

HOUSING and POLITICS REVISTED

In a paper *It's Politics Stupid: A public choice analysis of housing policy*, delivered to Housing Studies Annual Conference at York in 2015, I argued that much of the 'Housing Studies' literature was over deterministic, resulting in the neglect of politics in explaining continuity and change in housing policy. This argument was developed in [Housing Politics in the United Kingdom: power, planning and protest](#) (Bristol: Policy Press, 2016). My critique was directed mainly at three dominant perspectives in housing explanatory narratives: Marxist Political Economy, Organic Social Theory (in its political and sociological forms) and Fabian Socialism. Its purpose was to elevate the role of politics in continuity and change in housing policy with most devoted to a detailed exploration of how politics has shaped housing policy in domains such as land ownership and release; social housing; private landlordism; a property-owning democracy and homelessness.

This article is aimed at updating the content of *Housing Politics in the United Kingdom: power, planning and protest* (2016). It also includes comments on 'evidence-based' policy plus housing's impact on the 2017 and 2019 General Election outcomes. Finally, a few highly cautious observations are made on the implications of Covid-19 for housing policy politics.

Marxist Political Economy

Despite protests to the contrary, Marxist Political Economy is deterministic. It maintains that the economic base sets the superstructure: society's institutions and all that 'men say, imagine, conceive,' including such things as "politics, laws, morality, religion, metaphysics, etc" ([Marx and Engels](#), 1846, *German Ideology* p. 47). Moreover, the economic base — the production forces, the materials and resources that generate goods — changes in accordance with its structural contradictions, with capitalism subject to crises, eventually leading to its replacement by socialism.

An adjunct to this theory is the idea of the Vanguard Party. Lenin and Trotsky argued that Marxism's complexity and establishment antagonism made it necessary to form a cohesive, disciplined group to promote and safeguard the revolutionary ideology — a Vanguard Party (see [The Leninist Concept of the Revolutionary Vanguard Party](#), 1993). Working class spontaneous rebellions against their conditions required organisation and direction. The working class needed to be cleansed of their "false individual consciousness" and a revolutionary class consciousness instilled in them.

This Marxist thinking permeates much of the housing literature. Engels' supplied the basic approach in [The Housing Question](#) (1872). Because housing problems are located in capitalist relationships and the state is 'but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' ([Marx and Engels](#), 1848, p 10), social reform is futile. Action to demolish slums simply diverts the problem

elsewhere and promoting homeownership breaks the power of resistance to wage cutting by factory owners.

Later, an element in later Marxist thinking modified Engels' approach. Rather than regard the state as 'but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie', it was conceded that the working class could gain concessions from capitalism via the state but these dispensations would be limited and confined to certain moments in history. Although this adjustment made the Marxist approach more compatible with the historical record and added justification for support to working class 'protest' social movements and 'pre-figurative' socialist forms (council housing?), it made the perspective less distinctive.

Organic Theory

Organic social theory developed towards the end of the 19th century. At Oxford, Thomas Hill Green (1836–1882) educated a large number of future opinion leaders and his lectures were published as *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* in 1895. He advanced the idea that society was in organic evolution leading to a higher social order. Association produced the recognition a sense of common identity — a notion of citizenship — and 'only citizenship makes the moral man; only citizenship gives that self-respect which is the true basis of respect for others, and without which there is no lasting social order or real morality' ([Green](#), 1895 p. 73).

Green's prescription for the working class was for the state to 'hinder hindrances' to rational thought and so allow full participation in civil society. Slum eradication, for example, would enable former slum dwellers to rise above their everyday troubles and take part in character improving activities that enhanced citizenship. His perspective was adopted and developed by other philosophers — often known as the 'Oxford Idealists' — such as F. H. Bradley (1846–1924), and Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923). They promoted social reform but there was a large dose of paternalism and 'over-parenting' in their approach. The working class needed guidance and direction in their input to civil society.

