

'Drawing out the issues' in Social Housing in Europe II: A review of policies and outcomes, pp. 287 – 299, 2008.

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The choice of the instrument is one for Council—that is, the Member States, their governments, the ministers responsible for social housing and their informal Council. Then it will pass to the European citizens, with the new European referendum on institutional reform that succeeds the failed Dutch and French referenda on ratification of the constitutional Treaty. Only a clear mandate from the Council can secure the future of social housing and its contribution to Community interests.

Endnotes

¹ cf. specifically the Commission's White Paper on Services of General Interest, COM 2004 374 final version dated 12 April 2004

² Communication from the Commissions : Implementing the Community Lisbon programme: Social services of general interest in the European Union {SEC(2006) 516} Brussels, 26 April 2006 COM(2006) 177 final

³ European Commission, GD Competition, Brussels, 14.07.2005, 0 / 55413, COMP H1FSP / Ic (2005) A / 30854 D / 1001

⁴ State Aid N 343/200

⁵ cf. specifically the Judgment Bond van advertterrders, 1988

18. Drawing out the issues

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Introduction

In trying to predict the future of social housing in Europe a number of the papers in this book and its precursor seek to find the 'Holy Grail' — to locate an all-embracing, all-explaining, overarching theory that helps explain the dynamics of current changes. Malpass set about this task through examining the history of social housing, questioning whether European social housing was in a period of convergence or fragmentation. Addressing this question threw up debates about the phases of capitalism, the notion of dual rental markets, and the role and function of what was previously termed 'working class' housing.

In the first book in this series, *Social Housing in Europe*, Scanlon reviewed the statistical evidence (Whitehead and Scanlon, 2007). Again this revealed a number of similarities, if not convergences, at this point in time. But what exactly was the situation in the past, and what have been the respective motors of change? And what exactly do the national figures actually represent, given the high degree of intra-national variation that is evident from most of the papers?

Whitehead offered a useful critique of the current economic context, and again she presented evidence of convergence. Core amongst this was the relationship between public expenditure and private finance, and the agreed accounting conventions for public expenditure under the EU public expenditure and convergence rules. This was shown not to affect all countries in the same way, given different public finance arrangements, but nonetheless it does mean that public expenditure on social housing can be reclassified as private through the simple act of transferring the landlord from a public to a private or charitable one.

In his detailed contribution about one aspect of privatisation, the 'Right to Buy', Murie provided a comprehensive overview of its impact within one major English city, Birmingham. The long time frame adopted illustrated the sales pattern associated with deep discounting. It also revealed the close relationship between social renting, low cost owner occupation and the re-emergence of private renting in what had previously been the social rented stock. The juxtaposition of local economic and personal

financial circumstances at a particular point in time largely determined this outcome. The actual houses, and the people residing in them, may stay the same, but tenure classifications alter. This evidence helpfully demonstrated that any research, which tries to explain housing change through the use of tenure figures has severe limitations.

Another aspect of privatisation, this time the process of stock transfer, was dissected by Stephens, via a comparative study of UK and Germany. With transfer from public authority to housing association or company, the landlord's name changes, but what else does? The new investment expenditure on the stock is not accounted for as public spending, but otherwise, it's the same houses, the same tenants and the same staff. The only real tangible change for many has been the new sign on the landlord's offices. Although in broad terms the policy of changing the landlord from public to private appeared the same in both national contexts, how it actually operated on the ground and its long-term outcomes were noticeably different. So there was certainly convergence, but again at the same time difference.

Ghekiere provided a fascinating insight into the EU's perhaps reluctant influence in respect of bringing about convergence. He challenged the presumption that social housing was exempt from EU competences because it was unaffected by the all-embracing competition rules. The issue of general interest national opt out, in relation to social housing, was very usefully critiqued. His review of specific national legal cases illustrated clearly that the preservation of national differences is at odds with the pressures for wider integration, thus reinforcing policy fragmentation. It was also evident that there is strong resistance to convergence, as for example when national interests ensured an inconclusive Leipzig Charter.

