

From Path Dependency to Tragedy? Grenfell Tower and the historical background to the marginalisation of social tenants in the United Kingdom, 1956-2017.

Contemporary British social housing estates, from large tower blocks in inner cities to small rows of cottages in agricultural villages, are spaces of extreme social segregation. This fact rightly dominates all serious discussion of the disaster at Grenfell Tower. Indeed, this fact dominates most serious discussion of social housing in Britain today: we take it as read that it primarily exists as a service for the poor and socially marginalised, and ground our arguments in this fact. Yet it was not always so. Council housing was conceived as a means of correcting market failure; as a means of providing quality housing to families who could not afford to buy their own homes, not at providing a minimum standard of accommodation for the poor. During the interwar period, the intended beneficiaries of what was then a new policy were skilled workers and their families; by the immediate postwar period, the class element had vanished entirely and the emphasis, in a time of significant housing shortages, was on the provision of housing to young families of whatever social background. Council housing was defined a form of ‘universal’ mass housing, and the planning of council estates was dominated by the concept of the ‘mixed community’, in which people of all occupations would live happily together in a spirit of social harmony.

The Conservative government elected at the end of 1951 was to agonise over housing policy to an extent not seen before or since. At the heart of its troubles were two contradictory impulses. The first was the electoral need to oversee the construction of as many houses as possible; enough to end the postwar housing shortages that they had cleverly, if not particularly honestly, ascribed to the inefficiencies inherent to the Labour government’s socialist agenda. The second was the unpalatable reality that this would not be possible without an intensification of council house construction: the private house-building industry was at a historically low ebb and while efforts to revive it were planned – and would prove to be highly successful – it would inevitably take time before it could realistically provide sufficient houses to come even close to meeting the scale of demand. A third issue, marginal at first but soon to prove highly significant, was the political consensus on the issue of slum clearance. Once that long-delayed problem was finally tackled in a serious manner, there would be a need to re-house a significant number of people. With no extra capacity in the housing market whatsoever, this would inevitably mean the construction of even more council houses.

A compromise was found: at first to simultaneously encourage a great increase in council house construction and a resurgence in commercial house building, and then, once the back of the postwar housing shortage had been broken, to eliminate housing subsidies for general needs. Moreover, it was

decided to use the housing finance framework to encourage local authorities to re-house former slum-residents, where possible, in blocks of flats, rather than in conventional houses. These changes were the first step in the transformation of British social housing estates, but they were only a first step: they did not affect existing estates, and the new association between council housing and the slum districts was at this stage still something that existed more in the minds of policy makers than the general public.

As is often the way, the next step occurred due to the failure of this compromise. The abolition of general needs subsidies had, as anticipated, caused a collapse in council house construction.

Unfortunately, the increase in private sector housebuilding had not been rapid enough to make up the shortfall, the housing shortage began to grow, as did its electoral salience. A further reform of the housing finance system followed in 1961; a rather tortured set of changes designed to strike a balance between the system as it had existed before and after the alterations of the mid 1950s. Significantly, the new system maintained the bias towards high-rise construction and the approximate equivalent of the old general needs subsidy – I can only say ‘approximate as the new system was excessively complex – was significantly lower than that which had existed before the middle 50s. Moreover, it did not offer any resolution to the political problem that housing continued to pose the Conservatives.

In the end, the Minister tasked with finding a way out of that particular mess was Keith Joseph, appointed as housing minister following the ‘Knight of Long Knives’ in 1962. Even then he was a figure firmly on the right-wing of the Conservative Party, but one who embraced, as so many backbenchers did not, the possibility that technocratic Modernism might function as an effective bulwark against socialism; that the interests of property and free enterprise could best be defended through the efficient and controlled use of State power for the general good. Joseph’s stated aim was to increase the number of houses built by local authorities without challenging the pre-eminence of private provision, established only so recently and of great importance to him both politically and personally – his father had founded the house-building firm Bovis. But he also had another goal in mind. Defending his policies to a group of suspicious backbenchers in 1963, Joseph informed them everything he was doing as housing minister was geared towards securing a stable future in which private enterprise would be able to assert its rightful place as the principle provider of new housing, even in the rental market. This, he explained, would take time and would require significant changes to the political climate: changes that would not occur as long as there was a significant housing shortage and as long as the slums remained standing.

In practice, Joseph's legacy as housing minister was his enthusiastic promotion of system-built high-rise tower blocks, the idea of which he and his department's Permanent Secretary Dame Evelyn Sharp sold to council leaderships up and down the country as a rational and scientific solution to the otherwise intractable problem of slum clearance and redevelopment. This has often been regarded as a curious thing to have happened, as an action that ran quite contrary to Joseph's ideological motivations and the general course of his career. But when placed in the proper context of his broader housing policy strategy, a very different picture emerges. By pushing local authorities towards building system-built high-rises and by encouraging them to link this to an acceleration of their slum clearance programmes *at the same time* as he attempted to inflate the private housing market and commercial house building industry, Joseph was engaged in a conscious attempt to change the nature and purpose of public housing in Britain; to move it further away from the postwar vision of 'universal' mass housing and the 'mixed community' council estate.

