more and more of its housing functions would be stripped away due to the success of the Ministry of Works prefabrication programme and influenced Bevan in the termination of the programme (Foot, 1975).

Bevan and housing policy

After the 1945 General Election, with Bevan as Minister for Health and housing in his remit, local authorities assumed central stage in the building drive. Bevan called local authorities 'plannable instruments' capable of delivering homes for the working class and, later, for most of the population. He believed that 'we shall be judged in a year or two by the number of houses we build but we will be judged in ten years time by the type of houses we build' (quoted in Foot, 1975, p 82), so he wanted to produce high-quality homes. New housing schemes would also promote mixed communities not the past 'castrated communities', with their spatial division between council tenants and homeowners (quoted in Foot, 1975, p 82)

To attain his objectives, Bevan introduced a strict licensing system to control building by private enterprise, tripled the pre-war subsidy levels to local authorities and endorsed the Dudley Committee's recommendation that the size of council houses should increase, with two WCs for households with five persons or more (Dudley,1944). He rejected the National Housing Corporation idea, despite its endorsement by the 1945 Labour Party Conference, perhaps because he did not want to further antagonise Herbert Morrison, an ardent advocate of local government service delivery that Bevan was undermining by nationalising hospital services.

The 1946 New Towns Act established the legislative framework for the setting up new towns, a programme linked to population dispersal recommended in the planning reports (Scott and Barlow). Vociferous opposition to the first new towns delayed their progress but by the late 1940s they had started to deliver new homes.

Labour's housing delivery record is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Housing completions: UK 1946 to 1951

	Private Enterprise	Housing association	Local authority	Total
1946	28700	100	21400	50200
1947	38630	860	101370	140868
1948	30370	1820	181406	213596
1949	28460	8020	168780	205260
1950	30240	7290	167900	205430
1951	25490	7350	169020	201860

Sources: MHCLG, (2019): Rodger, (1989)

Given the materials shortage Labour's housing record was sound and the distribution of the new homes was more far more equitable than the 1930s. In Scotland although few private enterprise homes were delivered, local authority supply was gradually increased reaching 27,000 in 1951 (Rodger, 1989).

However, by the late 1940s, there was dissatisfaction on Labour's performance. A 1949 Gallup poll showed that 61% were dissatisfied with Labour's housing delivery (Howarth, 1985, p 106). With the benefit of hindsight, perhaps Bevan's mistake was to axe the centrally directed prefab programme and to reject the establishment of a National Housing Corporation, an idea that was attractive to Clem Atlee. The Conservatives strongly attacked Labour's performance (see post 1951 to 1961)

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1951 to 1961

The housing policies of the Conservative governments between 1951 and 1964 are remembered for the 300,000 houses per year promised in the 1951 Conservative Party Manifesto and the 1957 Rent Act that decontrolled the rents of millions of privately rented homes and severely limited their security of tenure. The first continued Labour's housing 'decommodification' (until 1956) but the second was a major attempt towards establishing a free market in privately rented accommodation.

Labour's housing record in relationship to its 1945 rhetoric made housing an obvious target for the Conservatives. They claimed that bureaucracy was limiting the housing drive with several different departments involved in housing production— Ministry of Health, Board of Trade, Ministry of Town and Country Planning, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Supply, and the Ministry of Works — resulting in:

> Despite the promise of the Minister of Health that "when the next Election occurs there will be no housing problem in Great Britain for the working class", waiting lists for council houses in many districts are longer now than they were five years ago.
>
> (Conservative Party Manifesto, 1950)

The 'numbers game'

At the 1950 Conservative Party Conference a somewhat bland Executive resolution was met by a passionate speech by Harmar Nicholls, elected as MP for Peterborough in the 1950 election, in favour of building 300,000 houses per year which other speakers from the floor endorsed, resulting in chants demanding a 300,000 target. Lord Woolton, the party chair, stepped onto the platform stating 'This is magnificent' and adopted the target.