Bernard Bosanquet had a strong influence on Octavia Hill whose housing management techniques had the characteristics of the government's 'Nudge Unit', aimed at producing behavioural change by incentives with Octavia Hill supplying her tenants with improvements in their housing circumstances in return for better behaviour. There are elements of this approach in 'Housing Plus' (see [Power](#), 1996), adopted by many social housing providers, whereby tenants are offered extra services, usually paid for by rents and raising the question of whether these services should be universal and financed from general taxation. A handful of associations have taken the approach to

extremes with one demanding fitness regimes from tenants with progress taken into account in tenancy renewal decision ([Johnson](#), 2013).

Organic social theory strongly influenced planning domain with 'grand designs' intended to use the physical environment to improve behaviour. [Harvey](#) (1997, p. 24) has commented:

The proper design of things would solve all the problems in the social process. It was assumed that if you just built your urban village like Ebenezer Howard, or your Radiant City, like Le Corbusier, then the thing would have the power to keep the process in harmonious state.

Functionalism was the sociological partner of organic Political Philosophy. Associated with Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) and Talcott Parsons (1902–79), functionalist sociological theory adopted the notion that society was a social system of interrelated parts, surviving because it evolved institutional structures to fulfil basic 'system needs' — its 'functional prerequisites'. However, a dimension of this functionalism later stressed certain 'dysfunctional' elements in society ([Merton](#), 1968) with, for example, the 'slum' viewed as disruptive to a harmonious order due to its disorganisation and its association with crime, immorality and disease. From this modified functionalist perspective the natural adjustment process would, in time, eradicate the slum but the process could be accelerated by the attentions of 'rational' planners gathering the 'facts' on an issue and acting 'with the grain' of functional adaptation. As [Prideaux](#) (2005, p 30) explains:

Essentially the structural-functional position rested on the belief that, where there was a lack of subsystem adaptation to change, the appropriate response to any resultant social conflict would be social reform.

Academia became infused by Functionalism, many speaking Functionalist prose without realising it.

Fabian Socialism

Fabian Socialism had connections with Organic and Functionalist theories but placed a stronger emphasis on the state. Sidney and Beatrice Webb were the most explicit Fabians in extolling the virtues of the state. They 'saw society as an evolving organism, in which collectivist rationality was inexorably replacing individualistic chaos' ([Marquand](#), 2009, p 63) with the state eventually embodying the common good. This evolution could be stimulated by 'experts' with knowledge of the 'facts' and with inductive reasoning, the 'new samurai' — as H.G. Wells described them — would

lead society through an ‘irresistible glide’ (Webb and Webb, 1913, p 56) into a new social order dominated by an efficient state.

The Webbs viewed the democratic process simply as a means to choose ‘brain workers’ (Webb and Webb, 1920), required to run the state. Social reform must come from above and Sidney Webb declared that it would be unwise to suppose that a complicated industrial society could be organised ‘without strict subordination and discipline, without obedience to orders’, its affairs ‘more and more the business of elaborately trained experts, and less the immediate outcome of popular feeling’ (Webb, 1908, p 57, p 71). Beatrice confided to her diary:

We have little faith in the ‘average sensual man’, we do not believe that he can do much more than describe his grievances, we do not think that he can prescribe the remedies ... We wish to introduce into politics the professional expert and through him extend the sphere of government. (Webb, 1948, p 120)

Unsurprisingly, given the elevated status the Fabians gave to ‘experts’, academia embraced the approach. ‘Evidence-based’ policy is adjunct of the Fabian approach. It is difficult to oppose ‘evidence-based’ policy but caveats need to be registered.

