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Abstract

The process of social construction in which competing and sometimes contradictory definitions contend with one another plays a decisive part in policy-making. Justifications for policy intervention often require a narrative identifying villains or victims to creatively identify a 'social problem' needing to be addressed by appropriate measures. This article shows how contrasting political and media representations of council tenants in the 1960s and 1970s provided the emotive justifications for two distinct policies: 'Fair Rents' and the 'Right to Buy'. The article concludes that more attention should be paid to the way that the successful mobilisation of bias legitimises policy interventions.

Keywords: Discourse, Mobilisation of bias, Council tenants

Introduction

Why do some issues become identified as social problems but not others? Structural and material factors are important but not sufficient. A social problem has first to be identified and its features described (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977; Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985; Best, 1989). Once the problem has been defined, policy-makers seek to explain why a particular solution is appropriate, generate arguments in support and then mobilise bias to legitimise the strategy adopted. Policy therefore is perhaps best understood as operating within a contextual space in which competing actors attempt to impose a version of reality concordant with their interests. Essential to the formulation of policy, therefore, are the debates and arguments that precede and inform it. The mobilisation of opinion and support for the policy measure comprises an essential precondition both for implementing preferred solutions and for preventing their being reversed by subsequent governments.

This article considers both of these questions within the context of government housing policies formulated between 1972 and 1980. It is argued that the two divergent policies implemented by the same political party within eight years of each other resulted in very different outcomes. Whilst the first was widely acknowledged as a categorical failure, the second was considered a highly successful (indeed revolutionary) initiative. The two approaches illustrate the way coalitions of support were constructed in each case to define the policy problem and to determine effective alliances for specific initiatives. The justifications offered for these divergent approaches and the effectiveness of the coalition strategies determine the relative success and failure of the policy initiative.

The two policies considered are the introduction of 'Fair Rents' in local authority housing in 1972 and the 'Right to Buy' policy for council tenants introduced in 1980. The discussion considers how both policies were initiated by the identification of a particular social problem and how this informed the policy measures that were subsequently formulated. Although there were continuities between the two policies, the central assumptions rested on very different foundations, in terms of the portrayal of council tenants. The discussion considers the way in which the 'mobilisation of bias' (Schattschneider, 1960; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962) was advanced in the two periods to generate coalitions of support for the respective policies.

The evolution of the image of the council tenant in political debates and in the media from the 1960s to the end of the 1970s demonstrates how among the myriad of competing images of council tenants, the predominant image that emerged in political discourse during the 1960s and that led up to the 1972 Housing Finance Act was that there was a significant number of households with relatively high incomes who, because they were well-off, had no justification to be occupying council housing required for the genuinely needy. Within populist discourse, affluent tenants were described and viewed as 'limpets', unfairly clinging on to subsidised housing at the expense of those in genuine need on the waiting lists.

The policy solution was therefore to encourage higher income earning council tenants to leave the municipal sector by charging them higher rents – using the stick, rather

than the carrot. The failure of this policy can be attributed partly to the fact that the imposition of higher rents was unpopular as a measure in itself and partly because it was a policy that could easily be reversed – as indeed it was by the succeeding Labour Government.

The repeal of Fair Rents in council housing by the third Wilson administration precipitated a change of strategic direction by the newly-elected Thatcher government which did not attempt to reintroduce the Fair Rents legislation but instead launched the 'Right to Buy' policy for council tenants. Whilst continuing to encourage rent increases for council tenants, the mechanisms by which this was achieved took very different forms. Rather than a legislatively imposed instrument, the government exerted more subtle indirect pressure through administrative changes to the local authority Housing Revenue Account.

Whilst there exists an extensive literature on the Right to Buy policy (Murie, 1975; Forrest and Murie, 1976; 1984a; 1984b; 1988; 1990) these discussions have mainly stressed the continuity between the two periods. This paper, whilst not seeking to challenge the arguments presented in earlier research advances a different emphasis, namely that the policy marked a significant *discursive* shift. This repositioning was largely determined by pragmatic rather than ideological reasons, but nevertheless represents an important strand in contemporary policy discourse.

It is testimony to the power of discourse[i] and its political manipulation that such reversals can be accepted with little further discussion. The word *discourse* is made up of two Latin elements, *course* meaning 'to run' and *dis* meaning 'away'. The introduction of Fair Rents in council housing led the chase off in one direction. Less than a decade later the introduction of the Right to Buy led the chase off in an alternative direction and proved to be one of the most popular pieces of legislation of its time.

