

Chapter 11

'Only Alternative Municipal Housing'

Making the Case for Public Housing Then and Now

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It is spelled out clearly on the big banner held aloft by the tenants of Partick at the centre of one of those much-reproduced black-and-white photographs from the 1915 Glasgow Rent Strike: 'only alternative MUNICIPAL HOUSING'. And although the immediate demand of the 1915 rent strikers was for rent control, the resulting 1915 Rent Restriction Act, together with the extensive tenant unrest, served as the catalyst that helped to break down government resistance to subsidized public housing and to establish council housing's place in British working-class life. This happened because municipal housing had already become a central demand of Left politics, in fact, a demand that had begun to enter mainstream debate and be given reluctant consideration as a temporary solution by politicians whose views were very far from socialist.

This chapter begins by looking at how government resistance to state-subsidized housing was broken down historically by a combination of tenant campaigns and wider socialist action, in the face of the clear failure of private developers and landlords to provide decent working-class homes. But reluctant acceptance of public housing was not enough. The following sections look at the intrinsic problems with a system that was almost always considered of second-class status and at how these problems helped open the door to the neoliberal revolution and the return of many of the old evils of private renting. This then raises the issue of demands for today's housing campaigners, fighting those same evils. Like the tenants of Partick, campaigners need to combine immediate demands for more affordable rents and better conditions, with demands for more long-term structural changes that will get rid of housing problems at the source. The primary purpose of this chapter is

to suggest practical long-term demands that would make that fundamental and sustained difference. It argues for a new investment in public housing that learns from past mistakes, public housing that would be as desirable as other housing tenures, and would be managed locally with maximum tenant involvement. Housing does not exist in isolation, and campaigns for better housing are intimately linked to campaigns for wider social change: greener planning, genuine local democracy and ultimately a reevaluation of societal aims. This chapter looks at improvements in housing as part of a much bigger shift towards an ecosocialist future and puts forward practical reforms for step changes that will help move us in that direction.

Although some of the changes proposed here may seem a long way from current thinking, recent developments in Scottish housing policy provide some grounds for optimism, especially the boost given to social housing by ending the Right-to-Buy and increasing investment in council housing. And while housing policy in England is moving in the opposite direction, the scale of the crisis this is creating is impacting on the public consciousness, especially since the Grenfell fire drew the veil from a world that many had learned to ignore. More generally, both the Scottish Independence campaign and Labour's Momentum have demonstrated the growing hunger for a more socialist approach. As the 1915 rent strikers discovered, change happens when ordinary people show that they will no longer tolerate a housing crisis, and then what was once dismissed as impossible soon becomes normal. Alternative policies would remain on the shelf without pressure from below to prove that the status quo will no longer be accepted, but grassroots action needs workable alternatives to aim for. This chapter is about preparing to build on the movement for change.

THE GROWTH OF AN IDEA

Despite a general assumption on behalf of the ruling classes that government should not intervene to alter the balance of market forces, and that unearned help encouraged dependency and fecklessness, it was impossible for them to ignore the housing needs of the workers who crowded into the Victorian industrial cities. Slums were feared as a breeding ground for disease and criminality; better homes were regarded as a prerequisite for a healthier, more efficient workforce; and poor housing conditions could prove a trigger for unrest at a time of a growing labour movement and revolutionary developments across the English Channel. By the start of the First World War, this situation had already led to interventions by national and local government, as well as by various forms of semi-philanthropic groups anxious to demonstrate that the provision of quality working-class homes was compatible with

making a small but comfortable profit. There were already many examples of housing built by the municipalities, especially following the 1890 Housing Act. The hope was that these would eventually bring in a return on the initial investment. However, local authorities increasingly had to resort to raising a portion of their running costs, as well as loan repayments, through the rates—the local property tax. Despite this creeping acceptance of limited government action, resistance to government interference in the market through subsidy remained strong, and the overall impact of what had been done was woefully inadequate.

The Social Democratic Federation (SDF) had argued for municipal involvement in nonprofit housing from 1885; the Workmen's National Housing Council, which was founded by three SDF members in 1898, played an important role in arguing for state intervention in rents and housing supply; and from the early 1900s, Labour Party branches were demanding subsidized municipal housing. Meanwhile politicians of all parties were being forced to realize that there were good economic and political reasons for ensuring the provision of decent homes. The First World War exacerbated bad housing conditions by diverting resources from both building and maintenance, and it also provided an example of state intervention, both more generally through the war industries and specifically in the provision of housing for war workers.