When Labour regained office in 1964, it made no attempt to reverse this policy agenda, and actually greatly intensified it. This was for purely practical reasons – Wilson and Crossman certainly did not share Joseph's priorities and long-term vision – but where housing is concerned what matters is ends and not intentions, and a new consensus on the purpose of council housing had decisively emerged: in essence it was now seen as a form of housing for people who could not afford to be aspirational. It cannot go ignored here that this new consensus went hand-in-hand with a marked decline in the quality of both the planning and construction of new council estates in most large local authorities.

The new consensus was reinforced by a parallel process that, by contrast, was highly contentious: the decline of low-rent private sector accommodation, the main form of tenure for the urban poor until well into the 1960s. It is important to understand that there were in effect two low-rent private sector housing markets in mid twentieth century Britain, rather than one. The first was that which covered the old slum districts, and despite considerable unhappiness amongst elements in the Conservative grassroots, there was a widespread consensus across the political divide in favour of the compulsory purchase and demolition of these properties. The second was dominated by late 19th and early 20th century housing; usually by-law terraces, but also tenement blocks and large houses subdivided into flats. This was a market characterised by transience and short-tenures; it rapidly became associated with post-war migration. The fate of the second form of low-rent private sector accommodation was one of the most fiercely contested of all housing policy questions during the postwar period: where Labour saw landlordism and exploitation and (as many of these 'low' rents were not particularly low; at least not for what tenants received) advocated rent-controls, regulation

and tenant protections, Conservatives were apt to see the erosion of property rights by the over-mighty State and favoured a lighter touch.

What made the politics of the issue so inflammatory was that in certain parts of the country, most notably in inner West London, a firm distinction between the two loose types of low-rent private accommodation did not exist. The widespread exposure of this fact in the early 1960s pushed popular opinion towards Labour's position and was the cause of the much of the 'difficult' climate noted by Joseph. Rent control and firm government regulation of the sector returned in 1965, but even before then councils had begun to experiment with measures designed to restrict this part of the private rental market. In some cities, notably Birmingham, this took on a racialised aspect, with the conversion of properties into HMOs permitted in select 'immigrant districts' and prohibited elsewhere, resulting in an intensification of residential ethnic segregation. In many London boroughs, slum clearance policies were expanded to include 'borderline' streets and districts, and a large number of private rental properties were subject to compulsory purchase. Many were demolished. The upshot of this was a significant movement of poor and socially marginal households from private rental accommodation into council housing, and in particular into high-rise council housing; the main form being constructed in the cities and boroughs where this was an issue.

All of which leads us to 1979 and to the radical housing reforms of the Thatcher government. The state-subsidised right of council tenants to buy their houses at below-market price, the nationally mandated shift towards a needs-based points system as the only means of allocating council housing, and the near-complete deregulation of the private rental sector. While these reforms are usually thought of as representing a major break with half a century of housing policy, they were in fact its entirely logical culmination. The council house, envisioned first as a respectable home for respectable working families and then as a universal solution to universal housing problems, became permanently and irrevocably established as the home of the poor; the dream of the 'mixed community' council estate replaced by the new nightmare of the 'problem estate', a place not of communal warmth but of atomised despair: a symbol of the State's inherent inability to tackle systemic social problems.

The developments that I have charted were not the result of a single conscious plan - even though one can certainly draw a direct line between the thought and actions of Keith Joseph in the early 1960s and Margaret Thatcher twenty years later - yet nonetheless followed a consistent, relentless logic, step following step in a classic pattern of path dependency. Ultimately what changed was the status of the council tenant. During the first few decades of council housing, council tenancy was primarily understood in terms of citizenship: the council tenant was provided with housing by the

State because access to a certain standard of housing had become viewed as a right of citizenship. If the Englishman could not afford his Castle, then it was the duty of the State to provide him with at least a modest Motte and Bailey. But as council housing acquired a wider policy purpose - as it began to be used to tackle not just the consequences of market failure but also long-standing social problems - and as access to home ownership widened, this changed. Council tenancy came to be understood as a form of state charity, rather than as a right of citizenship: the council tenant was no longer first and foremost a citizen, but a state dependent with little agency.

What is the use of History in the comprehension of contemporary tragedy? Certainly it cannot explain individual errors and failings, and it cannot point directly towards the avoidance of their repetition elsewhere. Certainly it can offer no solace. Yet it has a clear role: to examine the long-term factors that paved the way to disaster. Because while it would be absurd to claim the tragedy at Grenfell Tower can be directly blamed on the historical process described in this paper, I do not think it would be especially controversial to suggest that the disaster could not have occurred without it, as the marginal status of the social tenant and their established social position as state dependents - without agency even in the maintenance of their own homes; even in their concerns about their own safety - rather than as equal and respected citizens, played an immense and baleful role at Grenfell Tower. I would further add that as this is an issue of relevance to every single social housing estate in the United Kingdom, attempts to prevent similar disasters occurring in the future must begin with an understanding of its historical background, must attempt to comprehend the extent to which it has often warped decision-making at a local and even housing-management level, and must accept that, for all the fine words from public bodies we have seen post-Grenfell, it continues to have the potential to do so.