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# FROM BOUNDARY ESTATE TO GRENFELL TOWER: THE CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF BRITAIN'S COUNCIL HOUSING

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## **Abstract**

In its heyday in the 1970s, Britain's council housing sector provided homes to 40 per cent of the British population before falling victim to privatization, which changed homes for Britain's workers into commodities subject to property speculation. The fraction of the original council housing stock that has been preserved serves the needs of the society's most vulnerable. However, the concept of council housing as social housing is a later one; originally, council estates were designed for aspirational workers and were intended as mixed communities, with working and middle-class residents living side by side. Taking a historical perspective, the article maps the development of the concept of council housing in Britain from the original idea, inspired by garden cities such as Letchworth or Welwyn Garden City, to the gradual changes to both the design of council estates and their intended purpose that transformed the once socially desirable housing type into a symbol of social failure and deprivation. The recent tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire is used as a case in point to illustrate this process of change. In addition to historical research, the paper draws on recent sociological reports and newspaper articles dealing with the issue of Britain's council housing.

## **Key words**

*Council housing; garden city; working class; Right to Buy; Grenfell Tower*

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## **1. Introduction**

In a sense, the history of British council housing mirrors the history of Britain's working-class: its dreams, aspirations, as well as its decline. Addressing the need for decent state-provided housing available to working people represented one of the key goals of Britain's twentieth-century welfare state project. Currently, council housing carries a distinct social stigma and is subject to a wide array of stereotypes. However, this has not always been the case; obtaining council home tenancy was once a sign of upward mobility and the manifestation of a working-class family's desire for a decent life.

Taking a diachronous perspective, the article aims to map the development of the concept of council housing in Britain from the original idea, inspired by garden cities such as Letchworth or Welwyn, to the policies which turned the originally desirable housing option into a symbol of social failure and deprivation. It seeks to demonstrate that the gradual changes in the perception of the role and purpose of council homes had a fundamental and lasting impact on their design and social make-up; as well as their ability to constitute a viable solution to relieving the widespread housing need. While overwhelmingly historical in its approach, the article also pays attention to the present situation, using the tragic fate of Grenfell Tower (a high-rise block whose fire in 2017 resulted in 72 deaths) as a symbol of the downward trajectory travelled by council housing since its origins. The article draws on a number of monographs (most notably Lynsey Hanley's *Estates*, Danny Dorling's *All That is Solid* and Alison Ravetz's *Council Housing and Culture*), as well as sociological reports by organizations such as Joseph Rowntree Foundation or Shelter, blogs (above all John Boughton's *Municipal Dreams*), academic papers, newspaper articles and documentary films, such as Adam Curtis' *The Great British Housing Disaster*.

## 2. Middle-class homes for working-class people: the high-minded origins

Britain's first council development, Boundary Estate, was built in 1900 in Shoreditch on the site of London's most notorious slum, Old Nichol. Famously exposed by Andrew Morrison's social novel *A Child of the Jago*, the Dickensian living conditions of Old Nichol's residents were replicated in various degrees of severity across Britain's inner city boroughs (St. Ann's in Nottingham, the Gorbals in Glasgow, Angel Meadow in Manchester and others). In 1863, the magazine *Illustrated London News* described Old Nichol as "one painful and monotonous round of vice, filth, and poverty, huddled in dark cellars, ruined garrets, bare and blackened rooms, teeming with disease and death" (Boughton 2018: 9). In a similar vein, the overcrowding suffered by the slum's dwellers was brought to public attention by the *Builder* magazine:

With few exceptions, each room contains a separate family; some consisting of mother, father, and eight children. The first two adjoining houses that we looked into, of six rooms each, contained forty-eight persons. To supply these with water, a stream runs for ten or twelve minutes each day, except Sunday, from a small tap at the back of one of the houses. The houses are, of course, ill-ventilated. The front room in the basement, wholly below the ground, dark and damp, is occupied, at a cost of 2s. a week for rent. (Slum Rag Bag 2010)

By the time the embellished redbrick buildings of the Boundary Estate were erected, various projects had already been underway to provide decent housing to families languishing in sub-standard rental properties in inner city slums. As was typical in the Victorian era, these were invariably undertakings of the char-

itable sector, such as the Peabody Trust, whose “model dwellings” had the appearance of stern, barrack-like blocks, with tenants subject to strict rules of conduct which left them with a limited sense of autonomy, making social reformer Charles Booth comment that “The first sentimental objection to the block life is the small scope it gives for individual freedom. The second is its painful ugliness and uninterestingness in external look” (Stamp 2016).