The 300,000 target was included in the 1951 Conservative Party manifesto which stated:

> Housing is the first of the social services. It is also one of the keys to increased productivity. Work, family life, health and education are all undermined by overcrowded homes. Therefore a Conservative and Unionist Government will give housing a priority second only to national defence. Our target remains 300,000 houses a year. There should be no reduction in the number of houses and flats built to let but more freedom must be given to the private builder. In a property-owning democracy, the more people who own their homes the better.
>
> (Conservative Party Manifesto, 1951)

The strategy was to keep new local authority housing at around the level achieved by Labour – according to Macmillan (1952) an average of 180,000 per year — and use the extra 120,000 for owner-occupation. Macmillan thought that this could be achieved by varying building licences in favour of private enterprise (Macmillan, 2004). However, this objective was not achieved. Macmillan was deeply concerned that Conservative failure — especially on housing — would produce a radical Labour government with Bevan as Prime Minister (Macmillan, 2004). Hitting the 300,000 target was vital.

Housing conditions in 1951 were grim. In England and Wales there were 13,129 003 households crowded into 12,087,346 dwellings with Scotland having a far higher per cent of overcrowded houses than in England and Wales. 48% of UK households did not have access to all four basic amenities — a cooking stove, piped water, a water closet and a fixed bath. There were marked area differences in housing conditions with, as examples, 66% of households in the South Wales valleys without a fixed bath (meaning a tin bath had to be filled with hot water), 27% of households in South Yorkshire without exclusive use of a lavatory and 51% of Glasgow dwellings with only one or two rooms compared to 5.5% in Greater London.

Here the narrative becomes personal. I was seven in 1952 living in a 'yard' of 12 two-up two down terraced 'cottages' each with a nearby allotment. They were rented from a private landlord who lived miles away The 'rent man' (landlord's agent) visited every week to collect 7 shillings (35 pence) in rent, about 25% of my father's wages. Necessary repairs were reported but never done. In 1952 an outside flush toilet was installed by the council replacing the 'dry' lavatory (a brick outhouse where one took ashes to pour over the excrement below that was emptied from time to time by the 'night-soil' men). The flush outside toilet was great, always warm because a paraffin lamp was necessary to prevent the water cistern freezing. Electricity arrived in 1953 installed at the tenant's expense by a local handyman. The battery for the radio and the dim gas mantles could be ditched. There was light and sound!

Macmillan had inherited a well-oiled mechanism for delivering council housing and Eric Marples, a junior minister under Macmillan, boosted efficiency. Macmillan had doubts about the capacity of private enterprise to deliver a significant number of new homes (Macmillan, 1952), indeed he thought that more building materials for the private sector would disrupt the local authority programme (Macmillan, 2004). Moreover, producing more houses for rent was important to rent control reforms in the private rented sector. The outcome was that, when the 300,000 target was achieved, only 64,870 were built by private enterprise.

The achievement of the 300,000 house per year probably enhanced Tory popularity and set a future partiality for targets amongst the political parties, albeit that Macmillan's cuts in home size helped to attain his objective.

Despite his success in the 'numbers game', Macmillan was under considerable pressure to boost homeownership. According to Davis (2008, p 129), the clamour for 300,000 homes at the 1950 Conservative Party Conference was 'engineered by a group of free marketers with Enoch Powell at the helm', indicating that houses for owner-occupation delivered by private enterprise was what the party faithful wanted. Lord Woolton, the party chair, constantly pestered Macmillan to promote 'a property-owning democracy'. The White Paper *Houses: The Next Step* (MHLG, 1953) announced that subsidies to local authorities would be concentrated the need arising from slums clearance. Macmillan declared that he looked forward to 'a second scoreboard to run alongside "houses built", called "slum houses demolished"' (quoted in Estates Gazette, 1953, p 389). Abolishing the general needs subsidy was implemented in 1956 (except in Scotland). This was a return to the 1930s strategy and had the same outcome: a dramatic change in the type and quality of the council houses built. It was related to the Green Belt policy announced by Duncan Sandy's in 1955 and marked a step towards the containment of urban England (Hall et al, 1973).

