

## Housing Targets Are Not Enough

*Former Labour housing and local government adviser in the 1960s, Ann Carlton, recalls the aims, methods and motivations of house-building in the 1960s and 70s and worries that we are making the same mistakes in similar ways for the same reasons*

The leaflet aimed at women voters called for, “Good houses at reasonable cost. No rack rents No damp, dark overcrowded tenements” and claimed, “Local Authorities could build 500,000 good houses and let them at reasonable rents.”

That Labour Party leaflet was written in the 1920s. Nearly 100 years later politicians of all parties, appalled by housing conditions and shortages, are still setting unreachable housebuilding targets, calling for an end to bad housing conditions and for new homes at reasonable rents.

During the 1966 general election, over forty years after the leaflet’s publication, I was answering phone calls at Labour’s Headquarters when a quavering voice asked, “Where are the Homes Fit for Heroes we were promised when we got back from the War?” The caller was living in an Islington slum, as he had been when he went off to fight in the First World War, and was still waiting for politicians to deliver on their housebuilding promises.

In that election year Dick Crossman, then the Cabinet Minister responsible for Housing and Local Government, was also pushing a target of 500,000 new homes. The idea was to achieve that annual target through a combination of the public and private sector building.

Maximising housebuilding figures was considered so important during Labour’s 1966 election campaign that Crossman and I decided to include figures for housing in Northern Ireland in Labour’s statistics of its housebuilding achievements – something which had never previously been done. It was unfortunate that Crossman then forgot how we had achieved our inflated totals. Watching him floundering in a television interview, I vowed never to fiddle a statistic again.

At that time some of the practical barriers to an increase in housebuilding were caused by the structure of government itself. The Ministry of Public Building and Works, not Housing, was responsible for the building industry and, in an attempt to deal with problems of land supply, the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, had set up a Ministry of Land and Natural Resources. Responsibility for the supply of land and building materials was thus divided from responsibility for housebuilding.

Fifty years ago Cabinet ministers were unafraid of terrorist attacks. They were driven around in conspicuous, petrol guzzling, black Austin Princess cars – so big I could almost

stand upright inside them. The large cars could do a lot for political egos, and sometimes helped divorce ministers from reality. Moreover, in the Sixties there were no political advisers (or Spads as they are now called) to counter civil service influence over departmental ministers; instead staff at Labour's HQ tried to keep members of the government in touch with the world outside Whitehall. In some cases, it was an uphill struggle.

I found it particularly frustrating when, as Labour HQ's expert on housing and local government and horrified by the advocacy of tower blocks, I tried to persuade Crossman to look into research indicating it could be just as practical and more family friendly to build low rise houses at high density, as to build tower blocks by industrialised building (IB) methods. I had already seen in Liverpool the adverse effects on families of high-rise living. Sadly, Dick was not interested in achieving his half million target that way. I was wasting my time.

I then tried to persuade his Minister of State, Bob Mellish, to look into building more conventional, lower rise dwellings. Again I got nowhere. The builders had convinced him: Industrial building, and tower blocks, was the way ahead. The number of new dwellings built was all. Bob was not interested in (to him) vague quality and lifestyle issues. He was well-intentioned and intent on clearing London's slums. But for him huge concrete slabs were the answer.

Earlier, studying housing in Liverpool in 1963, I had encountered similar misplaced quantitative idealism. That, then overcrowded, city was blighted by problems caused by a filthy and dilapidated housing stock, as well as shortages caused by German bombing. Officials and councillors, intent on providing better lives for Liverpudlians, could only think of knocking down as many slum terraces as fast as possible and building as many new dwellings as fast as possible. The then Conservative government was fully behind Liverpool City Council in their dedication to quantity. A highlight of a visit to the city by Sir Keith Joseph, the Conservative Housing Minister 1962-64, was a demonstration of downtown slum terrace smashing.

Many of Liverpool's new dwellings were built at Kirkby, on the city's outskirts. They were intended to house families who were described by the planners as 'overspill'. Reflecting Ebenezer Howard's vision for garden cities, the paper plans for Kirkby included green spaces. However, because the city's politicians and planners were so intent on rehousing as many families as possible as quickly as possible, it was thought such peripheral facilities could wait. The social effects of that delay were not good.