By the 1890s, it was becoming evident that charitable provision alone was not sufficient to tackle the problem of the slums. Despite the general reluctance of politicians to entrust the provision of working-class homes to municipal authorities, with private home ownership still given wide preference, the Housing of the Working Classes Act of 1890 made it significantly easier for local councils to clear slums and build new residential houses. This opportunity was seized with considerable enthusiasm by the reformist London City Council (LCC). Dominated by the Progressive Party, whose ranks included a mix of labour leaders, radical Liberals and Fabians such as Sidney Webb, Arthur Hobhouse, or John Benn (grandfather of postwar Labour minister Tony Benn), the local authority body set out to implement sweeping reforms of London’s working-class housing sector.

Instrumental to the launching of the early council housing projects was the LCC’s Housing of the Working Classes Branch (a subset of its Architect’s Department), with Owen Fleming, a Socialist-leaning architect haunted by the insanitary conditions endured by the poorest, being its driving force. At the age of only twenty-six, Fleming was put in charge of designing London’s first council housing scheme, the Boundary Estate. Critical of both the terraced slums of East End and the barrack-like charitable dwellings, Fleming embarked upon creating a “picturesque urban village,” comprising 23 multi-storey redbrick tenement blocks based around a central open garden area (Boughton 2018: 21). Separated by open spaces providing ample light and fresh air, each of the free-standing buildings was built to an aesthetically developed, ornamental design, quite untypical of any preceding working-class housing project. In addition to shops, schools and other amenities, the estate included tree-lined boulevards, promenades and a central bandstand to cater to the residents’ leisure activities, altogether providing a housing standard previously only accessible to the middle classes (today, the largely privatized estate remains highly sought after for its time-tested quality, spaciousness and access to greenery). The acknowledgement of working-class people’s need for – and entitlement to – solidly built and aesthetically pleasing housing represented a radical break with the previous tradition of housing unprivileged sections of the population, as did the idea that the task should be undertaken by the local authorities, not private landlords or charitable entities.

Naturally, neither Fleming nor his successors worked in a cultural or architectural vacuum. Two major influences proved crucial to the way the early council estates were envisioned, designed and delivered. The first major inspiration was the Arts and Crafts movement, inspired by art critic John Ruskin and spearheaded by artist and social visionary William Morris. The movement’s cry for the restoration of aesthetics to everyday life and the creation of beautiful, well-made objects as opposed to the aesthetically inferior industrial-age mass production struck a responsive chord with the progressives found among Britain’s young architects.

Morris's vision of a more wholesome way of life, inspired by the pre-industrial era, also included housing for the masses. Such housing, he argued, should be solidly built, aesthetically pleasing, and situated amidst ample greenery. Elaborating on the "due necessities for a good citizen" in his essay *Art and Socialism*, he argued:

The second necessity is *decency of surroundings*: including (a) good lodging; (b) ample space; (c) general order and beauty. That is (a) our houses must be well built, clean and healthy; (b) there must be abundant garden space in our towns, and our towns must not eat up the fields and natural features of the country; nay I demand even that there be left waste places and wilds in it, or romance and poetry – that is Art – will die out amongst us. (c) Order and beauty means, that not only our houses must be stoutly and properly built, but also that they be ornamented duly: that the fields be not only left for cultivation, but also that they be not spoilt by it any more than a garden is spoilt: no one for instance to be allowed to cut down, for mere profit, trees whose loss would spoil a landscape. (Morris 1997)