In launching the *Collaborative Centre for Housing Research*, a consortium of universities involved in housing research, Ken Gibb, claimed ‘Housing policy needs to be based on evidence, not politicians’ whims’. An example of ‘politicians’ whims’, cited by Gibb, was the changes in the ‘spare room subsidy’, known as the ‘bedroom tax’. Gibb states ‘they held beliefs about the speed at which affected households would be able to downsize — but the evidence that then came in proved those beliefs to be wrong’. The implication is that, had the research on downsizing opportunities being done before the policy was introduced, it would have been abandoned or at least substantially modified. This ignores the impact of political ideology. David Cameron and Chancellor Osborne shared Margaret Thatcher’s dislike of subsidised housing. Between 2010 and 2015 social housing rents increased well above inflation and the ‘bedroom tax’ added another incentive to tenants to take advantage of the ‘reinvigorated’ Right to Buy as well as reduce public expenditure as part of the austerity agenda. Even when the evidence of the dearth of downsizing opportunities became available, the ‘bedroom tax’ remained almost unchanged.

There is also the question of whose evidence? There can be a great deal of conflicting evidence emerging from the academic community allowing scope for selecting evidence. For example, the [Affordable Housing Commission report](#) (2020), having reviewed the evidence on rent regulation concluded ‘...rent controls in the form of rent setting by a governmental agency would not be a sustainable

solution to the problem of housing affordability'. However, a more comprehensive review of rent regulation in the UK would have revealed beneficial impacts. When rent control was at its strictest, over two million homes were transferred out of the private rented sector into owner-occupation many to low-income sitting tenants. The best low-cost homeownership scheme ever?

Reviewing the research produced by the *Collaborative Centre for Housing Research* reveals much useful information that could be used in policy development but on 'high level' policy decisions political ideology and electoral calculations will normally be the dominant influence,

Marxist Political Economy, Idealist/Organic theory, Functionalism and Fabian Socialism had common traits: a belief in determinism and a conviction that rational experts were necessary to usher in a new social order. The approach tended to regard the working class — especially the 'lumpen proletariat', the 'residuum', the 'underclass' — as pawns in the transformation process. The politics involved in change were subordinated to powerful socio-economic forces and their 'expert' interpretation.

Housing Politics in the United Kingdom: power, planning and protest endeavoured to elevate politics to a major role in explaining continuity and change in housing policy. Public Choice theory formed a central part of the attempt.

Public Choice Theory

Public choice theorists divide the political process into three elements: the voting system; interest group activity; and the internal workings of the government system involving political alliances and the behaviour of state officials when organised into bureaucracies. All process participants are considered in terms of neoclassical economics' basic premise — they act rationally to promote their self-interest. There is no quest for 'the common good' in political activity: politicians want to secure election to pursue power, prestige and material advantage.

In order to attain such advantages, they must win elections. One tactic is to attract the median voter — the additional voter needed to obtain a majority — by pursuing policies to redistribute income from the rich to middle income groups and the poor who form the majority of the electorate (Tullock, 1976). Tullock's idea had a degree of plausibility until the late 1970s but, as taxation started to have an impact on the upper echelons of the working class, a resistance to 'tax and spend' developed that, in part, explains Margaret Thatcher's election success. Increasingly the Conservative Party (and, to a more limited extent, New Labour) developed an alliance between rich and middle income groups against the stigmatised poor. [Laws](#) (2016, p 97) claims:

George Osborne saw 'welfare' as a big political dividing line. He wanted Labour to be seen as the party of 'welfare scroungers', and he hoped that the Conservatives could position themselves as the party of the strivers.

Housing Politics in the United Kingdom: power, planning and protest analyses the influence of election winning calculations from the 19th century. This post explores the two UK elections, 2017 and 2019.

The 2017 General Election

The 2017 General Election, to the surprise of most pundits, produced a hung Parliament. General Elections are usually contested in vibrant colours and Theresa May fought the campaign on her ability (relative to Jeremy Corbyn) to deliver Brexit. In her first term of office May had recognised that 'Just About Managing' households had voted Brexit partly because they were unhappy about the decline in their living standards but the [2017 Conservative Party Manifesto](#) was short on remedies.