RENT STRIKES AND REVOLUTION

There has been a lot of debate on the significance of the rent strikes for the decision, realized through the 1919 Addison Act, to bring in state-funded municipal housing. This reflects broader debates on working-class agency. The rent strikes demonstrably forced the introduction of rent control, and although this was intended to be temporary, it proved impossible to remove. With housing in short supply, it was argued that removal of the restrictions would bring immediate and devastating rent rises, but the low rents were discouraging private investors from developing further rented housing (see the 1918 Committee on the Increase of Rent, Daunton 1984, 9). State-subsidized housing was welcomed as a temporary solution that would breach this impasse.

Beyond this specific and pragmatic argument, government was responding to the pressures of a restive working-class movement for whom appalling housing conditions were a highly visible focus of discontent. Indeed, the influential Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population of Scotland, which was set up in 1912 and completed in 1917, regarded housing conditions as a 'legitimate cause of social unrest', and even recorded their

'satisfaction' that workers were refusing to tolerate those conditions (Royal Commission 1918, para 2223). From 1917, housing was at the centre of plans for postwar reconstruction, with increasing recognition of the need for state funding. And there are no shortage of quotes—from the king downwards¹—putting forward the provision of housing as a solution to unrest; or in the words of the Parliamentary Secretary to the Local Government Board, 'an insurance against Bolshevism and revolution' (Quoted in Swenarton 1981, 94).

WHY PUBLIC OWNERSHIP?

The main forces in this history will be familiar to those who have looked at housing histories elsewhere, but what is unusual in the British case is the allocation of the leading role to the local authorities. Many other European countries turned instead to other forms of social housing, especially various types of housing association. The reasons for this difference lie in the nature of the British labour movement and its emphasis on parliamentary socialism; the development of British local government, which was already involved with many areas of planning, building control and service provision, and to some extent with housing; the limits of Britain's early housing associations; and the unpopularity and lack of organization of Britain's urban landlords, which made them unlikely recipients for government subsidies. Many European socialists, who were more wary of state involvement, set up their own organizations, including organizations for providing working-class housing, and in countries where housing associations have played a more significant historical role, the associations were founded by broad-based community groups.

The United Kingdom appeared to have little need for housing associations; however, a government-subsidized supplementary community-based housing association movement developed in the 1960s and 1970s. This was championed as an alternative to state bureaucracy, but many associations grew and merged into large businesses with new and even less accountable bureaucracies, high rents and remote management practices—especially after the transfer of former council-housing stock. Housing associations have become increasingly dependent on private finance and subject to the commercial models of their financial lenders (Malpass 2000; Smyth 2018). Government preference has ensured that housing associations are now the main providers of the UK's much diminished social housing stock,² but despite the undoubted problems of council bureaucracies, council housing has the potential to be a much more democratic way of running social housing³ and has also been shown to be considerably better value for money as it is not subject to commercial norms (House of Commons Council Housing Group 2005, 8).

A RELUCTANT CONSENSUS

As with rent control, so with state-subsidized public housing: a temporary measure became recognized as a long-term necessity. Council housing became an increasingly important part of British life—especially in urban Scotland—but, even as they congratulated themselves on their house-building statistics, few politicians saw council housing as anything other than a second-class tenure making up for deficiencies in the private market for those who could not aspire to the ideal of homeownership. It was a rare politician who, like John Wheatley and Nye Bevan, saw public housing as more than a necessity.

Bevan, who was in charge of housing as Minister of Health from 1945 to 1951, famously had a vision of good quality council homes rented by people from all walks of life. However, this was not shared by everyone in the postwar Labour government. He limited private housing to one-fifth of new homes, but a thoroughgoing nationalization (or municipalization) of housing was never attempted, increased subsidies were not enough to make rents affordable for the worst off and when pressures grew for cuts in public expenditure, housing was particularly vulnerable. More radical proposals never made it onto the statute book, including public ownership of the construction industry, which was supported by the 1944 Labour Party conference, and the transfer of private-rented homes to the local authorities, which was proposed in 1949 and later adopted as party policy for a period while Labour was in opposition. By the time of the next Labour government, the party was clear that it regarded the expansion of public housing as a temporary measure to meet exceptional needs, whereas the expansion of owner occupation was 'normal' and a 'social advance' (1965 White Paper, quoted in Community Development Project 1976, 22). For most of the time that council housing was enlarging its share of the British housing stock—peaking at just under a third of the total in 1979—it was being increasingly confirmed by governments of both main parties as a residual tenure for those who could not afford to own their own homes.