Traces of Morris's influence can be found in many of the early council homes. The ornamental appearance of the Boundary Estate's blocks is one example, but it is the cottage estates built outside inner city areas, such as Old Oak in Hammer-smith, where Morris's presence is the most apparent – not only in their historicizing style but also in the airiness and spaciousness that Morris deemed essential for working people's dwellings. While acknowledging the necessity to build tenement blocks in the heavily developed inner cities, the early planners showed, where possible, the preference for cottage-type houses with gardens. This, after all, was something the prospective residents themselves overwhelmingly wanted, a preference which changed little over the next 70 years of council house construction, leading the post-war architect Ted Hollanby to remark that "People do not desperately desire to be housed in large estates, no matter how imaginative the design and convenient the dwellings. Most people like fairly small-scale and visually comprehensible environments. They call them villages, even when they are manifestly not" (quoted in Boughton 2014). The ability of the council housing pioneers to tap into the majority view of what constituted a desirable home (with traditional-looking houses widely preferred over modern-style flats), represented one of reasons behind the enduring success of the early estates.

The second major influence on the early stages of council housing was the garden city movement envisioned by the social reformist Ebenezer Howard and implemented by the Socialist-minded architect Raymond Unwin. In his seminal book *The Garden Cities of Tomorrow*, Howard laid out his plans for economically self-sufficient mixed communities enjoying the benefits of both town and country by combining high-quality housing (complete with plentiful communal amenities) with sufficient provision of green and open spaces. The garden cities, of which Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City in Herefordshire remain the best-known examples, were intended to offer an alternative to life in industrial cities rife with squalor, overcrowding and lack of exposure to nature. Their underlying concept, however, went beyond the mere improvement of housing conditions.

First and foremost, Howard was a social visionary, and his garden city was designed as a social city, with land purchased collectively, rents re-invested into community development, and the city being a self-governing and self-funding entity propelled by a strong sense of community cohesion. There was a philosophical substance to the garden city concept; a new kind of society pioneered. As noted by the American architectural critic Lewis Mumford in 1972, Howard's vision "laid the foundation of for a new cycle of urban civilization: one in which the means of life will be subservient to the purpose of living, and in which the pattern needed for biological survival and economic efficiency will likewise lead to social and personal fulfilment" (Clark 2003).

Although innovative on the one hand, Howard's urban planning ideas (much like Morris's) had a regressive aspect to them. Howard's desire to return Britain's workers "back to the land" stemmed from his romanticized view of medieval agrarian communities as healthier and more wholesome environments, vastly superior to the late Victorian industrial cities. Through living in village-like mixed developments composed of historicizing cottage architecture, the working classes were expected to be restored to health, both physical and psychological. They were also implicitly expected to become more like the middle classes, whose way of life was perceived as more truly reflecting the "uncorrupted" pre-industrial model of existence. Thus, despite its visionary quality and communitarian accent, the garden city movement can be said to have aimed for and reproduced an essentially bourgeois mode of living (Clevenger 2017).

The intended middle-class character of council homes was confirmed by the standards laid out in the so-called Tudor Walters Report published several weeks before the armistice of 1918. Members of David Lloyd George's government were aware that a multitude of soldiers would soon be returning from the war, expecting to be housed decently. In addition, women, for whom housing was an issue of prime importance, were about to vote for the first time. Last but not least, the government was harbouring fears of working-class unrest, as witnessed in the rent strikes of 1914 and 1915. Thus, the provision of high-quality housing was seen as an ad hoc insurance against revolution and a strategy of maintaining the status quo (Fraser 1996: 17). Given the disarray of the private building sector as a result of the war and its inability to build working-class homes offering affordable rents, the public authorities, provided with additional funding in the form of subsidies, were designated by the government as the principal house-building agents.

Asked by Lloyd George to investigate the structure of working-class housing and propose standards for new homes, the committee led by the Liberal MP and housing expert Tudor Walters (and inspired by Raymond Unwin's *Town Planning in Practice*) presented a concept that determined the design of council homes (and the character of British towns) for the whole of the inter-war area. Ambitiously, the committee aimed "to profoundly influence the general standard of housing in this country and to encourage the building of houses of such quality that they would remain above the acceptable minimum standards for at least sixty years" ((Park 2017: 18)). According to the report, the new homes were not to be the constricted, high-density terrace houses that constituted much of the existing working-class housing, but spacious and airy low-density cottage suburbs.