Methodology

The research for this paper draws upon documentary material including newspaper articles, academic texts and political books and pamphlets that were published both

before and after the 1972 Housing Finance Act. In particular, material either reporting or sustaining the political debates of the period was selected in the knowledge that these were significant influences on the policy agenda. Other sources included recent historical research that made reference to the Act and its consequences. Though the coverage of the period is not extensive, these texts enabled us to follow up specific leads. For example, Timmins (1995) made reference to a 1966 campaign in *The People* (Sunday Newspaper) in which wealthy council tenants were portrayed as undeserving of council housing because of their income.

At a theoretical level, it is important; first of all, to acknowledge that historical methods entail examining events within an altogether different linguistic conceptual framework (Harloe, 1995: 15). What are today familiar concepts such as social exclusion and residualisation did not feature in the 60s and 70s and one has to be careful not to embed contemporary concerns in understanding past events. Second, the construction of a narrative, though necessary in the process of selecting archival material, can result in important evidence being overlooked and conclusions that cannot be properly substantiated. For these reasons, there is an obligation for those engaged in historical research to consider sources that add credence to alternative interpretations (Malpass, 2000). At the very least, a reading of texts from this period needs to account for the different ways in which audiences would have read the material and the conclusions they would have drawn. This entails an act of imagination in so far as it requires configuring how texts would have been interpreted at the time they were initially read.

The search for material[ii] provided some valuable sources including political pamphlets published by Conservative policy groups such as *The Bow Group, The Social Affairs Unit, The Conservative Political Centre* and *The Institute for Economic Affairs.* It was also possible to gauge the extent to which 'wealthy tenants' featured in the professional housing press. Analysis of the journals *Housing Review* and *Local Government Chronicle* suggests that the 'problem' of affluence hardly featured at all. The absence of debate in the professional press gives credence to the view that the notion of the wealthy tenant had political significance and that its evocation served to reinforce arguments advocating curbing state subsidy to the council sector as a whole.

The interpretation of newspapers and texts from the 60s and 70s required particular attention. For instance, the language of the period and style of journalism was markedly different from today. This placed a specific responsibility on us to scrutinise both the terminology and cultural references deployed by journalists. Also it is important when using newspapers as a research resource to situate each text in its economic and political context. As is discussed later on in this paper, the mid to late 1960s was a period when the optimism that surrounded the election of the Wilson Government in 1964 was diminishing. There were increasing pressures on the Government in relation to the weaknesses of the currency. Yet in overall terms, the political culture was generally regarded as a positive one with an expectation that sustained economic prosperity would result in new leisure opportunities. In contrast, the period following the 1972 Act was very different. Inflation was rising and the attempt by the Heath Government to impose an incomes policy resulted in considerable strain. Unemployment in 1972 was at its highest point since 1947 and mid 1973 inflation had risen to 9% (Merrett, 1979).

Relabelling council tenants and redefining policy

There were many discourses around council tenants during the 1960s, as indeed there are in any period. This clamour of voices expressing different definitions of reality provides the background out of which one particular definition is adopted as the basis for public policy by a political party and then implemented through the legislation the party enacts when it forms the government. But not all definitions have equal weight and impact. How was it, then, that the Conservatives were able to first identify a category of prosperous council tenants and define them as 'limpets' to justify the passing of the fair rents legislation in 1972 and a few years later redefine this group as an exploited minority needing liberation?

The formation of the privileged tenant: the limpet

The notion of the privileged council tenant assumed prominence in British political debate during the early 1960s. The historical perception of the municipal sector was that it constituted a highly desirable tenure. It was also viewed as heavily subsidised and difficult to access. The desirability of council housing related both to the

physical quality and to the resident profile, deriving from the fact that housing had historically been allocated to members of the 'respectable' working class. Allocation to council tenancies was originally confined to what Harloe (1995) has termed the 'core working class', that is employed family heads (p.292). The best stock was therefore supplied to an 'aristocracy of labour' (Clapham, 1989: 22). Council housing was perceived to comprise a tenant profile characterised by skilled working class groups, mainly in full-time employment, who had been fortunate enough to gain access to secure, good quality housing at low rent levels. Council housing at this time compared favourably with the other main form of rented housing, the private rented sector, which was associated with poor quality stock, landlord harassment intensified by rent deregulation (symbolised by the Rachman scandal, still fresh in the public memory) - and low levels of investment (Kemp, 1997).