All this raises the question: should explaining policy convergence, if not actually helping to facilitate it, be the 'Holy Grail' for housing researchers and practitioners? When once a Marxist analysis of capitalism would have satisfactorily explained both patterns of convergence and divergence, now it appears the only agenda is convergence, and the only explanation is the operation of global capital. That, however, is not good enough. The parameters of this debate appear, on the evidence presented here, to be somewhat hazy, and I would question whether framing the research question in this way is the best way to improve our understanding of what the future holds for European social housing.

International comparisons

There is an inherent problem with much comparative research in that it tends to be descriptive and largely devoid of analytical content. The goal of this book was to seek out explanations for what appear, at face value, to be overarching trends, and then seek to explain the specifics. Nevertheless, it contains more empirical description than robust analysis.

There are clear benefits from conducting such international comparisons, not least for UK housing academics, who are in high demand to tell the tales of woe that have befallen our housing system as a result of privatisation. Such comparisons may be particularly useful from a French perspective, as similar woes could well be on the way in France. But analysis that derives solely from broad descriptions of what is happening nationally in one country or another in terms of housing policy or tenure change is of limited value.

Over the last 30 years we have all witnessed a move from public to private provision. This was pioneered by the UK and until recently was less pronounced within the rest of Europe, but clearly that has been changing. So there would appear to be a very clear and obvious trajectory of change occurring within European housing. Decades ago another tenure shift occurred across what was then western Europe, namely the change from private renting to owner occupation, but again the pace of change differed in diverse national (or more accurately sub-national) contexts. The then eastern bloc had a very different experience, which was also not uniform.

The recent change reflects the growing dominance of individual 'private' solutions to what were previously conceived off as collective 'public' problems. It reflects increasing individual affluence and ready access to the broad array of financial products designed specifically to facilitate this consumption. In its wake has come residualisation of the remaining social housing stock. But can this be described as something new? It has been occurring throughout Europe, albeit at different speeds in different places, for the last three decades. France may have come late to this particular party with the recent election of Sarkozy, whereas the UK and what was formerly known as eastern Europe underwent radical change 30 and 15 years ago respectively.

Now, although the pace of change in individual countries still differs, it appears to be accelerating throughout Europe. Consequently, there is great interest in the drivers of this process, and the likely individual national consequences. There are also very strong vested producer interests in this debate.

What the papers in this book also illustrate is that although the general trends may be similar, and the broad-brush descriptions suggest similar patterns, the actual nature of the process of change and its localised impacts vary markedly from place to place. How do these differences help explain the nature of both convergence and fragmentation?

Explaining difference

The papers in this book reveal profound differences in the nature and working of social housing in each of the countries under consideration. Although there are undoubtedly similarities, often on closer examination these appear rather superficial, given the nature of the differences that exist. So should we not take as our starting point these differences, rather than content ourselves with a convergence agenda? Would it not be more productive to start trying to explain properly why such differences exist, and to understand the factors that help promote and produce similarities, as well as those that reinforce difference? This would give us a much better understanding of the drivers and suppressors of change operating within European housing systems.

Macroeconomic forces are undoubtedly similar across countries, as are the EU convergence criteria (which are themselves influenced by macroeconomics). But the fiscal and social policy responses of individual national states are not uniform. These differences reflect the structure and complexity of power relations within different societies. Different national histories, cultures, religions, politics, economics, ethnicities and the resulting power structures should be the future focus of comparative research in the field of housing. Understanding and explaining difference should be core to such an endeavour.

A useful example of this is provided by Esping-Andersen's seminal work *The Three Worlds of Social Capitalism* (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Many of the differences in European national welfare structures can be explained by differences in the Catholic and Protestant conceptions of the family. So, was the growth of the post-war social-democratic welfare states in northern Europe a response to the demise or restructuring of the traditional family as much as a political response to communism? Or is this just too general and simplistic?

While we can see markedly different methods of welfare provision between different European countries, marked differences also exist within individual countries at regional and sub-regional levels. Why, then, does comparative housing research always focus on presumed national norms? Through explaining sub-national or

regional divergence we could better understand the spatial distortion of national power structures.