The houses were simpler in design than those of the original garden cities, but their standard was vastly superior to the standards required of council housing today. The houses, built at no more than 12 to the acre, contained both a front and back garden, a living room, a bathroom, a water closet, a larder and some of them even a parlour (Hatchett 2017). In addition to the provision of generous space (a minimum floor area of 760 square feet), the practicalities of daily life were carefully thought of; for instance, the kitchen windows were designed to face the back garden to enable mothers to oversee their children at play. In addition, the use of cul-de-sacs was advised to prevent through traffic, making the streets cleaner and safer.

The standards proposed by the Tudor Walters report provided vital inspiration for one of the most significant pieces of interwar legislation, the Addison Housing Act of 1919. It created a nationwide system of public housing provision, funded by the central government and implemented by local authorities and the interwar equivalents of today's building societies, the Public Utility Societies. The principles underlying the legislation dominated Britain's housing sector for much of the twentieth century, although only 17,000 of the planned 500,000 homes were completed in the interwar era due to financial restrictions. Under the Act, which provided a no-limit per-house subsidy to local authorities, some of Britain's largest estates were built, such as Becontree in Dagenham, containing 24,000 homes.

Christopher Addison, the author of the Act, was a medical doctor by training. Possessing detailed knowledge of life in Britain's slums, he entered politics on the conviction that the effects of poverty on health could only be fought by governments, not by the medical profession. In his pamphlet *Betrayal of the Slums*, he detailed the human and social costs of life in the widespread one or two-room slum dwellings:

It is not the people's fault that their life is spent in unsavoury tenements wherein they and, often enough, two or three other families have to share the same tap in the yard or on the next landing, as well as a dirty closet which it is nobody's business in particular to keep clear. It is no fault of theirs that the mother of the family has only an ordinary fire grate in which to cook the meals and that the same room has to serve as a wash house, living room and bedrooms. It is not their fault that there is no possibility morning, noon or night for any member of the family to have any manner of privacy whatever; that the infant and the little child have to sleep in the room which other have to frequent when they come in for supper and during the evening; that it is not possible for fresh air to get through the tenement because it opens either on to a stuffy landing or is backed by another house; that boys and girls have to sleep in the same room together; that even at the time of birth, or in the hour of death, the same unyielding conditions, save for the kindness of neighbours, similarly circumstances govern the whole conduct of their family life. (Addison 1922: 62)

Intimate knowledge of these conditions explains, to a great extent, Addison's insistence on the unusually high housing standards providing ample space, suf-

ficient privacy and fresh air. Although his ambitions for the construction of 500,000 government-funded homes were dashed due to concerns over costs and changed government spending priorities, council houses for general needs continued to be built throughout the 1920s, albeit in smaller numbers than originally planned. Due to the relatively high rents reflecting the costs of building these superior-quality homes, the new council tenants were overwhelmingly members of the skilled, better-paid working class, whose vacated homes were expected to be taken up by those beneath them, a process known as *filtering up*. As argued by housing historian Alison Ravetz, the design and management of the council homes reflected a “bias towards the more respectable working classes” (Ravetz 2001: 32), with life in the estates suiting aspirational families ready to embrace the middle-class way of life. Being allocated a council home was a milestone in a family’s path to a more decent way of life, a fundamental means of embourgeoisement.

The 1930s, however, witnessed a major change in the attitude to council housing. The Conservative-dominated National Government saw the future of housing provision in the private sector and favoured owner occupation over council tenancy. Instead of building for general needs, local authorities were instructed to prioritize slum clearance. With the more prosperous workers newly aspiring to home ownership, council housing became an intended housing option for those “who could aspire to no better” (Boughton 2018: 58), a trend which intensified under post-war Conservative governments.