Thanks to his diaries about serving as a Cabinet minister Keith Joseph's successor, Dick Crossman, has had considerable influence on political theorists. This has not always been for the best. In opposition Dick had prepared to serve as Education and Science Minister and was upset to find himself becoming Housing Minister instead. Being highly academic he probably felt ill-prepared for the different task. He did seek help from

outside experts, but there was no excuse for some of his behaviour. If he had been less confrontational in his attitudes he might have achieved more. Sometimes, when I went to see him, his Private Secretary, John Delafons, would warn me, "He's in his silly bugger mood today." He could be very bullying and found it difficult to deal with women, which was hard on his Permanent Secretary, Dame Evelyn Sharp.

At a dinner before the 1970 election I sat next to Sir Matthew Stevenson, who had replaced Dame Evelyn as Permanent Secretary. Picking up my place card, he languidly commented, "So you're the woman who tries to make my Minister political". His emphasis was on the "tries" – and he was right. Tony Greenwood, Crossman's successor at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MOHLG), was a kindly person but lacked Crossman's aggression.

It would have been pointless trying to persuade Tony Greenwood that tower blocks were not an answer to housebuilding needs. He was full of compassion but would go along with whatever his officials told him. Government officials at the time were so convinced of the delights of IB that, when Labour again took office (1974-79), the Department of the Environment (DoE) which had taken over the functions of the MOHLG, was housed in London's Marsham Street in three nineteen storey office blocks united by a podium at first floor level and built by IB.

When I went to work there, as political adviser to the Secretary of State, Tony Crosland, and the Minister for Housing and Local Government, John Silkin, I found the building, with its lifts at one end of each floor and the staircase at the other, unsettling. However, unlike many tower blocks of flats, that IB monstrosity did not last long. Today a much lower rise development stands in its place.

Crosland had begun to take an interest in housing when, in 1969, feeling unable to sack Tony Greenwood but faced with huge local election losses, the Prime Minister decided to give him overall responsibility for bringing together assorted government departments. Crosland's job title was Secretary of State for Local Government and Regional Planning. The creation of an environmental overlord may have been intended to overcome problems caused by departmental separation of responsibilities, but it was a huge remit. At an early meeting in Crosland's new office overlooking St James's Park, I counted thirteen ministers sitting around the highly polished wood table.

In opposition between 1970 and 1974 Crosland held numerous meetings, often over generous portions of Jack Daniels whisky, at his Notting Hill home to discuss what should be done about housing if Labour won the next general election. He was dedicated to solving the problem and sought advice from as many experts as he could.

The Labour government elected in 1974 considered land availability essential to its housing policy. Consequently, politicians and civil servants spent endless hours creating a Land Commission to acquire land for housebuilding, combined with a new tax to

obtain money from increased land values. It was a chaotic and short-lived mess, just as the creation of a Ministry of Land had been a decade earlier.

However, following the 1974 election the new towns programme powered ahead. My secretary at the Environment Department had worked as a secretary for Lewis Silkin, John Silkin's father and the minister responsible for planning and new towns legislation in the immediate post Second World War Labour government. From time to time she would comment on how few civil servants had been needed to get that legislation through and how many more there were working at the new department. What, we sometimes mused, did they all do?

Given his father's achievements it was natural for John Silkin, as Minister for Planning and Local Government, to take a particular interest in new towns. After a visit to one of them where we had seen how effective the new town corporation was, we sat in his office despairing about the failure of the layers of London local government to solve the planning problems of an area on the South Bank of the Thames called Coin Street. We decided the only solution to that London problem was a development corporation akin to the new town corporations. Steps towards setting up such a body were begun. It was decided Bob Mellish should be asked to chair it, with a Conservative politician as his deputy.

But then there was a government reshuffle. Silkin and I moved to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. It seemed the concept of a development corporation operating in inner London had been lost, until it was reincarnated by the Conservative government in the form of the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC). It was interesting that Bob Mellish, though not Chairman, became that body's Deputy Chairman.