Nurturing existing homeowners, especially older homeowners without mortgages produced electoral rewards for the Conservative Party with its lead over Labour amongst people owning their home outright increasing from 21% in 2010 to 24% in 2015 and then to 26% in 2017. However, although increasing from 7% to 8% between 2010 and 2015, the Conservative lead over Labour amongst mortgage holders dropped to 2% in 2017 ([Akehurst](#), 2017). Unfortunately, the polling organisations do not supply figures on mortgage holder voting behaviour by age but perhaps the decline in Conservative support amongst mortgagees reflected the problems of 'second steppers' locked into homes with inadequate space.

In 2017 Labour's lead over the Conservatives amongst social tenant voters was 31%, down 1% on 2015 ([Akehurst](#), 2017). Labour winning only 57% of the total social tenant vote was a lacklustre performance. The swing to Labour amongst social tenants since 2015 was about half the swing amongst private tenants.

Before the 2017 General Election housing was the third most important issue for private renters ([Akehurst](#), 2017) and this was reflected in voting behaviour. In the 2010 General Election the Conservative Party obtained 4% more private tenant votes than Labour. By 2017 Labour had a lead of 23% amongst private tenants, made more significant by the surge in households renting privately, that, at 21.3% in England was almost the same household proportion as in 1965 when Labour had passed legislation to control rents at 'fair' levels. Young people living outside the parental home are overwhelmingly private landlord tenants. To some, voter turnout amongst young people was the key to Labour's progress but perhaps Labour's private renter vote surge can be explained by discontent

amongst older private renters. Pointing out that turnout was virtually unchanged from 2015 to 2017 among homeowners, but increased eight points among all renters, and ten points among those renting in the private sector and that Labour's margins widened by 13 points among all renters and by 20 points among private renters, [Singh](#) (2018) declared 'The youthquake was in fact a rentquake'. London, with its high proportion of renters, seemed to signify the political implications of the growing rental sector across the UK. Nationally, Labour lost by 2.5%, but won the capital by 21%.

The 2019 General Election

Some General Elections are fought in colours so vivid that one becomes totally dominant. This was the case in 1923. Labour had won Tory controlled seats in by-elections on the housing issue but the 1923 General Election was fought on UK trade protection and, although Labour did well, the party's performance was below expectations based on earlier by-elections.

Brexit dominated the 2019 General Election. The Conservative slogan 'Get Brexit Done' had strong appeal and Labour's housing policies were obscured in its plethora of policy announcements. Labour lost votes across all tenures: down 8% amongst outright owners, 7% mortgage holders, 12% social renters and 8% private renters. The 12% drop in Labour's social renter vote reflected the haemorrhage of working class votes. In the 2019 General Election Labour obtained 34% of the social classes D/E vote compared to 47% won by the Conservatives ([YouGov, 2019](#)), an unprecedented post war 13% Tory ascendancy. In part, this was due to working class concern that its Brexit vote would be ignored but the apparent breach between Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party and the working class was a significant factor.

Interest Groups

Public choice theory asserts that interest groups have a strong influence on policy. Politicians rely on interest groups to obtain intelligence on how policy is operating in a particular domain. They also know that some interest groups are 'opinion leaders', with the influence to have an impact on public attitudes.

There are a large number of interest groups operating in the housing domain. The Federation of Master Builders describes itself as 'acting as the voice of small construction'; the National Federation of Builders looks after the interests of small- and medium-sized builders. The Home Builders Federation whose membership includes the larger builders, claims to be 'the voice of home building industry', its members delivering '80% of the new homes built each year'. The British Property Federation promotes the interests of property developers, and its membership includes real estate

companies, institutional investors, investment banks, housing associations and professional firms. The Country Land and Business Association, successor to the Country Landowners Association, has 33,000 members and claims 'to protect and defend the interests of all landowners in England and Wales'. The Council of Mortgage Lenders represents the financial institutions involved in housing.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), claiming 40,000 members, crusades to protect green fields and the Green Belt whereas the National Trust, mainly concerned with looking after historic buildings, has joined the CPRE in campaigns to protect the Green Belt. Private landlord associations include the Guild of Residential Landlords and the Residential Landlords Association. The National Landlords Association, formed in 2008 by merging the National Landlords Association with the National Federation of Residential Landlords, claims to be the largest private landlord association, speaking for 60,000 members and associates. The resources of these landlord associations are far greater than *Generation Rent*, the organisation representing private landlords.