Popular perceptions of council tenants were influenced by political debates about social justice and a particular anxiety was whether the sector was continuing to efficiently meet the country's housing needs. The discourse of privilege emanated, in part, from concerns about the desirability of continuing to provide council housing on a universal basis to large numbers of households. The Labour government expressed the view in its 1965 White Paper that new provision should be selectively targeted 'the expansion of the public programme now proposed is to meet exceptional needs' (DoE, 1965, cited in Malpass and Murie, 1987: 74).

There are more diffuse yet pervasive social images and discourses that play an important part in making a political message more - or indeed less - convincing. An important reason for the persuasiveness of the Conservative's image was the way in which almost uniquely for the 1960s there was a general belief in ever increasing prosperity. This was a decade of full employment and great social optimism that was also reflected in sociology and other social sciences. Although there were warning voices, notably on poverty by Townsend (1968) and on homelessness in the film "Cathy Come Home", the overwhelming spirit of the time was one of almost unbounded confidence in the future. One book that reflected the prevailing sense of optimism was Millar's (1966) discussion of social mobility. The author enthused:

> If the present economic trends continue and the standards of living of the

British people continue to rise, then there is no reason why everyone should not have two homes and two cars, Persian carpets on the floor, a deep freeze in the kitchen, and, ultimately, the same mass social and cultural interests (Millar, 1966: 209).

The 'Affluent Worker Project' spawned in this era (Goldthorpe *et. al.*, 1969) had an important impact upon constructing perceptions of a society experiencing increasing opportunities for material wealth and individual prosperity. As a consequence of these perceptions of increasing affluence, debates became focused around the overall efficiency of public subsidies. The extent of public hostility towards abuses of the welfare state highlighted in Golding and Middleton's (1982) study of press coverage of poverty was reflected in a disquiet (within a housing context) about the continuing allocation of public funds to residents who did not require government assistance. Most of the criticism was, of course, directed against council housing subsidies rather than against tax-breaks to owner-occupiers. Within local authorities there was evidence that councils were keen to impose constraints on those deemed well off. For example, *The Times* reported in 1963 that Brighton Council approved a policy to serve a six-month notice to quit on tenants earning more than £1250 per year (*The Times*, 27/11/63: 13 col.g).

The theme of unnecessary subsidies provided to undeserving groups reached a peak in the mid 1960s with a campaign by *The People* newspaper entitled: 'The Great Council House Scandal'. *The People* campaigned for years against 'the scandal of the wealthy tenant living in a council house at a subsidised rent' (cited in Timmins, 1995: 303) while those in greater need queued on the council house waiting list. This campaign was expressly directed against continuing to provide government subsidies to affluent tenants. A number of stereotypes were deployed to generate public indignation at the extent to which tenants were exploiting the largesse of local councils and continuing to live in subsidised housing whilst those in 'genuine' housing need were confined to local authority waiting lists.

The cultural stereotypes deployed to illustrate these points, commonly included: the tenant with the expensive car, the bookmaker and the property owner. These images helped to generate powerful narratives that became potent symbols of an ineffective housing finance system. *The People* posed a rhetorical question: 'What about the rich

tenant, the man who owns a Jaguar, half a dozen betting shops, and yet manages to live in a subsidised council home?'(*The People,* 6/2/66). Entitlement to council housing was seen as a privilege extended to an elite group and their continued occupation of council housing represented for some an abuse of the system. Another story expressed outrage at the actions of a Mrs. Theodora Hajialexandrou. The paper outlined a story 'that will anger 78,000 families [on local authority waiting lists]. This woman owns two houses and she hogs a council flat' (*The People,* 6/2/66). The newspaper was anxious to comment that this was not an isolated example, complaining of a 'remarkable but not unique situation which is being repeated in many parts of the country and which is a challenge to the power of our local authorities' (*The People,* 6/2/66).

