

Let's Build the Houses – Quick!

Cathy Davis & Alan Wigfield (Eds), London, Spokesman Books, 2012, 62 pp., £6.00 (pbk), ISBN: 9780851248080

With an unashamedly clear political agenda, this book critically reflects on the development of housing policy under the New Labour and Coalition governments to explain why Britain is currently facing a shortage of housing across all tenures. By expressly situating housing policy within a broader political context, the book argues that New Labour's commitment to the market suffused and transformed its social policy objectives, which provided fertile ground for the Coalition to continue with this agenda (see also Davis & Wigfield, 2010. Davis, C. and Wigfield, A. 2010. *Housing – Did It Have to be Like This? A Socialist Critique of New Labour's Performance*, Nottingham: Spokesman Books)

The book is arranged in three parts. Part 1 is, effectively, a socialist critique of New Labour's 'hybrid political programme' (p. 5). The authors draw on Hall (2003. Hall, S. 2003. *New Labour's Double Shuffle: A Market State? Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*), to argue that New Labour was merely a social democratic government trying to govern in a neo-liberal direction while maintaining its traditional working-class and public-sector middle-class support (p. 8). Part 1 critiques New Labour housing policy, arguing that rather than the intended programme of modernisation, a largely non-interventionist and politically pragmatic approach was implemented, which better reflected the politics of their Conservative predecessors. Drawing on Malpass, (2005. Malpass, P. 2005. *Housing and the Welfare State: The Development of Housing Policy in Britain*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) the authors argue that New Labour's support for owner occupation (and arguably to some extent private renting) '...reflects a wider tendency to transfer responsibility for welfare provision from the state to the individual and from the public to the private sector' (p. 13). The result is that any reliance on the market for the supply of housing, with its tendency for expansion and contraction following economic cycles, means that the long-term growth of these sectors is a chimera. In critiquing the role of housing associations as the chosen vehicle for producing social housing, the authors stress that housing associations have no democratic mandate for their work and consider whether this predominantly privately funded way of producing social housing for rent is still viable.

Part 2 focuses on the political motivations of the Coalition government and its housing and welfare changes. The authors argue that the Coalition has used the deficit and determination to reduce expenditure '...as a smokescreen for welfare state restructuring and reduction' (p. 26). They suggest, for example, that the new financial model which housing associations are using to build houses for rent moves them further into the private sector, making their product more expensive over time with little security of tenure. In analysing the pre-election manifestos of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, the authors focus on the three key Coalition policies—the affordable rent regime, flexible tenancies and housing benefit cut backs. Such policies, the authors argue, have sought to '...construct the idea of dependency and then use it to

destroy welfare rights' (p. 35), reflecting a wider political motive to reduce the government's investment in social housing. In this spirit, the affordable rent regime reflects the shift from a capital-intensive model to a revenue-based model of social housing provision, whilst flexible tenancies seek to introduce mobility into social housing on the '...spurious claim that council and housing association tenancies reinforce dependency and deprivation' (p. 35). Equally, reducing housing benefit is a '...crude device to try to enforce mobility and improve the fit between households and housing' (p. 36).

Whilst Parts 1 and 2 point to the serious social equity issues underpinning the book, Part 3 anticipates what the 'housing crisis' might look like in 2015, given the existing political direction of the Coalition. It also outlines a new approach for the future which is necessary for increasing housing supply. The authors' prognosis for 2015 is, perhaps unsurprisingly, bleak. By 2015, Cameron and Clegg will have broken Britain. Specifically, the marketisation of housing provision will continue to '...[destroy] the protections that the poorest should by right expect from the welfare state' (p. 40), and will mean more people living below the poverty line, facing forced moves and homelessness. As the tone and wording in this section is emotive and critical, reflecting the political dispositions of the authors, the issues raised have a tendency to be overly dramatic and insurmountable, which given the focus of the final section in this part, is not surprising.

In the final section, the authors draw on inspiration from Clement Atlee's Labour government of the 1940s to suggest a new political approach to housing supply. Although acknowledging that it will be difficult to change from a consumerist and profoundly unequal, class-based society, the authors argue that the only sustainable way forward is '...a paradigm shift away from individualist consumerism based on spurious choice and individual debt' (p. 47). For housing policy, this means revaluing and building more council housing, renewing private renting, affordable rents and security of tenure, and accounting for sustainability and climate change. However, as these suggestions are steeped in the need for a paradigm shift, they are therefore unfortunately unrealistic, more so a pipedream and largely un-implementable within the existing political regime. And this is perhaps the key criticism of the book—it does not offer any practical suggestions for increasing housing supply before at least 2015 and only then if a government ticking all the necessary boxes comes to power. The title of the book 'Let's Build the Houses-Quick' is therefore largely misleading. Whilst the intended reader might be put off (or even motivated) by the political nature of the book, it undoubtedly provides a useful and perceptive, if not uncompromising, critique of housing policy over the past 14 years. For this reason, I think the book could be a useful resource for students, academics and practitioners seeking a more radical insight to Britain's housing supply issues, although the England-centric nature of the discussion might be off putting to some.