Public choice theorists claim that some groups have a common interest and unite to protect their advantage against disorganised individuals. In the housing domain, large numbers of interest groups make gains from a housing dearth. Landowners; established home owners; banks; developers, estate agents; and private landlords all have an interest in a housing dearth.

The [2019 Conservative Party manifesto](#) stated that the aim was to build 'at least a million new homes during the next parliament', which implied a target of 200,000 homes a year. This was lower than the current rate of new housebuilding — 213,660 new homes a year — and a lot less than the 247,000 on the 'net additions' measure. Other manifesto declarations such as a promise to provide infrastructure before development takes place and the usual strong Conservative commitment to Green Belts indicated that Theresa May's enhanced building programme was causing problems in the Tory heartlands (and beyond) so would be scaled back.

The Internal Operation of the Government Machine.

The third element of public choice theory is concerned with the internal operation of the government machine. The contention is made that the bureaucrats in the system, using their superior knowledge of real costs of their activities, pursue their interests by maximising the size of their administrative domains. Politicians form internal alliances to advance their authority (you support me for a budget boost and I will back you). Whilst readers of insider accounts of the Labour governments of the 1960 and 1970s ([Castle](#), 1993; [Barnett](#), 1982) will recognise this public choice dimension, in recent

years — with austerity the watchword — such bureaucratic and political stratagems appear to have been unsuccessful.

Social constructionism

Social constructionism claims that housing problems are not objective and ‘out there’, waiting identification. They are constructed through a ‘claims-making’ process involving problem definition and the attachment of causal notions to the problem. This perspective informs the content of *Housing Politics in the United Kingdom: power, planning and protest* where it is argued that social construction is a political process. Thus, for example, 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.

He campaigned, with great success amongst the media, for a revised homelessness definition, including the ‘invisible homeless’: families in overcrowded accommodation and in physical danger because their property was unfit and lacking basic amenities, such as a lavatory and hot water and he managed to get to a figure of three million. Given the problem’s scale on Wilson’s definition, it was difficult to label homelessness as a ‘personal problem’. As [Wilson](#) (1970, p 21) stated:

A small and powerless group such as 18,849 officially homeless are hardly likely to command priority over the many other demands on the nation’s resources. But if the homeless can be seen for who they are, and how many there are, numbering hundreds of thousands instead of hundreds, we might hope for better.

Wilson’s definition and statistics annoyed politicians with David Ennals, then Minister of Health and Social Security, declaring: ‘I have seen references to 3 million homeless. This is ridiculous’ (Ennals, 1969, quoted in [Wilson](#), 1970, p 19). Over the years homelessness definitions have been moved away from Wilson’s meaning, now consisting of ‘rough sleepers’ and households (mainly with children) living in temporary accommodation provided by local authorities. New Labour attempted ****

But social constructionism it is not just relevant to definition and causation attribution. It draws attention to the formation of the political agenda. Some issues receive little political consideration. As examples, from the 1920s homelessness was ‘hidden from history’ until the television

drama/documentary *Cathy Come Home* raised public and hence political awareness of the issue. More recently political attention has focused on first-time buyers (with or without children) to the neglect of frustrated 'second stepper' homeowners unable to afford a larger home when children arrive and being forced to turn to private renting to obtain more space.