An interview with the then Housing Minister Richard Crossman in February 1966 was seen as the vindication of the newspaper campaign. Headlining the interview 'Action at Last', *The People* triumphantly proclaimed: 'the whole of Britain's council house system is about to be swept by a "wind of change" - and the blast will be felt most of all by the rich tenants' (*The People,* 6/2/66). The image of the affluent council tenant was clearly expressed by the Minister:

> The present system has led to a cosseted and privileged class in our society - the council house tenant. These people are jealous of their privileged position - because a council house is a prize hard to come by (Richard Crossman in *The People*, 6 /2/66).

As has already been stated, an emergent theme in the construction of the discourse of privilege was the metaphor of the tenant as 'limpet', clinging on to the benefits of subsidised accommodation. A story at the beginning of 1966 expressed dismay at the level of disposable income of some council tenants:

> What a limpet - he has five betting shops and a council house…Mr. Pepper, a Liverpool bookmaker with a chain of five betting shops, has been known to keep £10,000 of folding money in his larder! (*The People*, 30/1/66).

This theme was developed in the description of the objective of the newspaper campaign by one journalist (John Justice) as follows: 'I continue to name the guilty councils who do nothing about limpet tenants occupying homes that should go to

more needy families' (*The People*, 20/2/66).

Whilst newspapers made reference to the 'problem' of prosperous tenants, this theme was also developed by politicians in an effort to influence the policy agenda. In particular, commentators on the political Right were keen to emphasise the inequities of the housing finance system. The Conservative Bow Group (1966) produced a pamphlet, which expressed a common perception that public sector tenants were unfairly receiving government funds. The pamphlet stated:

> In the circumstances it seems particularly unfortunate that ratepayers …should be called upon to subsidise council house tenants. Often this means that poor private tenants are directly subsidising wealthier council house tenants. This is manifestly unfair and in our opinion rates subsidies to council house tenants should be abolished (Nelson-Jones, 1966: 13).

The above comment is revealing in that it portrays private tenants as subject to poverty, whilst the council sector is portrayed as relatively wealthy. Not surprisingly, the Labour Government in the 1960s was keen to avoid accusations that they were creating a privileged class. Consider, for example the remarks made by the Housing Minister Richard Crossman:

> Local councils must get tough…they must use their powers and hit these tenants where it hurts most - in the pocket…They must charge the rich tenants £1,000 a year rent if necessary, I shall not interfere if they do that. Councils would be perfectly within their legal rights in charging above an economic rent. That will soon sort the problem out (Richard Crossman in the *People*, 6 February 1966).

This identification of privileged council tenants clinging on to subsidised housing in order to profit from public munificence was fostered by emphasising the size of public subsidies going to council housing and the shortage of vacant council housing for low income earners. The policy measure to address this by the incoming Heath Government of 1970 was to introduce rent increases into council housing under the label of "fair rents". The system of fair rents was already well established in private rental housing, to determine sub-market levels, set by an independent Rent Officer Service. Nevertheless the proposals demanded substantial increases for most local authority tenants. The policy would also act as an incentive to increasing owner

occupation as introducing fair rents would discourage individuals stubbornly remaining as council tenants due to low rent levels. In addition the policy would in theory create vacancies within the council sector as those who could afford to buy would leave the sector to become owner occupiers of private properties (rather to buy as sitting tenants as happened in later years).

However, the fair rents policy provoked much resistance, especially by Labour councils such as Clay Cross in Derbyshire, and the measure proved highly unpopular (Malpass, 1992). So after the Heath Conservative Government was defeated in the 1974 General Election and replaced by Wilson's third Labour administration, fair rents were repealed. During the ensuing period in opposition the Conservative Party rethought its strategy concerning council housing as we discuss further below (see Forrest and Murie, 1988 for a discussion of the policy changes in this period). Clearly, the use of the stick of high rents to make council housing less attractive was politically problematic partly because higher rents were unpopular as a measure in itself and partly because it was a policy that could easily be reversed.