This helps to explain not just the current dismantling of this huge public asset but also some of council housing's much publicized failures. Quality was sacrificed for quantity, and this was made worse by a fixation on relatively untested industrial system building methods, and the insistence, from 1955, that money borrowed by councils had to be at commercial interest rates. Second-class status also resulted in second-class treatment in the form of top down and insensitive bureaucratic management, poor maintenance and perpetual cuts. The dice were loaded against achieving anything better. Local-authority housing schemes made sure that millions of families had a

decent affordable place to live, but when, in 1976, workers from the government-sponsored Community Development Projects wrote a report in support of the case for proper investment in council housing, its title took the form of a question: *Whatever Happened to Council Housing?* And their answer was unforgiving:

First, from creditable and idealistic origins it has descended to a miserly output of often poorly designed and constructed homes for 'underprivileged' groups. . . . Second, most of the public subsidies and rents which fund council housing go not to adding to the housing stock or further improving conditions, but back to the money-lenders in the form of interest charges. (1976, 28)

The resulting problems have been used not so much to criticize inadequacies of execution as to condemn the very idea of public housing. Even in Scotland, where, under devolution, there is still a significant level of government support for public and other social housing, this is seen as part of a multitenure system where homeownership is the tenure of aspiration, and private letting has an increasingly important role. In England, under the current Tory government, there is a question mark over how social housing in any meaningful form can continue to exist at all.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

In the course of the twentieth century, the proportion of households in private-rented housing saw a huge drop. In England and Wales it dropped from three-quarters of all homes in 1918 to just 9 percent in 1991. In Scotland the proportion fell to less than 6 percent. Private renting seemed to be becoming permanently marginalized, but recent years have confounded earlier predictions. In 2016 the figures for private renting were more than 15 percent of households in Scotland and over 20 percent in England. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government removed rent control for new private tenancies in 1989, with the aim of encouraging people to become private landlords, but it was the loss of the social-housing alternative that allowed private renting to increase again. More recently, this has been combined with a decline in homeownership. Financial deregulation and consequent property speculation has forced many households to turn to private lets, first because of the spiralling price of ownership and then in response to financial difficulties consequent of the 2007 financial crash and subsequent austerity economics. Both house-price inflation and crash were the result of government policies to encourage property speculation.

This renewed dependence on private renting has drawn parallels with a 100 years ago, so should we be dusting down those old banners for municipal housing? Certainly all the forces that made private renting a problem in the past are still there. Market pressures tend to reduce quality of repair and security of tenure and to drive up rents. Even if all these things were regulated, and in Scotland we have seen a few small steps in that direction helped by a large Living Rent campaign (see Living Rent, this volume), landlordism remains an intrinsically exploitative system that acts as a major vehicle for transferring further wealth to the rich. Rent paid for private tenancies comes from the pockets of some of the poorest in our society—and, through housing benefit, from the public purse—and it goes to owners of extra properties as unearned income. By contrast, rent paid for council housing returns to local government for reinvestment in the community (figure 11.1).