Social constructionism entered the political domain in the 1980s with politicians hiring 'spin doctors' to influence the ways the media portrayed an issue. It became commonplace for governments to announce the same pot of money under different packages thereby inflating public expenditure in a policy domain. New Labour spun the family homelessness issue. When the DCLG's Rough Sleeping Unit was merged with its Statutory Homeless Division, DCLG attention turned to the possible 'personal' causes of family homelessness. The DCLG started to take an interest in 'repeat' statutory homelessness — perhaps under the assumption that 'repeat' homelessness pointed to 'personal' causes — and asked local authorities to record its incidence. A research report into the aetiology of family homelessness concluded:

Adult respondents (usually the mothers) in these families seemed to be a relatively disadvantaged group with respect to their health and access to social support, and many had experienced domestic violence. However, only a minority appeared extremely vulnerable and very few self-reported current drug or alcohol problems. Children in these families were generally happy at home and at school and were reportedly in good health. ([Pleace et al](#), 2008, p 24)

Nonetheless, for a time, the DCLG continued to promote its 'personal behaviour' family homeless explanation.

The New Institutionalism

Finally, 'new institutionalism' influenced the content of *Housing Politics in the United Kingdom: power, planning and protest*. The new institutionalism stresses 'purposeful' action, 'path dependency', 'institutional embeddedness' and 'layering' in policy continuity and change. 'New institutionalists' claim that 'the organisation of political life makes a difference' ([Marsh and Olsen](#), 1984, p 747). The perspective emphasises the specific contexts of decision-making and actors' roles in state institutions, even regarding 'great men and women' as influential in determining outcomes. As [Margaret MacMillan](#) (2016, p 92) observes:

Our understanding and enjoyment of the past would be impoverished without its individuals, even though we know history's currents — its underlying forces and shifts whether of technology or political structures or social values — must never be ignored.

Nye Bevan is a good example of the influence of great men and women. A long-term council house building programme was low on the agenda of the wartime Coalition government but Bevan made building by local government the top priority. However, Bevan had flaws. He axed the 'pre-fabs' programme condemning them as 'rabbit hutches'. However, they were constructed quickly, had a fridge and a garden and were very popular. The 'pre-fabs' were built by Ministry of Works, owned by Ministry of Works and distributed by Ministry of Works — not Bevan's Ministry of Health and George Tomlinson, the Minister of Works, received the credit, much to Bevan's displeasure.

Events, dear boy, events.

Harold Macmillan, when asked what was most likely to knock governments off course, answered 'Events, dear boy, events'. Covid-19 is a massive event with the potential to transform housing policy.

The short-term Government responses to Covid-19 have been extending the minimum notice for repossession orders to three months, a three month mortgage holiday and some limited improvements in the payment thresholds and operation of Universal Credit. It seems likely that these measures will need to be extended.

On the 26th March 2020 the Minister for Local Government and Homelessness wrote to local authority leaders asking local authorities to 'bring in those on the streets to protect their health and stop wider transmission' and to support rough sleepers and other vulnerable homeless into appropriate accommodation by the end of the week. Extra resources were on offer. On 18 April 2020 the Government reported that over 90% of rough sleepers in England had been offered accommodation as a result of the initiative ([Wilson and Cromarty, 2020](#)) but, as rough sleepers were taken off the streets, more people have lost their homes as the economic consequences of Covid-19 has started to make an impact.

'Stop wider transmission' was an interesting dimension of the announcement by the Minister for Local Government and Homelessness and there is anecdotal evidence of coercion in removing rough sleepers from the streets. This raises the question of 'how long will rough sleepers stay off the streets when the pandemic recedes and spare hotel accommodation

becomes scarce?' Sometimes, 'externalities' can be short-term and expectations of a 'new normal', based on greater concern for others, may be unrealistic.

Gazing into a crystal ball to explore the long-term implications of the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to produce fool's gold. If Covid-19 continues into 2021 the UK economy will be severely damaged. Covid-19 is most widespread in 'global cities' and London's large personal service industries are in danger of crumbling. The aviation industry, providing a large number of jobs in London's airports, is in long-term decline. Will people want to come to live in London (and other UK cities) if there is limited work and will overseas students want to study in the UK? If they do not, the rental market may suffer with implications for house prices. High nationwide unemployment and lower income could add more downward pressure on house prices as will mortgage availability as lenders fear large falls in house prices. Interest rates are very low and the available leverage is unlikely to be sufficient to boost the housing market.