Let us look, for example, at how the different nations within the UK sought to address home improvement policy. Although they shared similar policy ambitions, the approaches pursued were very different. The main reason for this difference was the composition of their respective housing stocks. The flatted accommodation predominant in Scotland demanded a collective improvement mechanism, whereas the traditional brick terraced house of England and Wales favoured an individual approach to renovation, as seen in English and Welsh improvement legislation throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Robertson, 1992).

On closer examination of Scottish renovation policy, further internal divergence is evident. The interplay between local politics, culture and policy meant that although Scotland's two largest cities, Edinburgh and Glasgow, utilised exactly the same legislative framework, they pursued markedly different renovation strategies. Edinburgh focused on the individual in order to preserve private property rights, whereas Glasgow employed a collective, community-based approach to tenement renewal, creating locally based housing associations to ensure that the existing community benefited and such neighbourhoods were not gentrified (Robertson and Bailey, 1996).

Similar differences can be found in other countries. Take the Swedish approach to urban regeneration, pursued throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Örebro pursued its regeneration ambitions through the municipal housing company, which was created by the local Social Democratic Party, and in the process created a distinct physical, managerial and subsequently political outcome. By contrast, Norrköping, which adopted an approach that favoured the co-operatives that had long been part of the local housing and political scene, produced a markedly different local managerial and political outcome, although on the surface the physical outcome looks quite similar (Elander, 1999).

Such differences are discernable in all European countries. Might it not therefore be better to argue there are no national norms, but rather regional variations of national ambitions?

Future questions

One way to take forward this strand of research would be to detail why and how different countries choose to house the poor, minorities, the disadvantaged, the disabled, single parents, migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Power attempted this

in part in her 1993 book *Fromhovels to Highrise* (Power, 1993). To do this properly, however, requires a historical overview, detailing which groups were originally earmarked for social housing, and how this has altered and changed over time. The work of both Linquist (1991) and Ball, Harloe and Martens (1988) is of relevance here, as they made convincing cases for comparative research to embrace both social relations and the historic context of individual countries. It is now time to reconnect with this thesis and move away from a focus on the assembly and analysis of tenure and housing statistics (Stephens and McCrone (1995). While Linquist focused on the production of housing, Ball, Harlow and Martins cogently argued that production and consumption needed to be considered together, and I consider this is to be the correct approach.

These are certainly not new questions, but they have rarely been answered in a systematic comparative context. Further, there would be great value in adopting a blend of historical, sociological, economic, cultural and public policy perspectives when addressing this question. Each perspective would help provide a distinct lens, adding greatly to our understanding of the dynamics of social housing. Such a multi-disciplinary and systematic comparative approach is the only way to start to isolate the forces that create and sustain difference, as well as those that encourage and produce similarities within European social housing. By better understanding the past, we would also be in a far better position to predict the future.

I will start this process by offering a few observations and insights about the development of social housing in Scotland at both a national and local scale. I also hope to challenge a few unhelpful myths about the history and function of social housing. I will use a housing policy/sociology lens, which will be further distorted by my distinct Scottish cultural perspective. Clearly, the addition of other perspectives would help improve and refine this analysis.

In Scotland in 1975, some 70 per cent of households resided in the social rented sector. But by 2005, a total of 65 per cent of households were owner-occupiers. Some projections now suggest that by 2025, the social rented sector will be but 8 per cent of the total housing stock, given that the elderly population now living in social housing will not be fully replaced by new younger tenants (Newhaven Research, 2006). Social housing is no longer a tenure of choice, and as such it is stigmatised. So it is clear we are only part way through a process of change, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that while change is a continuous process, it takes time to notice it has happened.

How did this change occur in Scotland's largest city? Glasgow in 1975 had 180,000 units of council housing. Glasgow Council had by 1970 become the majority provider of housing in the city, and at various times had sought to become the sole provider. Unfortunately the resulting housing department was just too large and unwieldy and the quite abysmal housing management service produced persistently squalid housing conditions for many tenants.

