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PREPARING FOR PEACE: THE HOUSING PROGRAMMES OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE 1945 GENERAL ELECTION IN BRITAIN

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Abstract: The creation of the welfare state in Britain, of which popular housing provision forms an essential part, has been seen as the working out of a wartime consensus on social policy. This article, by exploring the housing programmes of political parties during the Second World War, argues against this consensual view of social reform. The Labour Party's pragmatic approach to solving the housing shortage contrasted sharply with the more limited plan put forward by the Conservatives and was a major contributory factor in the Labour victory at the 1945 General Election.

(I) The German air raids in the early part of the Second World War wrought havoc on the urban fabric of Britain. It was estimated that about 210,000 dwelling units had been destroyed and a further 250,000 made uninhabitable. Altogether 4 million houses, representing one third of the entire housing stock, had either been damaged or destroyed. Thus Britain faced a serious housing shortage at the end of the war. Consequently popular housing provision became a major plank in the social reform measures which constituted the postwar welfare state in Britain since 1945.[1)]

The impact of war on social reform in Britain has been raised initially by Richard Titmuss who argued that the experience of a total war brought about a fundamentally new attitude on welfare issues.[2)] In particular, the extensive civilian bombing at once exposed social divisions in society and helped forge a sense of cohesion among the population. This, Titmuss claimed, made central govenment conscious for the first time of the need for postwar reconstruction and found expression in collectivist welfare legislation. More recently, the relationship between wartime politics and postwar reform has been reformulated by Paul Addison who put forward the idea of wartime consensus.[3)] He has argued that the Second World War placed on the agenda the major items of postwar welfare and, thanks to the radicalising influence of the Labour Party under C. R. Attlee in the wartime coalition Government, created a new middle ground upon which the political parties would henceforth compete for power. Thus there was now an

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emerging consensus between the Conservatives and Labour, a common approach in the field of social policy. This was buttressed by a leftward shift in public opinion during the war and the Labour victory in the 1945 General Election was seen as a vindication of this process. In Addison's famous phrase, the new consensus 'fell, like a branch of ripe plums, into the lap of Mr. Attlee'.[4)]

This article sets out to assess whether there was an emergent consensus on the issue of popular housing provision by looking at party political views on housing during the Second World War, with particular focus on the Labour Party's policy making. In doing so, it also examines the relationship between the housing question and the Labour victory in the 1945 General Election which has been hinted at but never fully explored in existing studies.[5)]

(II) In the case of the Conservative Party, the Post-War Problems Central Committee was set up in July 1941, with R. A. Butler as its chairman. Initially housing was discussed by the Social Services Committee, which was dissolved in 1943. Thereafter a separate Housing Sub-Committee was appointed with the task of preparing the spadework for a possible election programme on postwar housing. In due course its terms of reference was widened, from the initial one of considering the temporary housing programme, to include long-term policy on housing and to report on both aspects of the question.[6)] J. A. F. Watson, the chairman, was a chartered surveyor and chariman of the Southwark Juvenile Court, with personal interest in housing. Other members included Lord Balfour of Burleigh (chairman of the Kensington Housing Trust), Louis de Soissons (architect, closely associated with the garden city movement), Lord Dudley (chariman of the Sub-Committee on Design of Dwellings, a government committee on postwar housing), M. F. K. Fleming (member of the Society of Women Housing Managers), J. W. Laing (governing director of John Laing and Son Ltd, a large building firm) and H. R. Selley, M. P. (master builder and past chairman of the London County Council (LCC) Housing Committee). Harold Bellman (chairman of the Abbey National Building Society) was appointed as one of the technical advisers. Thus private enterprise interests were duly represented on the Sub-Committee, befitting the Conservative Party's record in interwar housing policy.

The interim report, *Foundation for Housing*, was published in March 1944. It dealt mainly with the town planning background of housing, which was preceded by a section on future housing standards. Quoting a number of survey results (including Mass-Observation's *People's Homes*) showing a strong preference for houses or bungalows in support, the report stated:

> For every family that requires it we desire to see a separate dwelling soundly constructed and self-contained. It should be near enough to the occupant's place of work, but within reasonable distance of the open country···Above all, whenever possible, it should consist of a private house with a garden of its own.