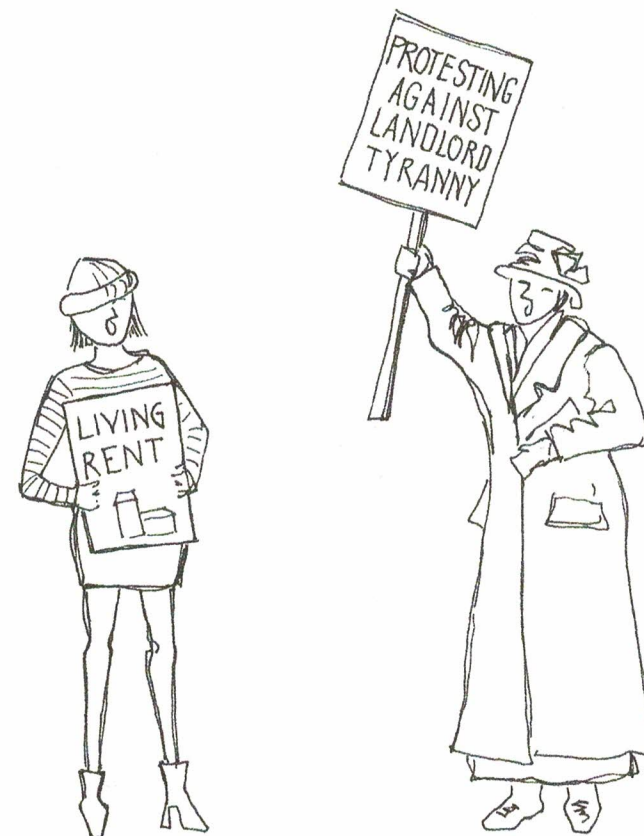


Figure 11.1 Against Landlord Tyranny. Sarah Glynn.

WHAT DO WE WANT?

As a housing activist, I am very aware of how easy it is to become totally absorbed in the urgency of immediate struggle. There does not seem to be time to look beyond individual, often defensive, campaigns to imagine and work out what better system we could be aiming for. And most academic research concentrates on criticizing actually existing processes rather than proposing alternatives. The purpose of this chapter is to step out into the void and put forward some coherent long-term goals as socialist groups were doing in 1915 and as was done by the mass-housing movement of the late 1930s that laid the ground for postwar investment in council housing (Glynn 2005). Activists need to articulate not only what they are against but also what they want and how to get there, so as to supplement immediate struggles with campaigns for real substantial change. A key stage of any such campaign is to get these different ideas onto the wider agenda, to open current housing practices up to discussion and debate and to enable people to begin to realize that another way of doing things is possible.

As with any effective movement, campaigners can build support, strength and understanding by combining the types of grassroots actions described in this book with wider analysis and long-term visions for change. Ideas have to be shown to be desirable, practical and firmly founded on real ground: no mere back of an envelope rhetorical wish for x thousand more council houses but a considered and realizable proposal. It is this that will give people the ammunition to move beyond isolated battles and push for a better system with the same confidence shown by the generation who brought in the Welfare State. As before, struggles against the immediate problems of exploitative private renting need to be linked to the campaign for a publicly funded, publicly owned alternative. And this time activists need to ensure the creation of places that communities can engage with and be proud of.

TOWARDS A NEW KIND OF SOCIALISM

Neoliberal hegemony has acted on the public imagination to equate socialism and public ownership with the worst forms of uncaring bureaucracy. Stalinist Russia is regarded as the inevitable conclusion of any more whole-hearted socialist ambitions, and in the field of housing, public housing has become equated with the worst examples of a troubled housing scheme. It is important to address this rewriting of history and examine public housing's many—often unobtrusive—successes, as well as its more notorious failures. But campaigners also need to make clear that they are not arguing for a return to the bureaucratic systems of the past; that they want to go forward to a different and better future.

Socialist visions of 100 years ago were forged at a time of industrialization and increasing mass production. Along with taking control of the productive forces, they embraced growth and economies of scale as the route to produce enough to meet everyone's needs. Today, productive forces can already generate more than enough for everyone, but capitalism continues to work against more equal distribution. We still need to ensure fair distribution of labour and of the products of that labour through common ownership and control of production, but we do not need further growth; indeed, in a world of finite resources, an economic model based on growth is unsustainable. Instead, we should be looking towards a system with different social and organizational forms, based not on 'growth' but on creating a better society in tune with our environment. Demands for social and environmental sustainability are mutually reinforcing. Both require a shift from a system driven by short-term profit to one that prioritizes long-term social and environmental values—a system that is reinforced through maximizing community ownership and bottom-up democratic control of basic resources (Bookchin 1999; Löwy 2015).

Ideas that can be grouped under the banner of ecosocialism call for a grassroots democracy, where most people can live and work as part of a local community integrated into their environment. They envisage a decentralization of jobs and services to local areas that function as local communities both socially and politically, with community ownership of major industries so that they can be run for the common good. Public or community-owned housing has a vital part in this system. Despite the overwhelming threat posed by climate change, a threat that can serve as a driver towards a social economy and a better type of society, we have to acknowledge that the political climate is not yet ready for such a wholesale shift of outlook, but we can still fight for every change that takes us in this direction. As in the past, the provision of public housing serves important functions in itself, and it is also a transitional step towards a fairer future.