Despite its earlier support for new towns, the Labour Party vehemently opposed the creation of the LDDC and Mellish's appointment. As its opposition to the concept mounted I would from time to time encounter a DoE civil servant outside the Commons, amused by this political volte face he would tease me with, "I'll tell them it was your idea."

Whereas solving the housing problem was once the responsibility of Housing and Local Government Ministers, today that task falls to the Communities and Local Government Secretary. It would be nice to think that the replacement of the word Housing with the word Communities was a reflection of a changed emphasis, and that policy makers were no longer so overwhelmed by a desire to build as many dwelling as possible as quickly as possible that they lost sight of the social needs of the families being housed. It would be nice, but has anything really changed?

Making community development an essential part of housing policy involves first of all a realistic analysis of demographic figures and trends; that takes courage and it not

clear policy makers and analysts have the guts to do it. It should also involve consideration of how the overall public sector finances are affected by housebuilding.

For planners that means recognising that even relatively small developments can have considerable social impact and so should be assessed in relation to their financial and practical effect on, for example, schools and health care facilities. Earmarking land for building on the edge of existing small towns and villages, often places where there is no local public transport, means new residents are likely to be totally reliant on cars. As well as any effect on the Green Belt, granting planning approval for such developments can have other environmental impacts that should be considered, but too often are ignored.

For providers of social housing, maximising community development benefits should involve reviewing allocation policies to see how homes can be provided in such a way that members of extended families live near each other. If young families are housed near grandparents, parents of young children are likely to find life less stressful. Grandparents living nearby will often provide childcare that would otherwise be provided by breakfast and after-school clubs, which are often indirectly subsidised from the public purse. Similarly, frail elderly people are more likely to benefit from family care if their relatives live nearby, and family provision of such care has a knock on benefit to public sector social and health care budgets.

Maximising community benefits means considering community issues from the start. It is all very well to feel virtuous because a brown field site has been brought into housing use; but in building on such sites it is important to consider, for example, the availability of leisure facilities in the surrounding area and the suitability of the proposed dwellings for the families who are likely to live in them. Building two bedroomed flats on previously industrial land which is surrounded on three sides by a railway line and two busy roads, then housing families consisting of two teenage boys and their parents in them, may not be the most effective way of avoiding future social problems.

For those who have a role in planning approvals or setting building standards, seeing community development as an essential part of housing provision means taking difficult decisions. It may mean requiring investment in green spaces and community facilities such as schools before spending money on building more homes. It may mean encouraging more generous living space and better quality building materials, and consequently in the short term reducing the number of dwellings built. But better than building the slums of the near future.

A week may be a long time in politics but, as I read about politicians' attempts to deal with the present housing crisis, fifty years seems like yesterday. Despite the efforts of successive political generations to solve it, the housing problem has not gone away and well-intentioned politicians of all parties are still seeking solutions in similar ways.

The Labour Party seems to have abandoned its historic new towns vision. With the authoritarian Left in ascendant, it seems increasingly intent on blaming the housing problem on the failings of capitalism, and using land and housing supply to redistribute wealth. On rent levels it is tempted to follow in the steps of Harold Wilson's 1964-70 government, which sought to lower private rents by a system of Rent Officers and Rent Assessment Committees and to control the public sector by referring some local authority rent rises to its Prices and Incomes Board.

Meanwhile, in the wake of the Grenfell Tower disaster, the Conservative Party is being blamed for failings which have been the responsibility of generations of politicians, policy makers and builders. In recent years, it has issued an assortment of building targets, including the Cameron Government's now abandoned million new dwellings by 2020. Currently floundering in the face of vociferous criticism, it is contemplating a target of 300,000 houses a year.

It is to be hoped the current media focus on housing will encourage politicians of all parties to abandon the idea that merely issuing a target number of houses to be built will solve the problem, and instead face up to the national demographic challenge and develop a new approach to housebuilding, combining community and environmental quality with quantity.

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Ann Carlton's recent book *Penny Lane and All That* costs £9.99 from bookshops, online retailers and the publishers Y Lolfa, [www.ylolfa.com](http://www.ylolfa.com) 01970 832304