Particularly the importance of having a garden ('an annexe to the house into

which an expanding family can overflow') was stressed. However, the report also admitted that flats had come to stay. Although families with children would always find flats a poor substitute for a house and garden, 'For some childless couples and for single people who desire to live in the centre of the city close to their work and places of amusement, flats may be very suitable'.[7] But the major part of the interim report was devoted to a general discussion on the need for a national planning policy upon which, it was argued, a successful long-term housing policy depended. The report particularly highlighted the close relationship between housing, industry and transport. Consequently the geographical distribution of industry, the coordination of transport and the control of the growth of towns, together with the protection of agriculture, were seen as the national objectives requiring national action in town and country planning. The report endorsed the recommendation of the Barlow Commission and pressed for an effective central planning authority, so that both local authorities and private enterprise might be guided into sound channels of action. As regards the questions of the control of land use and property values, the report merely mentioned the Uthwatt Committee and tended to gloss over its recommendations.[8] It did call for 'a practical solution' to the problem of compensation and betterment, for the uncertainty as to future government policy on the issue was seen to be having a detrimental effect on private land development and the housing industry.

The forthright views of the Housing Sub-Committee on town planning were nonetheless remarkable for a Conservative Party document. The report, for instance, took exception to 'the persistence of a perverted conception of private ownership as implying an unchallengeable right to do as one pleased with one's own without regard to one's neighbour's interests'.[9] These strong words were said to bear the marks of Lord Balfour of Burleigh, who stated his opinion elsewhere that not even the short-term housing programme could be properly prepared without the introduction of a positive planning policy. At the same time it has been suggested that the Tory Reform Committee (a body of young progressive Tories) became an important source of Conservative ideas in the middle years of the war.[10] Originally formed in February 1943, 'with the object of encouraging the Government to take constructive action on the Beveridge scheme', the Tory Reform Committee took an initiative in framing a progressive Conservative policy on various aspects of postwar reconstruction. Its statement on the use of land echoed the views expressed in *Foundations for Housing*:

> the physical reconstruction of the country can only be effective · · · when the Government is prepared to take control of development rights upon a national basis. If this is done we believe it to be possible by the full use of private and public enterprise to create an adequate supply of houses of high standard for our people within ten years of the end of the war.[11]

The Tory Reform Committee rejected a doctrinaire laissez-faire approach and embraced the need for national planning and public control in a new political and economic system, in which both private and public enterprise would have to be

used. The fact that the Government's proposals on the control of land use closely corresponded to the statement of principles set out by the Tory Reform Committee could be probably taken as an instance of its influence on the Conservative thinking on social issues. Its members, which included Lord Hinchingbrooke, Peter Thorneycroft, Lady Astor and Quintin Hogg, were also conspicuous among the supporters of the limited Town and Country Planning Bill of 1944. As far as postwar housing was concerned, a motion was proposed at a Central Council meeting in October 1943, on behalf of the Essex and Middlesex Area Council, urging the Government of declare 'a definite policy to provide finance, labour and material for the provision of 4 million houses, as a matter of utmost urgency using to the full the resources of Private Enterprise'. Significantly, after a discussion it was decided to call upon the local authorities to share in the housing provision, and the meeting passed the amended motion demanding a definite government policy 'using to the full the resources of Private Enterprise, and of the Local Authorities'.[12)]

(III) Towards the end of the war, however, Conservative Party policy making increasingly focussed on producing an immediate housing programme, while the arch-Conservative broadsheet, *The Daily Telegraph*, began to warn the public against the promise of an extensive social reform. Indeed, the final report of the Conservative Housing sub-Committee entitled *A Policy for Housing in England and Wales* (January 1945) was published with a probable general election very much in mind. Certainly any pretensions to discussing housing in relation to the wider problems of town planning and the control of land use were gone.

The report put forward the Conservative Party's programme for postwar housebuilding and discussed questions of building agencies, tenure and housing subsidies. As far as the type of houses were concerned, the emphasis of the interim report on houses and gardens was repeated but there were also new elements introduced into the text. In areas of high density, the final report suggested reviving terrace houses with such features as central heating and hot water supply systems, and where flats had to be built it called for greater imagination, both in layout and design: 'Wherever practicable, we favour a mixture of houses and flats in order to avoid the monotonous series of barrack-like blocks which in so many areas were typical of flat development between the wars'. The report also endorsed the standards of space and construction recommended by the Design of Dwellings Sub-Committee (a government committee on postwar housing).[13)] In the main sections a three-stage (i.e., emergency, intermediate and long-term) housing programme was proposed. In all, the report estimated a shortfall of nearly one million houses at the end of the war. The urgent task during the emergency period was to provide shelter for the entire population. For this purpose the report adopted a target figure of 750,000 houses (200,000 in traditional brickwork and the remaining 550,000 made up of temporary houses or permanent houses of non-traditional construction) to be built within two years of the end of the war.