Improvement grants helped to boost to homeownership. Conditions on awarding improvement grants were relaxed in the early 1950s with only a 15-year rather than a 30-year life required, and, in 1959, grants for basic amenities became mandatory. Mandatory improvement grants were accompanied by central government loans to building societies in order to encourage them to lend on pre-1919 houses. The policy had an impact as homeowners bought privately rented property and used mandatory grants to improve them. In 1959, Schedule A tax on owner-occupied property was abolished but tax relief on mortgage interest was retained thereby assisted owner-occupation.

The private rented sector

Macmillan was well aware that, with nine million private landlord tenants, rent control was a highly politically sensitive issue. In 1952, he warned the Cabinet that the 'increase of rents is a bold and hazardous undertaking.... Everything will depend on the scheme not merely being fair, but seeming to be fair' (quoted in Weiler, 2000, p 127).

Macmillan's eagerness to boost rented housing supply was, in part, motivated by his desire to reform rent regulation. Macmillan was very cautious in relaxing rent control and he tied the initial venture in rent rises to repair. The Housing Repairs and Rents Act 1954 allowed a rent increase for houses in 'good repair'. It also excluded from control all dwellings built after 30 August 1954 and all self-

contained accommodation produced by conversion, except when they had attracted improvement grants.

Willetts (1992) detects wet/dry cycles in Conservative social policy. 1956 to 1960 was a dry cycle with the free market advocates gaining ascendency. Geoffrey Howe and Colin Jones (1956), in a pamphlet entitled *Houses to Let*, argued that the 1954 Act had failed: controlled rents were heavily subsidising tenants and there was a need for a general rent increase up to 285% to restore a market in privately rented housing. According to Barnett (1969), the Bill on rent decontrol had the full support of the civil servants in the ministry, including the Under-Secretary for Local Government, who immediately resigned to become chief executive of a landlord pressure group! Civil servants presented a long list of reasons why rent control had to end. Piecemeal control had produced 'anomalies', with similar dwellings let at different rents, and landlords received insufficient income to keep their properties in good repair, leading to future slums and new council housing. Moreover, low rents produced under-occupation and reduced labour mobility. Added to this list was the low percentage of working-class income taken in rent compared to a high percentage spent on 'immoral' expenditures such as drink and tobacco, and — a Treasury idea — rent increases would have a deflationary impact, taking from those who spend to give to those who invest. At first, Henry Brooke, the Minister for Housing, was cautious, not wanting to 'block' the decontrol of higher-value properties, but Enoch Powell and Iain Macleod argued for radical action and Brooke accepted their case.

The 1957 Rent Act decontrolled all dwelling houses with rateable values above the value for houses that might reasonably be considered 'slums' ('block' control), made provision for future rent increases in the remaining controlled sector and decontrolled the rents all houses on vacant possession ('creeping' decontrol) with the ending of security of tenure. The Act generated political problems from the start, with tenants in 'block' decontrolled properties, often middle-class Conservative voters, complaining about higher rents and the loss of tenure security. This middle-class reaction caused anxiety in the Cabinet. The 'block' decontrol transition period was extended and the Landlord and Tenant Act 1958 restored tenure security for three years. Nonetheless, for a time, rent decontrol had a low media profile only hitting the headlines in the early 1960s when Perec Rachman, a slum landlord who made use of the 1957 Rent Act to get rid of tenants using 'strong arm' methods to secure higher rents, was implicated in the 'Profumo Affair'. John Profumo, the British Secretary of State for War, had an affair with Christine Keeler, the reputed mistress of Yevgeny Ivanov, a naval attaché at the Soviet Union embassy. After lying to the House of Commons when questioned about the matter, Profumo resigned. Keeler was a friend of Mandy Rice-Davies, Perec Rachman's mistress and Rachman set up Rice-Davies in a flat in which he had previously allowed Keeler to stay. Rachman's connections to the 'Profumo Affair' led to his property empire being investigated,

culminating in a Panorama programme with the opening words: 'We start with the story of a man: a sordid story that some of you may not want the younger children to hear'.