ARGUING THE CASE FOR PUBLIC HOUSING—AND SOME SUPPORTING CHANGES TO TAXATION

After almost four decades of neoliberal housing policies, the case for public housing has never been stronger. The drive for short-term profit has intensified the UK's endemic housing crisis, fuelled inequalities of wealth and opportunity and destroyed the economy. Capitalism will always leech money to the finance sector, as well as to other owners of capital.⁴ But following financial deregulation, the flow to finance has become a flood, fuelling unrestrained property speculation. The Office for National Statistics calculated

in 2015 that dwellings accounted for £5.5 trillion, or 63 percent of the UK's total net worth.⁵ Our economy is built on a giant Ponzi scheme that relies on there being always more buyers for houses at ever increasing prices. When buyers run out and prices fall, the current housing bubble will burst like the last one did ten years ago. In addition, money speculated is not being spent on other things, such as building and improving homes and infrastructure. Housing costs have generated unsustainable levels of personal debt, and the recent revival of private renting has proven to be a vehicle for renewed exploitation.

Although the growth in household formation—itsself a function of our atomized socioeconomic model—along with net migration has generated the need for additional homes, the main driver of the housing crisis remains the systemic failure to address issues of affordability and fair distribution (Dorling 2014). For a propertied elite, their share of wealth is extending off the scale, while, for a growing portion of the population, poor-quality expensive housing is impacting every aspect of their lives. The result of regarding housing as a commodity rather than as homes is being etched on a generation. The underlying demands of any housing campaign—or wider social movement—need to be predicated on reversing this position and regarding housing in terms of social and environmental needs.

A housing policy that focuses on housing as homes, and on promoting housing equality, has to marginalize the use of housing for speculation. Although this could be achieved by taking all property into public ownership, today's politics is not ready for such a step. However, it is possible to move towards similar goals through a transitional, more evolutionary, approach that would combine the expansion of public housing with an effective convergence of different types of housing tenure (Glynn 2014). If private owners were increasingly restricted from using their homes to make private profit, while social tenants were given greater security of tenure and freedom to personalize their homes, and all homes were subject to socially driven planning and regulation, then in the long run, the differences between ownership and social tenancy would tend to diminish. Fiscal changes to reduce speculation could include land value tax (LVT), raising the rate of capital gains tax and extending it to include the main home, a tax on inheritance and ending all subsidies for private ownership (Murphy 2017). Some of these would be more easily introduced than others, but all could be brought in at a low level and subsequently increased. Persuading people to abandon the curious British obsession with house price rises might be harder, but if prices were to fall and stabilize at a lower level, most people actually living in their homes would not suffer from the drop in their paper value, as long as all mortgages were made portable to other properties so they were not prevented from moving. (In Germany, by comparison, the last forty years of housing policy kept prices relatively stable with a slow overall decline.) For those finding

difficulties in meeting their mortgage payments or other costs associated with owning a home, or who would simply prefer to rent, existing mortgage to rent schemes could be extended to offer the alternative of converting their existing home into a local authority tenancy.

The simplest way to ensure that land use is in the public interest is through public ownership. An evolutionary policy model needs to include ways both to increase public ownership and to regulate the use of land that is not publicly owned so as to minimize speculation and maximize social and environmental benefits. When land is brought into public ownership this raises issues of compensation. This could be helped by the reintroduction of the law, abolished in 1959, that allowed councils to purchase land for development at current use-values. The introduction of LVT, combined with a strong, democratic and transparent planning system, would have even wider impact. It would promote the most beneficial use of privately owned land, enable increases in land value to bring public benefit and reduce land speculation, which is the major element of property speculation (Jones 2008). An initial low-level LVT could be brought in as a much more progressive replacement for council tax, as advocated by the Scottish Greens, and included as a possibility in the 2017 Labour Manifesto. As LVT levels increase, so possibilities for land speculation diminish, and ownership moves towards being nothing more than the right to use the land, in accordance with planning guidelines.