Wider social and economic changes also undermined the notion of the privileged tenant in the 1970s. Besides the oil crisis during the Heath government that marked the end of the era of boundless optimism and prosperity, changes in perceptions of housing provision meant that the discourse of privilege was no longer sustainable. First, the sector itself had become inherently less attractive. Due to the effects of what later became termed the 'residualisation' of social housing (Malpass, 1990), whereby new properties were allocated exclusively to groups in severe housing need, a certain stigma had become attached to the granting of a council tenancy. The start of major council building for elderly people and the role that slum clearance played in transferring poor households from the private rented to council sector hastened the process of council housing playing a role confined to special need groups (Harloe, 1995: 292). Figures of increasing benefit dependency and economic inactivity showed how this process was accelerated. Thus, in 1962, 11% of council tenants were economically inactive compared to 17 percent of owner-occupiers. By 1978, 30 percent of council tenants were economically inactive compared to 19 percent of owner-occupiers (Holmans, 1987: 167-204; Harloe, 1995: 292). Table 1 illustrates the increasing proportion of tenants receiving the main means-tested benefits within

the municipal sector.

Table 1. Proportion of households receiving supplementary benefit by tenure

Year	Local authority tenants	Owner occupiers	Private rented tenants	Total
1954	21.5	10.7	67.8	100
1960	35.8	12.5	51.7	100
1976	58.9	17.4	23.7	100

Source: Harloe, 1985: 293

Whilst the 1970s provided a high tide for council housing, comprising a third of all housing, at the same time local authority policies meant that those groups entitled to council housing were increasingly seen as deprived. This process was accelerated by changes in the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act which incorporated a duty on local authorities to provide housing accommodation only after a range of eligibility criteria had been satisfied (Somerville, 1994). Consequently, by the mid 1970s, the local authority sector was beginning to be perceived as what later came to be termed a sector of last resort, providing safety net or residual provision, for a client group largely comprising unemployed and economically inactive residents. Thus, the attempt to portray council tenants as a prosperous and over-subsidised group was anachronistic. Furthermore, it was in this period that tenant organisations began to voice their concerns about local authority management, high rents and under investment (Cooper and Hawtin, 1987). The proliferation of system built and high-rise estates generated further dissatisfaction with the council sector (Dunleavy, 1981) with studies of 'difficult-to-let' housing (Burbidge *et. al*., 1981) and 'problem' housing estates raising questions about the continuing desirability of a council tenancy. By the late 1970s it was therefore increasingly incongruous to attempt to portray the sector as a highly desirable enclave of affluent and privileged tenants.

A second reason for the decline of the discourse of privilege was the perceived attractions of home ownership. Government action in the form of continuing –

indeed soaring - mortgage tax subsidy and abolishing the tax on imputed rent (Schedule A tax – abolished in 1963) that flew in the face of economic stringency, combined with the buoyancy of the owner-occupied market, meant the rational solution for the affluent tenant was to leave the sector and to realise potentially significant capital gains through the owner occupied market (Forrest *et. al*., 1990).

For Conservative strategists, the change in policy emphasis away from local authority housing finance towards a strategy to extend home ownership enabled a number of objectives to be achieved. It allowed them to focus upon the inherent benefits of privately owned property. It also enabled them to express a 'natural' dislike of the municipal sector and provided a convenient weapon to attack professional interest groups (such as planners and housing managers). Furthermore, it facilitated a rhetorical drive to reduce government spending, wherein public expenditure was defined to incorporate local authority subsidies but not mortgage interest tax subsidies. These objectives necessitated a transformation in the language used to describe the experience of living within council property.

The outcome of this policy re-evaluation was a fundamental shift in strategy whereby the problem was redefined. Instead of attempting to identify a group of undeserving council tenants and using this as the justification for raising rents, council tenants were redefined as an oppressed group, who had paid rent all their lives and received nothing in return. Council tenants - and especially those who could afford to buy their properties - some at least of whom would in the previous discourse have been labelled as 'limpets' - were therefore redefined not as 'privileged' but as 'exploited' tenants.

The discourse of exploitation: housing policy and the Right to Buy

Even in the early 1960s, the notion that certain council tenants constituted an oppressed group was evident in portrayals of local authority housing. Within this particular discourse, stories that highlighted the negative features of local authority accommodation were given prominence. The same newspaper that was so exercised by the 'scandal' of the affluent tenant (*The People*) was simultaneously carrying stories of tenant exploitation. The difference however was that such stories were seen

as isolated examples, rather than evidence of a general and widespread malaise and did not form part of a coherent and sustained campaign. Nevertheless, front page headlines such as 'A savage council evicts family of nine' (*The People*, 30/1/66) illustrated this supplementary theme, that council housing was a negative experience for many households. The headline referred to a decision to evict a family evicted not on the basis of their previous behaviour. A quote from the chair of Rugby council housing committee explained the reasoning behind the decision:

> We felt the family would unfortunately slip into their old ways...We think now, that it will be best, in the long run, to rehabilitate the family, so that they know how to run a home properly (*The People*, 30/1/66).