The [Bank of England](#) (2020) believes that UK GDP will decline by 14% in 2020 followed by a sharp recovery in 2021 but this may prove to be very optimistic. The state borrowing needed to contain Covid-19 and mitigate its economic consequences is already high but far more borrowing will be necessary to kick-start the economy, prompting the question 'borrowing for what?'

People have started to appreciate clean, fresh air and Covid-19 may lead to a switch of economic investment to dealing with climate change rather than to the revival of carbon generating industries. This seems to provide an opportunity for a job-generating retrofit of the UK housing stock to ensure all homes have a high Energy Efficiency Rating. In the process all dwellings should be improved to an upgraded Decent Homes standard (or the equivalents in Scotland and Wales). Grants should be available to homeowners and potential homeowners and, if private landlords do not meet the standards within a specified time span, the stock should be compulsory purchased for improvement by local government of resale to potential owner-occupiers or housing associations.

Eventually, the state borrowing will need to shrink. It may be politically impossible to push the costs onto reduced public expenditure in the health and social care sectors. Housing is likely to experience hard times with pleas for higher up-front grants to social housing providers likely to fall on stony ground. In this context making housing more affordable will depend on using mechanisms involving no cost to the state, falling on the 'rentiers' in the system. Rent control of the 'fair rent' variety — reducing housing costs to the consumer, saving expenditure and promoting low-cost homeownership — looks a contender. A lot more land release costs the state nothing and makes housing more affordable. One of the most searing images from the Covid-19 pandemic has been the people living with young children on the 15th floor of a tower block with a broken lift. Does London really need to be surrounded by 10 mile green belt, much being scrubland?

Higher taxation will be required to pay off the public debt and, since we are talking about the very long run, well after the 2024 General Election, a land tax, reclaiming the large ‘unearned increment’ from the vast hikes in land prices over the last 60 years could obtain a higher place on the agenda.

Conclusion

Introducing ‘politics’ into the established discourse on housing has produced indignation in some circles. Responding to a highly critical review of his book *The Politics of Housing: Power, Consumers and Urban Culture* by a ‘Housing Studies’ traditionalist, [Peter Shapely](#) (2008) states:

The review takes a well worn path, expressing opinion largely based on economic reductionism. As such, it utterly fails to engage with the central ideas about shifting discourse, policy and the local decision-making process... the book is concerned with discourse, but the review completely ignores this issue, preferring instead to refer to more obvious and well trod approaches.

My book *Politics in the United Kingdom: power, planning and protest* received several favourable reviews but there was with one exception. The title of my paper *It’s Politics Stupid: A public choice analysis of housing policy* created umbrage in some circles. ‘Stupid’ was not meant to be offensive. As explained in the article, it was a reference to ‘It’s the economy stupid’, used by Bill Clinton’s New Democrats in their discussions on how to win the 1992 Presidential Election. Sophisticated analysis can sometimes ignore the obvious. However, to some, it rankled, and this was reflected in [Ian Cole’s](#) review. Rather than engage with the book’s argument, it simply made a number of feeble, disconnected and inappropriate remarks. For example, Cole admonishes me for including the trivia of the formation of the Liberal Party in 1859 but, of course, the Liberal Party broke the political dominance of the Whig and Tory landed parties, heralding Liberal attacks on the concentration of land ownership.

Reductionist interpretations of continuity and change in housing policy need to be tempered by accounts that give a higher place to an understanding of the politics involved. Politics concerns who gets what, when, how. It is about the conflicts involved in distribution (Lasswell, 1936). A bridging process links the state and its citizens ([Etzioni](#), 2003) manifest in a constant attempt by the politicians who control the state apparatus (and those who want to control it) — culminating in elections and, sometimes, referendums — to construct reality in ways that will underpin their ideologies and help them retain or obtain power

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