The report particularly stressed the building of non-traditional permanent houses, which were 'in every way comparable with those of traditional construction' and could be 'built more quickly and more cheaply and without call to any serious extent upon skilled building labour'. During the emergency period it was also argued that the Government should 'ration and maintain the price controls on essential materials'. After the urgent need of 750,000 houses had been satisfied, a further 250,000 would be required to remedy slums and overcrowding in the intermediate period. Thereafter a steady building programme was to follow, 'to raise the quality of housing throughout the country and to provide for any subsequent increase in the number of families'.[14]

On the questions of agencies and subsidies, the report argued for 'the combined strength of the local authorities and private enterprise' to be employed in the provision of houses and, above all, urged private enterprise to 'make up its mind to build houses *to let* in far greater numbers than heretofore'.[15] The need to retain general housing subsidies (the amount to vary with the cost of building) for local authoritities, at least for a limited period, was pointed out, as were the measures for promoting the activities of housing associations. But probably a key proposal for the Conservatives in this regard was a lump sum subsidy, amounting to half the increase since 1939 in building costs, for any house built by private enterprise with a floor area not exceeding 1,750 square feet. The report said that the rents and selling prices of subsidised houses built by private enterprise should be controlled for at least five years after they were built. In this connection, the report spoke out strongly for the need to provide every opportunity for people to own their own houses, as well as supplying a sufficient number of houses to let in all districts.[16] Finally, the report, for all its proposals, carried with it a grave warning concerning the cost of the programme. Assuming an overall postwar deficiency of one million houses (750,000 units in the immediate programme and a further 250,000 required to replace slums) to be made good by local authorities and private enterprise alike with an aid of a subsidy, the report threw up a figure of 700 million pounds as the total capital cost to the community and stated:

> These great sums must be forthcoming either from Government or local funds, to which all sections of the community contribute from savings over a period of years. The relation of this demand on the national resources to other capital demands must be carefully borne in mind. Therefore the urgent need for the continuance of rigid economy, both public and private, is difficult to exaggerate.[17]

Thus, in substance, the report's proposals mirrored the housing policy of the Conservative-dominated coalition Government. They were mainly geared to solving the housing shortage in the short run. And with a general election in view, an ambitious target of 750,000 dwellings was set (which was scaled down in the actual Conservative election manifesto to 300,000 permanent houses as proposed by the Government) and plans were made to facilitate private enterprise in housebuilding. The particular concern expressed in the report about the cost and

scale of the projected housing programme echoed the position articulated by *The Daily Telegraph* in 1944 and 1945, when it sided with the cautious argument aired by some Conservatives that 'it would be wrong to promise the country more houses than the men and material available at the end of the hostilities could possibly produce'.[18] In March 1945, the paper threw cold water on the parliamentary debate on postwar housing: 'Everyone recognises that the housing problem is extremely urgent, but nothing is to be gained by demanding the moon or by concocting paper programmes which no human agency can possibly fulfil'.[19] The Conservatives' increasing reservation about the extent of government commitment on housing, in turn, intensified their calls to reinstate private enterprise as the main agency of housing provision. Commenting upon the publication of the final report, *The Daily Telegraph* stated:

> Nobody will argue that these figures are exaggerated, and if they are too modest that is all the more reason for employing every possible means of home-building without political prejudice. How can we afford to discard or to handicap private enterprise which, without subsidy, provided more than half the houses built between 1919 and 1939?[20]

The 1945 Conservative Party Annual Conference, whose keynote was struck by Winston Churchill's outburst against 'State-imposed panaceas', was held in March, in anticipation of a general election.[21] The conference adopted a housing motion calling on the Government to formulate without delay a comprehensive building programme and stated that,