Rotherbury council in Northumberland provides another example of this portrayal of council landlords as an oppressive class. The local authority had evicted a family for 'under-occupying a council house'. As the Chairman of the Housing Committee, Councillor John Luke, explained: 'They were warned about a year ago that the practice of spending nights away from their council house must stop' (*The People,* 17 July 1966: 2). The newspaper story explained that the reason for the family's absence was to look after an elderly mother who needed care, an explanation that found little sympathy amongst local authority members. The notion of tenants as victims of oppressive management systems, subject to arbitrary, bureaucratic demands and dependent on the changing political composition of councils was being established through these cautionary tales.

The discourse of the exploited tenant began to find fertile ground within popular debate in the mid 1970s. Thus, proposals to offer council tenants opportunities to buy their homes were presented by politicians on the Right of the Labour Party (see for example, Field, 1975). Field declared it was 'time to free the council serfs' (Field, 1976; *Roof*, vol.1, no.3, May 1976: 1)[iii]. Similarly, it should come as no surprise that sections of the Conservative party adopted the theme of tenant exploitation enthusiastically. The theme was utilised to argue that tenants could only be free from unacceptable constraints by taking ownership away from local councils and turning tenants into homeowners.

Proposals to sell council houses to existing tenants therefore emerged from

Conservative party discussions in the 1960s. Recommendations can be found in a host of publications from right-leaning think tanks during this period (see for example, Corfield and Rippon, 1965; MacGregor, 1965; Merrett and Sykes, 1965; Gray, 1968). Consider, for example an excerpt from the pamphlet written by the leader of the Conservative group on Birmingham City Council and one of the pioneers of introducing the Right to Buy for council tenants. Alderman Griffin (1967) argues:

> It is pretty hard luck on those who cannot afford to buy a home that they must pay a rent during the whole of their lifetime, even into pensionable old age, and never own a stone. After sixty years two tenants have in fact paid to purchase the property for the local authority (Griffin, 1967: 6).

The shift in emphasis upon the rights of tenants was given added impetus after the Fair Rents fiasco by largely internal Conservative discussions of housing policy during the mid 1970s. The post mortem on the 1972 Housing Finance Act precipitated the strategic change, with Conservative writers beginning to argue for extending the liberties of tenants. Councils were described as 'feudal' landlords:

> Too often council estates still seem run on a neo-feudal system with exactly that measure of paternalism typical of the country landowner that was once the *bete noire* [*sic.*] of Fabian Socialists at the turn of the century. Users of socially provided housing are, by and large, treated with as little concern for their individuality as broiler chickens in a battery farm. Rent books are there to remind them of their duties, but little of their reciprocal rights (Patten, 1976: 101).

Patten illustrates how the theme of giving rights to tenants had now become a central feature of the new discourse. Thus: 'we need a tenants statement of rights...The idea should be part and parcel of Tory philosophy, in fact, embodying as a basic right for council tenants the rights of self-determination and maximum freedom of choice' (Patten, 1976:101).

The Heath government had promoted the sale of council houses to the extent that council house sales increased from 7,000 in 1970 to nearly 46,000 in 1972 (Forrest and Murie, 1985: 15). However, the difference in this earlier period was that the strategy was a permissive one, which relied on voluntary sales by local councils and

did not offer substantial discounts to residents. Crucially the sales of council housing in the early 1970s were not accompanied by populist discourse akin to that which preceded the 1980 Housing Act.