### 3. The highs and lows of the post-war era

With tens of thousands of Britain’s houses destroyed in the bombing raids of the Blitz, the necessity to build homes emerged with unprecedented urgency after 1945. Inadequate housing, or squalor, was identified as one of the five giants of the Beveridge Report, which constituted the roadmap for building Britain’s post-war Welfare State. However, the envisioned role of council housing in the planned “New Jerusalem” went far beyond the ideas underpinning local authority building in the interwar era. For Lloyd George, the provision of council housing was a strategy of preserving the status quo, of giving the workers a stake in the system and thus preventing them from radicalization. In contrast, for the post-war champion of council house building, Labour Minister of Health and Housing Aneurin Bevan, homes for working-class people were a means of *changing* the status quo, of ushering in a more egalitarian society which would make the experience of the Hungry Thirties impossible to repeat.

Born in the Welsh mining village of Tredegar, Bevan experienced acute poverty in his childhood. Driven by a burning passion for the improvement of working people’s lives (culminating in his creation of the National Health Service), he was adamant that working-class people had the right to housing of the same quality as middle-class individuals. Like Addison, he was a staunch believer in the role of local authorities in housing provision, his hope being that private renting or owner occupation would gradually diminish as council housing became the

dominant sector. In his speeches, he made no disguise of his aversion to speculative builders, who, in his view, not only built second-rate homes but also destroyed the English countryside with their sprawling monstrosities (Francis 1997: 127).

In a stark break with the Conservative view of council housing being for those too poor to aim for home ownership, Bevan insisted that the council-built developments should be mixed communities, with working- and middle-class residents living side by side in the fashion of pre-industrial *merrie England* villages. He believed that the pre-war system, where speculative builders built for one income group and the local authorities for another, led to the creation of “castrated” communities, perceived by him as a “wholly evil thing from a civilized point of view ... a monstrous infliction upon the essential and biological oneness of the community” (quoted in Hughes 1998: 58). Through its building policies, Bevan argued, the state should encourage and foster broad social interaction:

We should try to introduce in our modern villages and towns what was always the lovely feature of of English and Welsh villages, where the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer all lived in the same street. I believe that is essential for the full life of a citizen [...] to see the living tapestry of a mixed community. (quoted in Rogers 2017)

Bevan’s holistic vision of the newly planned estates involved not only diverse socio-economic groups but also the co-existence of different generations. Believing that young families should be housed alongside senior citizens to achieve a healthy generational mix, he famously declared that elderly people “do not want to look out of their windows on endless processions of funerals of their friends; they also want to look at processions of perambulators” (quoted in Beckett and Beckett 2004: 79).

Bevan’s idealism was also apparent in his insistence on the good quality of the houses. The standards proposed by him were higher than before, or, indeed, since. In addition to providing exceptionally generous space (900 square feet), the houses included amenities such as bathrooms and downstairs toilets, as well as spacious front and back gardens. The experience of relocation to Bevan’s houses was aptly summarized by Neil Kinnock, the 1980s Labour leader, who recalled later in his life that moving to one of the new bungalows in Tredegar after the war had been like “moving to Beverly Hills ... it had a fridge, a bath, central heating and a smokeless grate. People used to come just to look at it” (Kynaston 2008: 248).

Bevan was adamant that the quality of the houses must take precedence over their quantity. Firmly resisting pressures to relax the standards in order to enable more homes to be delivered, he maintained that his government would be judged by the type of the houses built, not by their number. Moreover, only homes attractive enough for professionals as well as workers would enable the creation of the desired mixed communities. However, Bevan’s uncompromising approach proved a historical anomaly that did not survive the general election of 1951. With the country still in the grip of a severe housing shortage, the Conservatives challenged Labour’s housing policy with a vote-winning pledge to build 300,000

council homes a year, their election manifesto recognizing housing as “the first of the social services”, to which the Conservative government would give “a priority second only to national defence” (Spiers 2018: 9).