At the same time, a major investment in new and upgraded genuinely affordable public housing would allow such housing to become a tenure of choice. We have been conditioned in the United Kingdom to find this surprising, but postwar Swedish housing policy came close to its ideal aim that homes of different tenures should be of similar standard and that there should be no intrinsic financial advantage in living in one type of tenure over another, with the result that ownership patterns did not vary much between different social classes (Kemeny 1981, 102–106). Ultimately, there is no practical, as distinct from political, reason why we could not have a system where everyone who wanted it was entitled to affordable public-rented housing as a universally available service, with no need for rationing or means testing. Universal services need to be paired with a progressive-taxation system so that beneficiaries who are better off make their contribution through higher taxes, and wealth is redistributed. Decent housing is a basic requirement for a well-functioning society, and investment in public housing is investment in a social good, like investment in health, education or transport infrastructure. The postwar welfare state never fully took on the problem of housing—especially after Nye Bevan's resignation in 1951—but a new approach to housing can learn from past mistakes and ensure policy works in the interest both of better homes and of greater equality in housing and beyond. This means not being afraid to invest in building, buying and upgrading public housing.

The provision of social goods should be a major function of government expenditure, and that ought to be sufficient reason in itself for investing in housing. When Birmingham City Council took over the city's waterworks in 1876, the mayor, Joseph Chamberlain, told a House of Commons Committee. 'We have not the slightest intention of making profit. . . . We shall get our profit indirectly in the comfort of the town and in the health of the inhabitants' (quoted in Marmot 2010). It would be a sad day if we cannot aspire to be at least as progressive as a nineteenth-century Liberal. But this does not mean we can ignore the financial costs of such public investment and nor should we fail to recognize the economic benefits of good affordable public housing. The lack of decent housing has financial as well as social costs, and the financial gains from the provision of better homes are potentially huge, even if they are difficult to measure. Good homes and a more equitable housing provision would form the foundation for better health and life chances and better social cohesion. In addition, the building, upgrading and maintenance of the homes would create a major stimulus to the economy, bringing money and jobs to local areas and helping to counter the impact of the economic cycle.

Money in a modern economy is not a physical thing, like a bar of gold, but a promissory note for future payment, which means that theoretically there is no limit on government expenditure so long as this generates sufficient future returns and does not stimulate inflation by putting more money into the economy than there is increase of things to buy. (The idea that government spending can be compared to that of a household is a dangerous fallacy.) Sufficient returns would be what is needed to pay a low-interest loan such as could be made available from a national investment bank. The financial returns from investment in public housing are both direct (from the rents) and induced (recovered by the government as taxes on the economic benefits arising from construction and from better housing). The cost of public services and infrastructure—which should include housing—can also be partially refunded through taxation in other areas, and even with very favourable borrowing rates, it is clear that such contributions would continue to be needed. Wealthy elites always try and persuade the less well-off that taxes are equally an attack on everyone who earns an income or owns even the tiniest bit of property. The argument has to be made, and remade, that when progressive taxation is used to fund public investment and services, the majority of people benefit, especially when wealth distribution has become so skewed in favour of the super-rich 1 percent.

BOTTOM-UP DEMOCRACY

We need public housing. We can afford public housing, but how can it be made to work better? Activists also have to consider how to avoid distant

and inflexible bureaucracies and instead develop locally based management that can respond quickly to needs and keep regular checks on maintenance—perhaps even encompassing the function of concierge. For this to succeed in meeting the needs of tenants, they have to be given the opportunity to play an active part. This can be achieved through tenant management cooperatives. Despite some successful examples in the late 1970s and 1980s (Power 1988; Scott 2000), and a legal 'right to manage' since 1994, these have so far only been taken up by a small proportion of tenants, usually as a result of dissatisfaction with existing management and repairs. Such organizations demand a major commitment from the tenants involved, and any tenant management system needs to strike a careful balance between facilitating the setting-up process and retaining necessary checks and safeguards. An evaluation of English Tenant Management Organizations carried out for the UK government in 2002 found that they were generally well managed and were especially effective in dealing with small repairs, cleaning and general maintenance (Cairncross et al. 2002). Many of the organizations extended their remit beyond basic housing functions.