Proposals to extend the sale of council houses were developed into specific schemes included in the 1974 October Conservative manifesto (Timmins, 1995: 365). Following the election defeat of 1974, Peter Walker, the former Conservative Minister advocated a scheme whereby council houses would be gifted in freehold to tenants who had paid rent for twenty years (*ibid. The Times*, 23 June 1975). Walker enlarged on this theme in a book published prior to the 1979 general election after which he became Secretary of State for the Environment. In a chapter entitled 'The liberation of the permanent tenantry' he adopted what might be termed a 'feudal yoke discourse' to describe council housing (Walker 1977: 163-176). Far from rents being too low for affluent households, long-established tenants were now viewed as exploited by local authorities, having to pay unreasonably high rents indefinitely, even when the cumulative rents paid may be several times the original cost of the council house.[iv] Walker refers in heart-rending terms to the 'disadvantages of that one family in three whose destiny it is to be a perpetual council house tenant' (p.165):

> Unlike the owner-occupier, they obtain no benefit from the increasing value of the house they occupy as inflation progresses. They have no freedom to use their house in the way that they wish and they have no substantial bequest to leave to their children. They have no incentive to improve their property, and in many parts of the country a considerable amount of vandalism takes place on council estates. Such vandalism would end quickly if it was directed not against public property but against property owned by individuals…The council tenant is not able to move elsewhere if there is a better prospect of employment in another part of the country…The prospect for such tenants is years of steadily rising rents with no permanent benefit to themselves or their families (pp. 165-6).

A number of strands to this theme of oppression can be identified: first, that tenants lack choice. Second that an inherent stigma is attached to the granting of a tenancy and third, that the experience of residence is largely unpleasant. These concepts would become highly influential in imputing a negative image of council tenants. The image of council tenancy as a form of oppression continued during the late 1970s. Thus, in an image taken from Hayek (1944), Michael Heseltine whilst

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Shadow Environment Secretary, commented on the need to 'free council tenants from serfdom' (speech to Conservative party conference, 10 October, 1979). The policy solution was therefore to allow – indeed encourage - tenants to leave the tenure. But this time it would be done not by charging penalty rents in the hope of forcing them onto the market but by tempting them to buy their council house at bargain basement prices.

Writers such as Gurney (1990) have shown how entrenched is the notion that paying rent represents 'money down the drain'. The Conservatives played on and encouraged this interpretation in their justification for extending the 'Right to Buy'. Whilst the Right to Buy signified an important policy change, other policies reflected a continuation of the strategy to increase rents, particularly the introduction of a notional Housing Revenue Account in 1980 and subsequent change from general subsidy to Housing Benefit payments (Malpass, 1990). These measures exerted considerable leverage upon local authorities to increase their rents and further contributed to incentives to tenants to buy their property. The success of the discursive strategy was illustrated by the absence of serious resistance to this measure compared to the public outcry that greeted the 1972 Housing Finance Act[v]. Furthermore, having previously complained about the amount of public subsidy given to council tenants the Conservatives now in effect argued for a new additional and very substantial form of public subsidy to be introduced in the form of huge purchase price rebates to help as many council tenants as possible to buy. Of course, the Conservatives were careful not to describe the discounts as subsidies. Indeed, it was argued that the size of the discount would increase with the length of the tenancy of the purchasing council tenant. The implication here was that the longer one had been a council tenant the more of their money had 'gone down the drain' and hence they should be 'entitled' to a larger subsidy as compensation.

Conclusions

The analysis presented in the paper suggests that the abandonment of the attempt to label an unspecified group of council tenants as limpets and its replacement with a more sympathetic "victim definition" of council tenants precipitated policy changes that gave a huge impetus to the residualisation of tenure and that generated much

more negative definitions of the subsequently unsold council housing and its tenants. What are the reasons behind the success and failure of the two policies and the discourses behind them?

Much work has been conducted on the background to the implementation of the Right to Buy policy (Forrest and Murie, 1988; 1990) illustrating how the deployment of the discourse behind this policy was highly effective. Rather than a target for blame, the council tenant was redefined as a victim while new scapegoats were found in disembodied bureaucrats and impersonal local authorities. The arguments deployed in support of the later policy were broadly libertarian ones about choice and freedom and the discourse of liberation was far more appealing than the discourse of blame. At the same time, a discursive silence was maintained on rent increases which were implemented indirectly through administrative measures rather than directly through legislative change. The success of the policy was ensured by a combination of the development of a more positive image of council tenants as victims with unprecedented public handouts in the form of discounted property prices, while not giving voice to the intention to increase rents dramatically. 'Rights' were more popular and were easier to understand as a point of principle than the relatively technical issue of rents, while the Right to Buy policy built on the political consensus of increasing homeownership

A problem with the Fair Rents legislation was that it was easy to reform and reverse (as it was by the subsequent Labour administration). In contrast, the Right to Buy was irreversible. Council housing once sold was lost forever; while no future government could even contemplate revoking this fundamental right given to council – but not private - tenants. This redefinition and its accompanying policy shift from only penalising (fair rents) to both penalising (significantly increasing rents) and rewarding (the subsidised Right to Buy) did not simply emerge fully-formed, but evolved out of over a decade of debate and policy discourse experimentation in the Conservative Party.