> while recognising that Housing may need to be provided by Local Authorities subsidised by Exchequer Grants and by the Rates to meet the needs of those citizens only able to pay the lowest rent · · · Private Enterprise should be encouraged to play its full part, and particularly, that every possible facility should be made available by way of Loans (or Guarantee of Loans) to enable as many citizens as possible to purchase their own houses.[22]

The Daily Telegraph, reporting on the conference proceedings, gave a succinct reminder of the Conservative thinking on housing:

> Take, for example, the question of housing, which may well outweigh all other domestic Issues. Irresponsible persons could promise any number of houses which comes into their head. Conservatives will promise only as many as the whole available resources of the building industry can provide; and that is certainly more than the Socialist programme would produce, because Conservatives will not frown upon private enterprise.[23]

As far as postwar housing was concerned, then, the perceived shortage and a strong popular demand for houses had pushed the Conservative Party during the war to embrace a certain degree of government intervention (including subsidies for private builders building houses mainly for sale) and planning in its housing programme. But as the prospect of a return to normalcy gripped the ranks within the Party, its social commitment in postwar housing visibly waned and a much more prominent role was now envisaged for private enterprise in

housebuilding which, in effect, meant a continuation of its policy from the 1930s.

(IV) The Labour Party similarly established its Central Committee on Reconstruction Problems in 1941, at the instigation of Harold Laski and Hugh Dalton. Emanuel Shinwell became the chairman and Laski the secretary. A number of sub-committees were appointed under the aegis of the Central Committee to explore the broad field of postwar reconstruction.[24] The Labour Party, under the circumstances of the wartime Coalition, could be said to be in a unique position of being both in government and opposition. The Party's policy making was to run parallel to the contributions made towards postwar planning by Labour members of the Coalition. The Housing and Town Planning Sub-Committee was set up in the autumn of the same year with Lewis Silkin as its chairman. The membership fluctuated in the course of the Sub-Committee's existence but the core members included Richard Coppock (leader of the building operatives' union), F. J. Osborn (honorary secretary of the Town and Country Planning Association—TCPA), Gilbert McAllister (former Secretary of the TCPA), E. G. McAllister (Public Relations Officer, the TCPA), F. W. Dalley (member of the Executive of the TCPA), Rev. Charles Jenkinson (Labour member of Leeds City Council), Lady Simon (education and housing campaigner), M. E. Sutherland (Chief Woman Officer, Labour Party) and Arthur Pearson (Labour whip). Morgan Phillips, secretary of the Research Department of the Party usually sat in attendance. Thus the Sub-Committee, in the main, comprised members from the various sections of the labour movement and a large TCPA contingent.

Prominent among the problems involved in housing reconstruction, as set out by Silkin, were the replanning and reconstruction of bombed towns and, more generally, the unplanned growth of towns with its associated ills of inadequate open space, ribbon development, suburban sprawl and the transport muddle. The question of postwar housing was viewed primarily in the context of planned rebuilding and controlled growth of urban areas. This led, in the early stages of the Sub-Committee's work, to the discussion of the machinery of town planning to be adopted and to the issues of land acquisition and compensation.[25] The Sub-Committee called for a National Plan, which defined land use with reference to the allocation of areas for housing, agriculture, roads and railways, and industry. To administer this Plan a central planning authority would be necessary, in the form of a Ministry of Planning which 'should have supreme control over land use for industry, agriculture and housing'.[26] Whilst the Labour Party remained committed to 'a policy of land nationalisation with compensation for the landowners', the Sub-Committee from the outset kept an open mind on the question. It argued that 'since complete Nationalisation may not be possible immediately the war ends alternative solutions and expedients should be considered'. At this stage (early 1942) the Uthwatt Committee had not yet been appointed. The alternatives considered by the Sub-Committee included the pooling of ownership, municipal land ownership and the acquisition of development

rights.[27] As far as housing was concerned, the Sub-Committee decided to propose a short-term programme and a long-term policy. Such issues as the provision of communal facilities in relation to new housing and the interior planning of the house were discussed. The Sub-Committee also argued that temporary housing should be opposed and that one-class communities should be discouraged in postwar housing schemes.[28]

