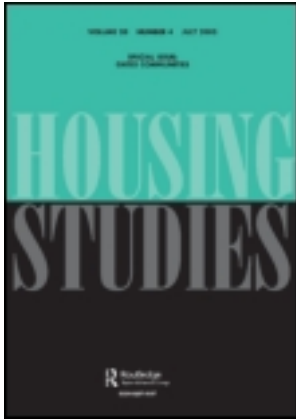


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Housing: Did it Have to Be Like This?

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One might be tempted to think that at the present juncture a socialist critique of Britain's New Labour housing policy is about as timely as a snowfall in June. Indeed, this pamphlet by Davis & Wigfield forms part of a more general series of publications that might have been called a Litany of Disappointments. It shows how far New Labour housing policy fell short of meeting expectations, although whether these were the expectations of those inside or outside Tony Blair's 'big tent' in 1997 is perhaps less clear.

Davis & Wigfield take those two high water marks of positive UK Government policies towards council housing, under the Ministerial leadership of John Wheatley in the late-1920s and Aneurin Bevan in the late-1940s. While they recognise that this sets a high standard for any comparison of subsequent performance, they chastise the New Labour administration of 1997–2010 for its political timidity in following through many of the policies introduced by the preceding Conservative administrations, and in some cases (such as the transfer of council housing stock) going further faster. They also indicate how this laid the ground for the new coalition government's current trample through the housing system by 'reforming' housing benefit, reducing security of tenure in council housing and drastically reducing capital programmes—all things, I would suggest, that a newly-elected Labour Government would have been likely to do as well, albeit with less relish.

The pamphlet is inevitably concise and necessarily selective and the contrast between the three epochs is one way for achieving this. However, the different conditions prevailing in each of these periods are cast aside a little too casually, despite the obvious limitations of space. To take one obvious example, the proportion of households in owner-occupation had risen from just over 10 per cent in the 1920s to approximately 70 per cent in the mid-1990s. This is bound to affect the policy priorities of any government, but does not merit comment here.

The historical evidence will be familiar to many readers of *Housing Studies*, but this booklet may be a useful entrée for those who are just learning about the development of housing in England (Scotland or Wales do not feature) and perhaps only associate Bevan (if they know him at all ...) with the National Health Service. The account helps to demonstrate that council housing was at its strongest when national economic circumstances were grim. The economic crisis was a stimulus to state intervention, not a reason to diminish it. How things change.

The tone of the pamphlet is rather uncertain, oscillating between some jaunty journalese ('Fast forward twenty years') to sober empiricism in discussions of wall tie failure and HIP allocations and accumulated capital receipts in the early 1980s. Sheffield figures strongly as the case study, which is fair enough given Wigfield's background as a (very committed) chair of the council's housing committee in the 1980s and early-90s, but this does tend to overlook the degree of local variation among Labour urban local authorities in the way council housing developed over these periods. Space is short, but even a cursory comparison of the different paths taken by, say, Sheffield and Leeds would have got this across.

In terms of the damning assessment of New Labour there is perhaps a little too much naivety about how much council tenants were ever going to be in the limelight of Blair's 'bright new dawn' of 1997. There are several rhetorical questions posed along the lines of the 'surely New Labour would not preserve the Right to Buy?' variety. Well, from my recollection many seasoned observers at the time thought it would ... and it did.

For my part I think a more nuanced assessment of New Labour's housing record is possible. Two crucial opportunities were missed—when the Conservative's public expenditure plans were adhered to in the first two years following the 1997 election: a tactical move to sanitise Labour prior to the general election that rapidly turned into a millstone when they formed a government with a massive majority. Then in the 'bank bail out' of 2008–09 when some of the possibilities to exert more sustained pay back from the financial sector were not exploited. However, whatever the underlying purpose, approximately £25 billion, for example, was invested in the Decent Homes programme to improve dwelling conditions in the social sector after decades of neglect. It was not all terrible, and one might look on such initiatives more wistfully two or three years down the line.

However, the pamphlet is perhaps most disappointing in terms of refusing to look to the future, other than to stare into the abyss that is coalition government housing policy. Do some of the contradictions in the British housing system resulting from casino capitalism offer new opportunities for socialist informed policies to be developed? The authors do not say. What about the growing size of the 'waiting room' sector for those caught between unaffordable rents and homeownership, the long-term impact of the current economic conditions on property values, the extent to which mutual and co-operative forms of organisation might offer new opportunities, the development of a post-ALMO sector, and so on? I would have liked Davis & Wigfield to have turned their considerable experience to at least a few new ideas, and to counterbalance a little of the bleakness with a smidgeon of the 'optimism of the will'. Maybe some winter sunshine is in order next time round?

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Changing Contexts in Urban Regeneration: 30 Years of Modernisation in Rotterdam

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The author's two main objectives in this thoroughly researched book are clear from the outset—to map and evaluate recent regeneration initiatives in the Oude Noorden area of Rotterdam whilst advocating the importance of embedding urban regeneration within the development of the 'sustainable' city. The former is largely achieved with forensic aplomb, whilst the latter is a consistent theme rather lacking in elaboration and analysis. As such, this book is an exercise in mapping and reflection, not interrogation and challenge, and its concern is to examine the vicissitudes of urban policy since the 1970s and attempts to manage, renew and regenerate some of the fissures wrought by social, economic and environmental changes during that period.

Moving seamlessly from the general to the specific, the author plots his evaluation against a backdrop of changing policy debates and legacies and within a theoretical