Finally, the interests opposing the Right to Buy were divided, as well as compromised by having already accepted some of the assumptions of their opponents. The Labour Party in particular had accepted the desire to use public policy to propel more of the

population into owner occupation. There was no alternative solution developed, such as selling council housing to tenant-owned rental co-operatives or private non-profit rental organisations. The success of the Right to Buy is therefore ultimately understandable in terms of the failure of opposition to mobilise bias for an alternative solution. This 'flagship policy' which 'was to do so much to change the political landscape and help lock Labour out of power' (Timmins, 1995: 365), can therefore be seen as a classic example of the successful mobilisation of bias, involving an effective redefinition of council tenants from a negative image of the wealthy council tenant to the exploited renter.

This paper suggests that, at the very least, for policies to be durable, a convincing rationale or narrative has to be assembled by politicians that accords with popular sentiment. In this respect, competing definitions of what constitutes 'a problem' and its solutions are a crucial determinant in defining the policy agenda and establishing a legislative framework. The discovery of a positive rallying cry for tenant mobilisation marked a more sophisticated approach to Conservative strategy after the mid-1970s. The discourses deployed were instrumental in establishing the political context for legislative change in the 1980s and 1990s. The success of the Conservative government's Right to Buy policy can be attributed to the ways in which many were receptive to the notion of the exploited tenant.

The crux of our argument is that wider social and economic changes interact with specific discursive struggles in a policy area like housing to determine outcomes. Attempts to gain the discursive ascendancy, to close off counter-arguments, and to construct and implement appropriate policy 'solutions' to particular definitions of social problems are sometimes aided by social changes but they equally sometimes hinder them. The outcome can never be pre-determined, however. Often decisive is the ability of a coalition of interests to formulate a convincing discourse that interprets social changes in a particular way and enables it to effectively mobilise bias in its favour.

Public policy comprises a particularly rich site for digging through the layers of discourses in a range of identifiably relevant and inter-related arenas of social action over specific policy issues. In theory, it would be possible to uncover many different

discourses or variants of discourses and even to piece these together with the aim of producing a more informed understanding of discursive practices in a policy area and their relationship to each other. Numerous studies have been carried out in other areas of social issues on struggles to define social problems and to implement policy agendas to deal with them (Gusfield, 1963; Useem and Zald, 1982; Loseke, 1997; Linders, 1998). Whilst other studies have shown the role that the media plays in constructing social problems (Hall *et. al*. 1979; Cohen and Young, 1981; Mathiesen, 1997) these arguments have not been extensively applied to a housing context (although see Cowan 1997 for an example). So far housing researchers have barely scratched the surface of this fascinating – and often politically charged - excavation.

Ultimately, then, this historical study of a discursive shift has far-reaching implications for how we can understand major shifts in policy and why and how they came about. Researchers need to think more strategically about the ways in which discursive struggles channel and form wider changing social conditions in such a way as to create historic changes in the direction taken by public policy. It is here that theoretically informed research can make a direct contribution to our understanding of policy making.

Acknowledgement

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[i] In this paper the conception of 'discourse' drawn upon Foucault (1980) and as such is viewed as one of the key means by which different interest groups seek to establish a particular narrative or version of events to pursue political objectives.

[ii] The research material for this paper was collected from the Harry Simpson Memorial Library, London (a specialist housing archive library) and the British Library Newspaper Collection, London.

[iii] According to two of Harold Wilson's closest civil servants proposals were drawn up by the Labour government in the 1970s but frustrated by a lack of political will and civil service inertia (Haines, 1977, pp. 94-111; Donoghue, 1987, pp. 106-9).

[iv] The feudal yoke discourse of this period echos US pro-owner occupation rhetoric in which the tenure is depicted in the policy debates in terms of the Jeffersonian yeoman farmer frontier ideal (de Neufville and Barton, 1987 cited in Kemeny, 1992 p.).

[v] We are grateful to Alex Marsh for this point.