Of course not all groups of tenants will want, or be able to cope with, such active involvement, especially before the implementation of other social changes (such as a universal basic income) that could give them more time and fewer pressures. In other places, tenant management might be wanted initially, but fail later; however, when that happens, homes can be taken back into full council management. At the same time, care has to be taken that this kind of tenant involvement does not replace and exclude more campaigning forms of tenant organization. Anyone who has been involved with community groups will be familiar with pressures to co-opt and incorporate independent organizations and close down criticism; and tenant groups have proved particularly susceptible through schemes for registration and grant funding (Glynn 2010). Beyond and separate from management organizations of the kind described here, tenants need to be free to arrange their own independent tenant-controlled campaigning organizations, which can act in a comparable manner to a trade union with active local branches. The 1930s housing movement provides a powerful and effective example (Glynn 2005), while organizations such as the Radical Housing Network, Acorn and Living Rent are marking out similar paths today.

Public-sector houses are every bit as much people's homes as are privately owned houses and should feel that way. This means, besides security of tenure, the freedom for tenants to make alterations to suit their household and tastes. They would still be restricted from disadvantaging their neighbours or damaging the value of what remains publicly owned property, but private owners are also required to conform to a degree of neighbourliness

by planning and environmental regulations and would not generally make changes that devalue their home.

Finally, although local authority ownership already ensures a measure of democratic control, if public housing is to respond fully to local needs, it would have to be developed as part of a wider reappraisal of local democracy—a reappraisal that devolved many more decisions to local communities. Although governments pay lip service to local devolution, local democracy in the United Kingdom remains extraordinarily centralized. Radical ideas for a participative grassroots democracy have been developed in Bookchin's writings on 'Libertarian Municipalism' (Bookchin 1999).

PLANNING FOR THE LONG TERM

Public ownership alongside real devolved democracy should enable more sensitive design and planning, with priority given to social and environmental considerations. Developments do not have to be subservient to volume house-builders' requirements to squeeze in the most cost-effective configuration of homes and reap the quickest reward. 'Regeneration' can be designed for existing communities rather than displacing them for more profitable gentrification. Even now, the more holistic and long-term approach possible within the social-housing sector has allowed it to take a lead in creating energy saving homes.

Campaigns for better housing and well-planned places mesh with campaigns for environmental and energy protection and the objectives of environmentally friendly living, strong communities and a better quality of life are mutually reinforcing. Achieving these goals calls for a proactive approach to planning that is guided by the public interest and not reduced to reactive responses to the wishes of developers. Regional planning is needed to coordinate homes and jobs and ecological concerns, so as to make the best use of land and resources and enable a more community-focused way of life.⁶ And at a local level, communities can be directly involved, alongside planners and architects, in designing and developing the places where they live. Attention can then be given to the spaces between buildings and not just to individual houses; provision can be made for local services, efficient and cheap public transport and community spaces; sheltered housing and elderly friendly outdoor spaces can be integrated into communities with proper facilities for children and young adults; and developments can be laid out to maximize natural light and sunshine and access to the outdoors and green space. The improved environment, as well as people's involvement in its creation, can help to reinforce community structures.

None of these changes will be handed down to us. Every improvement will have to be fought for, and to do this we need clear positive agendas for worked out and workable alternatives. The fight for better housing is a fight for better housing quality, for greater housing equality and for genuine environmental sustainability. These will not be fully achieved until we have created a more equal, community-centred society, driven by social rather than simply economic criteria; but the fight for better housing—based on democratic public housing—is part of the bigger campaign for that better society. Every gain will not only be valuable in itself but will also contribute to that greater aim.

NOTES

1. In a speech to the local authorities given in April 1919, George V observed: 'If unrest is to be converted into contentment, the provision of good homes may provide one of the most potent agents in that conversion' (quoted in Burnett 1978, 215).
2. Scotland still has a higher proportion of social housing than the rest of the United Kingdom and more owned by local authorities than by housing associations.
3. Although housing associations include tenants on their board, these are not there as tenant representatives and have to act in the interests of the association.
4. This even applies to council housing whenever money is borrowed in the open market or construction is carried out by private contractors.
5. www.ons.gov.uk/news/news/ukworth88trillion.
6. A major factor in the current housing crisis is the lack of any significant attempt to bring investment and jobs to areas where homes are available, and so stem migration to an ever-more crowded London and southeast England. This also results in socially and environmentally unsustainable commuting.

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