Over the last 30 years, like all Scottish local authorities, Glasgow has undergone massive tenure change. By 2002 the council owned some 80,000 houses, the stock having been reduced through the Right to Buy, small-scale transfers to community-based housing associations and demolitions, which had gained pace in the last 15 years. Then in 2004, the council transferred its entire housing stock to a specially created housing vehicle, Glasgow Housing Association. In return for this, the UK Treasury agreed to write off the £1 billion of accrued council debt on the stock.

But by and large, those who reside in what were Glasgow's council houses have not changed. Tenants who bought under the Right to Buy generally stayed on in their purchased homes. However, with this population now starting to die off, their housing is being sold to younger people who see such housing as the first step on the home-ownership ladder, or as an alternative to rented social housing. So over time the population profile will change.

With the stock transfer, the council landlord was re-badged as a housing association, but for all intents and purposes nothing else changed. The same poor quality of housing management service continues unabated, as was clearly detailed in the recent regulators report (Communities Scotland, 2007). The same tenants pay the same rent to the same landlord - or almost. With the abolition of the £1 billion debt, what had been a debt-ridden council landlord is now a cash-rich housing association. This has allowed a substantial refurbishment programme to take place. It has not been funded via new private borrowing, as was planned, but rather from the rental stream, 70% of which comes directly from government as rent subsidies. The original plan — to transfer this stock on to the successful community-based housing associations—has stalled completely.

So in Glasgow as elsewhere in Scotland, although Right-to-Buy changed the tenure profile it did not change the make-up of those who resided in the stock, at least not initially. This fuels my concerns about research that focuses solely on tenure change and does not dig deeper, given that a change of landlord might not actually represent a socio-economic alteration.

That said, it would be very wrong to assume that the population resident in what was council housing is uniform or stable over time: that has certainly not been the case. Over the last 50 years the profile of social housing tenants has altered significantly. Owner occupation has become the tenure of choice for the majority of the population, and now most people consider council housing to be unacceptable. Whereas council housing was long the preserve of the working class family— skilled artisans and, to a lesser extent, unskilled manual workers — it has over the last 40 years been opened up to those previously excluded from this tenure.

I recently bought a copy of Ferguson's *The Dawn of Scottish Social Welfare* in a second-hand bookshop in London. Published in 1948, the book provides a sharp reminder of the long-standing and clear distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor made by those charged with implementing social welfare policies over the centuries. According to Scots' Presbyterian values, the changes of tenant profile described above mean that the 'deserving' moved out and the 'undeserving' moved in. And such terminology is not culturally specific to Scotland. Karl Marx made a similar, if not identical distinction, in his case between the 'working class' and what he termed the 'lumpen proletariat', or what he noted, approvingly, the French called 'la bohème' (Marx, 1852). Social status and identity is a crucial consideration when it comes to discussing the future of the social rented sector, something I will return to later.

Why exactly did this dramatic social transformation occur? It was not solely the inevitable consequence of privatisation; it is a bit more complicated than that. Broader changes within society have had a cumulative impact, and have in turn influenced and been influenced by subsequent social legislation. There was a reaction from the late 1960s against the collectivist uniformity that emerged from the austere immediate post-war period. As European society dusted itself down after the war and became far more affluent, the desire of both consumers and capital was for far more individuality. One consequence of this was the growth in home-ownership. Another social policy repercussion was the demand for equality of access to the broad range of social assets, one of which was social housing.

A good UK example of this was the passing of the Homeless Persons Act of 1977, which ensured that certain types of homeless families gained access to council housing, a tenure form they had previously been denied. Similarly, the Matrimonial Homes Act of 1982 required councils to separately house both people who had previously shared the family home if the marriage broke down. Given shared childcare responsibilities and access, this also meant that single parents with permanent or partial

childcare commitments were now re-housed. As a result, the long-standing norm that council housing did not house single people (with the exception after the war of so-called spinsters) was breached.