By the end of 1942, probably because of the disagreements with TCPA members on the Sub-Committee on certain aspects of planning policy including the question of houses or flats, Silkin was personally preparing a draft report at the request of the Central Committee (on Problems of Post-War Reconstruction).[29] By this time the Uthwatt recommendations had been published, providing a bench mark against which to assess the Party's proposals on land acquisition. Silkin proposed a two-fold solution involving nationalisation of urban land and the acquisition of development rights in rural areas.[30] The draft report was brought before a Central Committee meeting where a number of controversial points including the question of land acquisition were discussed. In the light of the Central Committee discussions the Sub-Committee agreed 'to advocate the nationalisation of rural as well as of urban land···as the ultimate objective', while at the same time it approved of ' the recommendations in the Uthwatt Report on the acquisition of development rights as a temporary expedient'.[31] Interestingly some Central Committee members expressed views in favour of flats. As Ellen Wilkinson pointed out:

> In view of the size of the population, if everybody had separate houses, it would lead to more urbanisation of the country. We should advocate well-built flats with communal services with garden or allotments for each tenant in a separate area.

Philip Noel-Baker similarly asserted that 'We should explain the very great advantages of the flat system. Better playgrounds for the children, communal laundries, etc.'.[32] In early 1943, Silkin drew up the final draft of the report, intended for inclusion in the Labour Party pamphlet, with the help of Morgan Phillips, who had become more actively involved in the work of the Sub-Committee, presumably to counterbalance the TCPA influence.[33] By this time the cleavage of opinion between the two forces appeared to be irreconcilable. Osborn, in turn, came up with long amendments which would have had the effect of altering the character of the report. In particular, Osborn emphasised the need for the decentralisation of the industrial population and for 'the building of forty or fifty entirely new towns', out of proportion with the rest of the text. He also disapproved of the lukewarm attitude towards the Uthwatt recommendations adopted in Silkin's draft report. Moreover, Osborn, in his amendments, carefully deleted references to flats in the text.[34] Silkin took up the matter with the Central Committee, which, after discussion, approved the draft report prepared by Silkin and recommended that the National Executive Committee (NEC), the governing body of the Party, publish the report for discussion at the forthcoming annual

conference. This recommendation was unanimously carried by the NEC, and the report was duly published in time for the 1943 Annual Conference of the Labour Party.[35] Unhappy with these developments, the TCPA members of the Sub-Committee secured an undertaking from Shinwell and Laski of the Central Committee that the report would be reviewed by the Sub-Committee in the light of the debate at the annual conference.[36]

The report, *Housing and Planning after the War*, outlined the short-term and long-term housing programmes and proposed high standards in the planning of the house. It also dealt with such problems as the blitzed areas, the unplanned growth of towns and the location of industry, and reviewed the Uthwatt proposals on compensation and betterment. As the report stated, 'Housing and essential services must come first' in the immediate postwar years. Thus the provision of accommodation (for families returning from evacuation, ex-servicemen and women, and newly-married couples), necessary shops, factories, hospitals and other services formed the short-term programme. In the long run, the report proposed to build 'at least 4,000,000 houses over a period of 10 years'.[37] The report advocated setting a high standard in the design, layout and equipment of postwar dwellings, including the provision of a parlour or second living room, of constant hot water and even of such amenities as refrigerators and central heating. 'The vexed question of flats as against cottages' was thoroughly dealt with in the report, which put forward a reasoned case for providing flats as well as single family dwellings:

> In a well-planned community there is room for both types of dwellings. Older people with or without grown-up families, young couples without children, single persons, or those who by the nature of their work find it necessary to live in central areas would probably find flats more convenient. Some housewives may be attracted to flats on account of the greater ease with which they can be run.

Above all, the report argued that local authorities 'should be free to choose between flats and single family dwellings according to suitability in each case, regardless of the cost of the land'. In the planning of flats, 'the cold, inhospitable, barrack-like lay-out and appearance' should be avoided, while allotments and gardens for those tenants who desired them should be provided. The report also called for the provision of a private balcony in every flat and of lifts both for passengers and for goods in blocks of flats over three storeys.[38]