Once in power in 1951, the Conservatives did honour their promise to build at an unprecedented rate. To meet the targets, however, the character of the estates changed fundamentally. With Harold Macmillan, the future Prime Minister, serving as the Minister for Housing, the leafy *merrie England* cottage estates gave way to high-density system-built blocks of flats that were cheaper and faster to build. The newly emerging high-rise estates became the playing fields of a new generation of progressive-minded architects captivated by European architectural trends, especially Le Corbusier’s concept of houses as “machines to live in”, stripped of any bourgeois attributes and fostering a collective spirit (Christopher 1999: 184). This philosophy meant the abandonment of the earlier efforts to create principally middle-class living spaces for working-class people that provided sufficient autonomy, privacy and direct access to greenery. Moreover, the futuristic, bare-bones appearance of the new housing projects ran against the instincts of the majority of the residents, unaccustomed to high-rise living, or, indeed, living in flats as such. While the Bevanite and pre-Bevanite council house planning had successfully reflected popular architectural tastes, very little consideration appears to have been given to people’s preferences in the case of the technocratic high-rise projects. In the BBC documentary *Why I Hate the Sixties*, mapping the more problematic aspects of 1960s Britain, a respondent filmed at the height of of high-rise spree emphatically summarizes the widespread grievances of those earmarked to live in the new-built estates:

And I don’t like the proposed plan, the metropolis come true that they propose for us. I mean, who wants to live in that? Who wants to live in a tower flat or even a few storeys above? I have to ask a caretaker, ‘Please, may I hang a picture on these composition walls? Please may I keep a cat?’. In fact, in some of the places it would be cruel to keep an animal in. Conceding that in a great many of those places you couldn’t do those things, I say that the places that are built where you can’t do homely things, the things that make home, the things that spell home, those places are not home. (Why I Hate the Sixties 2004)

However, it was not only council housing architecture that changed after Bevan’s departure; it was also the very idea of what and who council housing was for. Discarding the Bevanite requirement that the state should act as the principal provider of housing for the general public, the Conservatives reinstated their belief in the private sector as the primary driving force in housing development. In the spirit of Thomas Skelton’s interwar concept of property-owning democracy (later the central element of Margaret Thatcher’s economic policy), they made owner occupation the preferred housing mode again. Titled *Housing: The Next Step*, the Tory White Paper of 1953 celebrated private housing as “the most satisfying to the individual and the most beneficial to the nation” (O’Mahony 2007: 207). The policy shift was a manifestation of the party’s long-held view that home ownership

eroded Socialist tendencies and made voters more likely to vote Conservative. In addition, it reflected the preferences of private builders, landlords and solicitors heavily represented in Conservative-held local authorities. Crucially, it spelled the end of the vision of garden city-like mixed communities where manual workers and professionals lived side by side. Instead, just like in the 1930s, the role of the state as the housing provider was reduced to housing those in need, with the rest becoming either owner-occupiers or private renters. “Those in need” overwhelmingly meant slum dwellers, and it was slum clearance schemes and relocation to high-rise buildings that the government provided subsidies for, with the general subsidy for housing being abolished in 1956.

Furthermore, the pressure to build for quantity led to a marked decrease in quality standards. The use of industrial construction with offsite manufacturing methods and previously untried and untested materials (a trend continuing until the 1970s) made the homes less durable than expected, a phenomenon investigated and critiqued by Adam Curtis in his groundbreaking BBC documentary *The Great British Housing Disaster* (1984). Moreover, underinvestment and poor maintenance led to the deterioration of both the exterior and the interior of the houses, causing the swift decline of many of the estates. Even those that were built to a relatively high standard, such as Cressingham Gardens in Lambeth, suffered as a result. Indeed, the argument that maintenance neglect was just as responsible for the fall of council estates as their dehumanised appearance and shoddy construction has been gaining traction in recent housing research (Clemoes 2015).

The transformation of the estates from homes for broad communities into poverty enclaves, already underway in the 1960s, was spurred by Labour’s Housing Act of 1977 (also known as the Homeless Persons Act), which required local authorities to prioritize vulnerable groups in the provision of council homes. This key piece of legislation made a substantial contribution to the residualisation of council estates, a process in which estates became a safety net for those unable to obtain adequate private sector accommodation due to poverty, age, physical or mental health issues or various other problems. Though multifaceted in its causes, residualization was closely tied to the changing economic conditions, with swathes of the working classes becoming marginalized in the process of the decline of traditional industries and the expansion of the service industry (Malpass and Murie 1982:18). The prioritization of welfare-dependant individuals drove many of the original tenants of the estates away, leading to the break-up of the formerly close-knit communities. In the 2011 BBC documentary *The Great Estate – The Rise and Fall of the Council House*, a long-term resident of Thamesmead Estate, transformed in the 1970s from a model development for aspiring working-class families into one of London’s most notorious “sink estates”, recalls the change:

Before we moved here, we ticked all the boxes. I had a job. I could pay my way. And we were told quite categorically that everybody on Thamesmead would have to pay. Fortunately or unfortunately, they decided that their policy was no longer viable. They had to change the rules and had people who were on subsistence. Not that there is anything wrong with the people on subsistence, but that changed everything. (The Great Estate 2012)

Finally, a key factor which hastened the restructuring of council housing and its demise as a comprehensive housing model was the policy of selling off council homes into private ownership, the so-called Right to Buy. Although already in operation before 1979, with numerous local authorities seeking to shed their council stock to save on maintenance costs, it was Thatcher's Housing Act of 1980s that launched a massive wave of tenure transfer that turned council tenants into property owners. Skilfully tapping into the growing popularity of private home ownership, the Right to Buy legislation proved a definitive vote winner, with 400,000 council homes bought by November 1982 thanks to large discounts offered to the buyers (Homer 2017). Predictably, it was the more attractive properties, the detached, semi-detached or terraced homes occupied by more affluent council tenants that were bought off, with less desirable homes such as blocks of flats constituting the bulk of the remaining council stock.

Drastically reducing the pool of homes available to those unable to join the property ladder, the Right to Buy represented the climax of the transformation of council housing from an attractive housing choice to an "ambulance service" for the society's neediest. With home ownership hailed as a sign of gaining a stake in the ascending property-owning democracy, council tenants became real residual citizens, with those who could moving away. Whether in reality or in popular discourse, council tenancy became increasingly synonymous with social failure, with the tenants frequently portrayed as antisocial "chavs" and subjected to various forms of symbolic violence, a trend fuelled to a great extent by the tabloid media or a number of popular TV shows such as *Little Britain*. In the words of sociologist Tracy Shildrick, "Little wonder then that in the popular and public imagination, social housing has all too often become synonymous with the so-called 'sink estate' purported to be inhabited by only the hopeless, the workshy and the criminals" (Shildrick and MacDonald 2013).

#### 4. The shadow of Grenfell Tower

In 2017, the downgraded status of council housing was painfully revealed by the Grenfell Tower disaster, which saw the 24-storey tower block in London's North Kensington engulfed in flames following a fridge-freezer malfunction. 72 people were killed and more than 70 others injured. Although situated in one of London's most affluent boroughs, the Brutalist block of flats was home to some vulnerable, largely immigrant households living in overcrowded conditions. The tenants' long-term concerns over poor safety and neglected maintenance, echoing the complaints of numerous other council estate residents across the UK, went unheeded by the local authority. As noted by Dawn Foster in *The Jacobin*:

They were met with silence, and several told me on the scene they were convinced it was because they were poor, living in a rich borough that was determined to socially cleanse the area as part of a gentrifying project. People were given the message that they were lucky to have any home at all, let alone in a borough that harbored such wealth. (Foster 2017)

The fact that the residualized building was situated in a wealthy borough played a role in the devastating fire. One of the continuous grievances of Grenfell's tenants had been the presence of flammable cladding installed on the concrete building as part of its refurbishment. To prevent the tower block from being an eyesore to the affluent residents living in the area, the council had decided to conceal its grim concrete exterior under a more visually acceptable shell (Griffin 2017). The choice of unsafe materials, driven by an effort to keep costs to the minimum, directly contributed to the swift spreading of the flames. Similar cladding has since been identified in at least 470 other tower blocks across the UK, raising concerns about another possible disaster.