Council control of housing allocations also came under greater scrutiny and regulation by central government, which emphasised specified housing needs. Local connection, which had long been used as an exclusionary device by local authorities, was challenged in an effort to open up access to council housing. Today, all social housing allocations are based on need, so the poorest and most deprived now get housed. This also has a downside, in that those in greatest need get allocated to the least desirable stock because that is most accessible. Moreover, thanks to the introduction in 1982 of housing benefit, a universal rent allowance system, those allocated this housing could now pay for it. Previously, councils used high rents as a means to exclude the poorest.

So now those long excluded from council housing gained access to a shrinking stock, thanks to the impact of Right to Buy, the Thatcher government's flagship policy of 1980. As poorer tenants moved in, wealthier tenants moved out, or, more accurately, bought their better quality council homes. It is critical to remember that there was always marked social segregation within council housing; it was never a uniform utopia. Throughout history, certain areas have been deemed more socially acceptable than others (Robertson et al, 2008). The stigma of slum living has been a fact of life for centuries, not just in recent decades. Within what was the mass provision of council housing, pre-existing social hierarchies changed only slightly with the advent of Right to Buy. In general, wealthier tenants with higher social status and the financial means to purchase already lived in the better housing, while the poorer tenants who resided in the poorer quality stock not only could not afford to buy, but were also put off doing so because of the low social status of the housing they occupied (Damer, 1989). The tenure may have been the same, but in terms of social status, the Right to Buy changed little.

Recently completed research in Stirling illustrates this very clearly. The good-quality council estate built under the banner of 'Homes Fit for Heroes' immediately after the First World War, and designed along Garden City principles, was originally allocated to the families of the artisan skilled working classes and some bourgeois white-collar workers in managerial positions. Since the Right to Buy the vast majority of this housing has been bought by sitting tenants, and the area now constitutes a distinct, affordable and vibrant part of the Stirling housing market. By contrast, the slum-clearance estate build to rehouse skilled and unskilled manual workers (mainly miners) from the

medieval slums surrounding the castle was always socially stigmatised. This estate witnessed very few house sales and is now, relatively speaking, more deprived than it was in the past. What is quite shocking is that this area, known as Raploch, can be shown to have been socially stigmatised since at least 1550 (Robertson et al, 2008).

In the past, gaining access to a council house represented a major improvement in personal living conditions, if not social status. This is no longer the case. There is now a social stigma attached to what we call—pejoratively, unfortunately, social housing. Previous work looking at low-value, low-demand private housing in England found that individuals preferred to stay in poorer quality private rented accommodation than move to council housing, as no one would be sure whether they were owner-occupiers or private renters. As council tenants, by contrast, their social status was clear (Robertson, 2003).

Society's increasing wealth and the focus on the individual and consumers has had major repercussions for the role and function of social housing. As the rights of individuals within society have been enhanced to the detriment of previous collective arrangements, the socio-economic profile of social housing has changed markedly. Socially segmented mass public housing has given way to a far smaller and more socially polarised provision, which now houses those long denied access to such housing. This, of course, merely reflects the ever-widening gap within contemporary society between the rich and poor, between the haves and have-nots. So although privatisation has undoubtedly contributed significantly to these changes, it also reflects other broader societal changes. But it most certainly does not provide the whole story in explaining change within Scotland's social rented sector.

Future research issues

Some questions for future housing research are: who exactly lives in social housing? Why do they stay there, and for how long? Does such housing represent a lifetime housing choice, as was the case in the past, or is it a housing option for a particular period in their life?

Scottish evidence indicates that once a household gains a social housing tenancy it can easily become trapped, because the interaction between high rents, low wages and housing benefits encourages welfare dependence. It is ironic that the operation of social housing adds to or reinforces poverty, rather than helping to alleviate it.

The relationship between social housing costs and tenants' capacity to engage with the labour market needs far more attention. This is a significant issue, especially for

the very vulnerable, who are obliged to pay high accommodation costs because of the care packages attached. This issue has been brought into sharp focus with the recent influx to the UK of accession state migrants who are mainly Poles, Latvians and Estonians in Scotland. How is it that they find low-skilled work, while unemployed Scots living in social housing cannot?