On the important question of land acquisition, the report maintained its traditional stance: 'The Labour Party remains convinced that the most satisfactory way of dealing with the question of land is by nationalisation'. The report was rather equivocal in its assessment of the Uthwatt recommendations. The proposal for the acquisition of development rights in rural areas was welcomed as going 'a long way in non-urban areas towards solving the problems so far as they hinder effective planning'. With regard to urban areas, the report felt that the periodic levy on the increase in annual site value of land failed to deal with the main

obstacle to proper planning, namely, the high cost of land. Hence planning authorities were reluctant to provide much needed open spaces in central crowded areas, for fear of imposing heavy rate burdens on their ratepayers when these areas became revenue producing if built upon. Similarly, in the past, when a local authority had had to build on expensive sites owing to the local demand for housing, it had been obliged to crowd as many dwellings as possible to reduce the land cost per dwelling, regardless of considerations of good planning. Nevertheless the report also admitted that, if well administered, the periodic levy scheme 'might be accepted as a step in the right direction'.[39] In general, housing subsidies were viewed with disfavour, and to achieve the ideal of building dwellings without the need for subsidy the report thought it essential, among other things, 'to reduce both the cost of land and of building to the lowest possible level'.[40] Hence the need to retain control over both building materials and new construction, especially in the immediate postwar period. In order to reduce building costs, the development of alternative materials and standardisation of fittings was suggested. The report also considered that some form of national control of the building industry might be necessary, so that greater efficiency and modern methods of construction would be introduced, at the same time as safeguarding wages and conditions of employment for the operatives.[41] Finally, the report stated that the location of industry was to be 'controlled in the interests of the community by means of a National Plan prepared by a Central Planning Authority under the direction of and responsible to a Minister of National Development'. There would then be a considerable measure of decentralisation of population, by building new towns as well as by enlarging and expanding existing towns.[42]

At the 1943 Annual Conference, the NEC introduced a resolution, in conjunction with the report, *Housing and Planning after the War*. The resolution called for the continued control of building materials and their price, a planned expansion of the building industry and an improved standard of housing. It demanded that the housing programme be linked up with and form part of 'a national plan for the rebuilding and redeveloping of congested and badly-planned cities and towns and those damaged by enemy action'. In carrying out this programme of housebuilding and redevelopment, such factors as the location of factories, commercial land and buildings, the provision of open space and the coordination of transport were to be taken into account. Where there was congestion of industry, decentralisation might be considered by the creation of new towns. The resolution, moreover, reaffirmed the view that 'the only means of securing courageous, imaginative, and efficient planning is by the public ownership of land'.[43] In the ensuing discussion the report was criticised for being half-hearted about public ownership of land. An amendment to the NEC resolution was tabled which declared that 'only a Socialist Government' could deal with the problem of housing and town planning. Silkin, in reply, argued that the public ownership of land was taken care of in the terms of the resolution and then reasoned with the conference:

We have to visualise the possibility that there may not be a Socialist

> Government after the war, and we have still got to do all we can to provide homes for the people, to rebuild our cities and plan in the most satisfactory way.

The amendment was defeated and the conference approved the Executive's resolution.[44]

(V) During the second half of 1943, a notable change took place in the Labour Party's policy making process, with consequences for the work of the Housing and Town Planning Sub-Committee. Soon after the annual conference in June, the NEC decided to wind up the Central Committee on Reconstruction Problems. This course of action was adopted on the recommendation of the Policy Committee (a standing committee of the Labour Party, of which Dalton was the Chairman), whose existence in the early years of the war had been rather overshadowed by the activities of the Central Committee on postwar planning.[45] Henceforth the Policy Committee under the direction of Dalton regained its position as the central policy making body of the Labour Party.[46]

As part of this changeover, the Policy Committee took stock of the work of various sub-committees taken over from the Central Committee. As far as the Housing and Town Planning Sub-Committee was concerned, it was agreed to convene a further meeting 'in fulfilment of the pledge given' to the dissatisfied TCPA members of the Sub-Committee, to reconsider the report in the light of its reception at the annual conference. But in the meantime, the Policy Committee also took matters into its own hands by suggesting that 'it would be advantageous for the Policy Committee to determine its views on the Uthwatt Report, so that appropriate guide may be given to the sub-committee on one of the major points at issue'.[47] Dalton circulated a memorandum in September 1943, advocating the acceptance of the Uthwatt recommendations as a Party policy. Cases were instanced of reconstruction schemes in blitzed towns being held up through lack of powers to acquire the necessary land. Dalton also took care to placate those who held to land nationalisation, by adding that 'every attempt made to implement the Uthwatt recommendations would increasingly force the community to recognise that the simplest and most economical solution is the one advocated by the Party——wholesale nationalisation'.[48] As a result, it was agreed at the subsequent Policy Committee meeting to accept 'as a matter of immediate urgency' the recommendations of the Uthwatt Committee which empowered local authorities to acquire the whole of reconstruction areas at prices not exceeding those of March 1939. The principle of compensation in respect of development rights was accepted, as was the principle that any undeveloped land required for development should first be purchased by government. The Policy Committee also approved the principle that betterment conferred upon private property by communal action should be collected from the owners. It further urged the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, 'as the Central Planning Authority', to press ahead with the establishment of joint planning authorities to facilitate regional planning.[49] The NEC approved