Widely interpreted and reported on as a "Tale of Two Cities" laying bare the deep-seated urban inequalities, the Grenfell disaster can also be viewed as epitomising the decline of council housing itself, or rather, the crisis of council housing caused by long-term central and local government neglect. Cash-strapped as a result of continued government cuts, local councils, both Labour and Conservative, have been looking at ways of generating profit, leading them to adopt various "regeneration" schemes whereby private buyers or renters are attracted to public projects. The remodelling of the existing housing stock often involves interference with the design and layout of the buildings to squeeze in private units, with safety being compromised on numerous occasions. Running parallel to the process of regeneration are attempts by local authorities to move out the poorest tenants from estates earmarked for remodelling in order to make way for more lucrative residents. As housing expert Fergus O'Sullivan notes,

In order to maximize these profits, there is pressure to remove as many poorer public-housing tenants as possible, to make more room for market-rate apartments. Homes that previously had public tenants in them are left unfilled, while public tenants can be offered a flat fee to clear out and never return (in some cases without fully understanding that the money offered bars their right to return). Evictions spike as property management companies instigate zero-tolerance policies against rent arrears. Slowly but surely, the number of public tenants who retain the right to live in the refurbished or rebuilt building is whittled away. (O'Sullivan 2017)

Thus, in many places, residualized estates are becoming gentrified, with the safety net of social housing being torn apart as market forces assert themselves ever more aggressively in the public sphere. Yet, the current demand for council housing in Britain is enormous, as seen from the growing waiting lists. With both home ownership and private renting becoming increasingly unaffordable as Britain grapples with a severe housing crisis, even a small flat in a tower block can mean the difference between getting by and destitution. For all the negative stereotyping attached to council estates, there is evidence that the residents themselves value their tenancy and greatly prefer it to living in private rental properties. For instance, a recent survey by the housing charity Shelter found that almost nine out of ten council tenants were happy with their housing, while 77 per cent of them stated they felt fortunate to live in a council home (Mattison et al.

2019: 6). Nevertheless, the respondents expressed pessimism about the future of council housing, blaming politicians for a lack of will to build more homes. Their less-than-hopeful outlook appears justified; the number of social homes built has dropped by almost 90 per cent since the Conservatives came to power in 2010 (Kentish 2018). Yet, all of the evidence available indicates that amidst the present cost-of-living crisis and the vagaries of the gig economy, the need for affordable council homes is more pressing than ever.

## 5. Conclusion

Over its century-long history, Britain's council housing has undergone dramatic development in response to the changing views on its role and purpose. Its beginnings were rooted in both idealism (the high-mindedness of the Arts and Crafts and garden city movements), and pragmatism (Lloyd George's intent to use it to ease social tensions). The initial insistence on its quality and high aesthetic value prevented poorer segments of the working class from accessing it, with the more prosperous skilled workers being the main beneficiaries of its existence. Until the 1950s, Britain's council estates maintained a distinctly traditional, *merrie England* appearance, consisting mainly of cottage-style developments imitating middle-class suburbs. Due to the conformity of this kind of design with Britons' general living preferences, council homes were highly desirable and their allocation was an indicator of upward social mobility. The finest hour for council housing arrived under the post-war Labour administration, with the social reformer Aneurin Bevan envisioning it as the universal housing mode, gradually replacing both owner occupation and private renting. For him, council housing represented the "great leveller" helping to bridge the class gap as residents of various income groups shared one living space.

Although the subsequent two decades brought significant expansion in council house construction, the design and execution of the new homes (mostly mass-manufactured flats, including high-rise blocks) alienated many residents, with the more aspirational ones preferring to try their fortune at owner occupation. Lack of investment and maintenance, together with the policies of residualisation implemented amidst social change caused by the decline of traditional industries, transformed council estates into zones of last resort housing. With the Conservative governments of recent years remaining as committed as ever to the idea of the private sector being the principal provider of homes, there is a reprehensible lack of any coherent vision for Britain's public housing, despite the soaring demand for affordable homes. As the Right to Buy continues to eat away at the torso of the council stock and the process of gentrification causes tenant displacement, low-income families are increasingly forced to rely on the volatile private rental market providing overpriced, unstable and often sub-standard accommodation, something the nineteenth-century founders of Britain's council housing sought to remedy in the first place. As far as housing ordinary people is concerned, history may well have come full circle.

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