This issue also raises challenging questions about the power of producer interests. Is the cost of housing management now too high? The requirement to cover its costs effectively locks tenants into housing benefit and welfare payments.

Future research should also focus on understanding the organisational and governance structures that have been developed by social housing landlords to ensure public accountability. It is critical to protect consumer rights and ensure producer compliance with a wide range of rules and regulations, but how much does the administration of such compliance systems add to the overall cost of providing housing services? Should we not weigh carefully before adding to the detailed regulations and requirements that impact on social housing, given the very direct implications for rents, welfare dependence and labour-market engagement? Why should tenants of social housing now be expected to pay for extra policing or cleansing as additional charges on their rents? It is not enough simply to say that most tenants do not in fact pay these charges because their rent is paid by housing benefit. Should housing management not be more about housing and less about managing, if not controlling, poor people?

An examination of who lives in social housing might also provide evidence to refocus current debates on social housing. For too long in Scotland we have assumed that the poor who live in social housing have a tendency to become ill. Could it instead be the case that people who become ill can very quickly become poor, and thus have no choice but to move into social housing? If this were the case for a significant proportion of tenants, then the whole nature of the debate surrounding social housing would greatly alter.

The analytical focus should also move beyond social housing alone to include those living in the private rented sector and the bottom end of owner occupation. Only then can we properly appreciate how those on very low incomes, and who are often welfare dependent, access different tenure options at different points in time.

But to gain a better understanding of the actual dynamic of housing, and the role of social housing within this dynamic, we would be better able to decide whether to support those unable to afford entry level owner-occupation, but who either reject or are

rejected by social housing landlords. This 'sandwich class', as they are termed in Hong Kong, have again become a focus of Scottish housing policy, as they were for short periods during the 1960s and 1980s. The initial development of the housing association movement was very much focussed on addressing the housing needs of what was then termed the 'indigent middle class'. Co-ownership and cost rent schemes were developed, and later shared ownership and Improvement for Sales ventures. But should state subsidies again be used to help them up, while leaving others more deserving to sink? Why is it that some people merit a hand up, while others can only expect a hand out? Are 'key workers' of concern mainly because they serve the needs of the more affluent and powerful within society?

Refining our analysis and understanding of social housing would also help us decide what types of regeneration and renewal policies should be pursued in future. Renewal policy for the last 30 years has been reminiscent of the movie *Groundhog Day*: the approach has been to say, "this is a run-down deprived neighbourhood, let's renew it". Then a decade or so later, the same problems re-emerge and the exact same statement is repeated. And so it goes on, to the benefit of the construction industry and housing professionals, but not necessarily the residents of such localities. Initially the focus of renewal was on the architecture and planning, addressing what was seen as their collective failings. Over the last 20 years changes to local management arrangements have also been made. But it is the same localities that are continuously subjected to the same processes of renewal. More recently, there has been much discussion about the merits of developing more 'mixed communities' as part of the regeneration process. This recalls the failed social engineering undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s with mass housing developments, which was equally well intentioned. Only by properly understanding the broader social, economic, cultural and political dynamics of social housing in a specific locality will we be able to know if this is the correct approach.

The Holy Grail should be to better understand the actual dynamics and drivers of change. Then we would be better placed to predict what the future holds for social housing. Counting the houses, slotting them into tenure packages and then tying the changing numbers to an analysis of national housing policies represents a very constrained and limited means for improving our understanding of the future role of social housing, either in Scotland or Europe as a whole.

Critically, we need to better understand power relations within our respective societies and how these act to influence, orientate and re-orientate the operation of the local housing market within individual housing systems, and then show how that impacts upon different groups of people. We also need to re-acquaint ourselves with how

power interfaces with the poor. After all, there is an irony in that those who would never choose to reside in social housing and thus are never subjected to its rules and regulations – which probably includes most of the readers of this book – debate and then decide its future, while excluding from such decision-making those who are actually resident in this housing. Housing is political, as Engels convincingly illustrated in 1848: the rich get well housed, the poor do not, and we could all start by acknowledging that fact (Engels, 1975).

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