By 1959, the Conservative housing drive was slowing down with 281,870 new homes built in 1959 compared to 354, 130 in 1954, a consequence of the rapid decline of council house production, down from 239,160 in 1954 to 116,160 in 1959.

Homelessness

Defining homelessness is problematic (see Harding, 2019) but, in the 1950s, a distinction was made between those 'without a settled way of living' — comparable to 'rough sleepers' today— and households with children. This divide was reflected in administrative responsibilities.

Under the National Assistance Act 1948, the National Assistance Board became responsible for reception and resettlement centres for those 'without a settled way of living'. These were often located in the former workhouse 'casual wards'. Homeless single people officially became a 'work' issue. Circular 136/46, issued in 1946, envisaged a system of 30 reception centres positioned around the country wherein 'rootless' men would be offered accommodation, 'casework' and referral to resettlement centres to change their work habits. Local authorities remained responsible for the other functions previously undertaken by local authority public assistance committees and discharged these obligations through Welfare Committees. Although the legislation did not prohibit Welfare Committees from helping single people, such assistance was rare.

'Part Three', as accommodation provided by Welfare Committees was called, mainly housed homeless women with children and elderly people. The National Assistance Act 1948 declared that it was 'An Act to terminate the existing poor law' but the poor law spirit did not expire. Being the direct successor of the 19th-century 'less eligible' workhouse – with some accommodation in former workhouses — the long-established negative attitudes towards its inhabitants persisted. If women and their partners could not provide the basics for their children in a full-employment welfare state, then this was likely to be caused by 'feckless' behaviour (Greve, 1971). Deterrence was applied, with only squalid accommodation, sometimes in communal dormitories or old caravans, and it was common for a man to be separated from his wife and children: the man being told to look for lodgings in Salvation Army hostels and his wife and children housed in accommodation supplied by the Welfare Department. Audrey Harvey (1960) reported on the situation but her revelations had little impact until dramatised in *Cathy Come Home* 1966). That accommodation was provided by Welfare Departments, not Housing Departments, making offers of permanent housing less likely and adding to the homeless stigma. As Des Wilson (1970, p 18), Shelter's Director, claimed:

> The trouble is that the word 'homeless' has been officially linked with the word 'welfare'. Not only has the official number of homeless been falsified by definition, or lack of it, but the character of the homeless has also been falsified, and the authorities are able to infer that the homeless form a small group that would inevitably end up in the cesspit of any society.

Outcomes

New house construction figures are given in Table 1.

Table 1: New House completions, United Kingdom, 1951 to 1960

	Private	Housing Ass.	Local Authority	**Total**
1951	25490	7350	169043	201850
1952	36670	10130	201520	248320
1953	64870	16800	245160	326830
1954	92420	22120	239160	354130
1955	116090	12850	195480	324420
1956	126430	9850	171390	307670
1957	128780	8520	170290	307590
1958	138220	6520	140200	278630
1959	153170	7240	116160	281870
1960	171410	6320	125160	314260

The tenure distribution was owner occupied (31), local authority (18), private renting (50) and housing associations (1) in 1951. In 1961 it was owner occupied (43), local authority (26), private renting (30) and housing associations (1).

1961 Census recorded that across the UK 22.4% of households had no fixed bath, 6.5% no flush toilet (internal or external) and 21.8 % no hot water tap [Central Statistical Office, (1995)]. There were 14,542,828, private households in England and Wales compared to 14, 322, 183 dwellings (Holmans, 1999).

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