the Policy Committee decisions on the Uthwatt Report 'subject to the reaffirmation of the traditional Party Policy in favour of Nationalisation'. It was also agreed that 'steps be taken to secure press and other publicity for the proposals'.[50]

Meanwhile the projected meeting of the Housing and Town Planning Sub-Committee to thrash out the differences of opinion among the members came to nothing, and it was finally decided that 'as the differences were fundamental in character, those who disagreed with the view of the Chairman should prepare a document for the consideration of the Policy Committee'.[51] In response to this a set of memoranda was prepared by TCPA members of the Sub-Committee, setting out their grievances and disagreements. The covering note jointly signed by Dalley, Jenkinson, Gilbert McAllister and Osborn referred to a possible anomaly in the composition of the Sub-Committee but maintained that they had been invited to serve because of their knowledge of the subject. There was certain bitterness about the fact that the report drafted by Silkin, *Housing and Planning after the War*, had been accepted by the Party without consideration of the views held by 'the working majority' of the Sub-Committee. It urged the NEC to reconsider the report in the light of the differences that had arisen within the Sub-Committee.[52] As might have been expected from the substance of Osborn's amendments put to Silkin's draft report earlier in the year, the disagreements centred on the emphasis to be placed on the policy of decentralisation, the Party's attitude towards the Uthwatt Report and the desirability of building flats in postwar housing schemes. Jenkinson, in his memorandum, stressed that the decentralisation of industry and population should be 'the FOUNDATION of a sound national policy'. Failing this there would be a further unplanned growth of towns, leading to suburban sprawl by private enterprise building and the despoliation of the countryside. Local authorities, on the other hand, would be left to deal with the unprofitable problems of the congested central areas, with no practicable solution except a resort to blocks of flats involving higher rents and rates and bigger subsidies. Dalley similarly recorded his objections to the report. It failed, in his view, to emphasise 'the house garden standard' in housing, relegated to the end 'the supremely important question of decentralisation, *without which the problem cannot be solved*' and damned the Uthwatt Report with faint praise 'instead of treating it as an authoritative Report which, having regard to the urgency of the situation, holds the field.'[53]

In reply to this criticism, Silkin put forward his case for prioritising the question of postwar housing and the manner in which it was to be solved. As he put it:

> The real point of difference between us is that of the question of Flats versus Houses in large towns, the Osbornites are absolutely uncompromisingly opposed to flats. They might permit a few, but Osborn's idea is really something like 5—10%. To achieve this in the large towns will involve an enormous amount of decentralisation · · · Decentralisation of industry on a large scale, so long as it is privately owned, is fraught with immense difficulties, and anyway cannot be carried out quickly · · · The Osbornites do not complain

> about what is in the report. There is nothing there to which they object except my luke-warmness on the Uthwatt, but they think the emphasis is wrong. Decentralisation of industry should be stressed as the paramount factor. I think this is wrong. I think that we should be failing in our duty if we did not stress housing first · · · Everybody is concerned about housing after the war. People are, I am afraid, not so much concerned with town planning and decentralisation.[54]

The Policy Committee, having given consideration to these conflicting views, decided at the end of 1943 to dissolve the Housing and Town Planning Sub-Committee.[55]

No further statements on housing emanated from the Labour Party for the remainder of the war, though the questions of postwar housing and town planning continued to be debated at the annual conferences in 1944 and 1945. Interestingly, the Policy Committee decision to embrace the Uthwatt proposals was barely reported, let alone publicised, in the *1944 Annual Conference Report*.[56] At the conference itself an elaborate resolution on housing and town planning was moved on behalf of the NEC. The resolution declared that 'the bad housing conditions and the great housing shortage constituted the most urgent and critical of our social problems'. It repeated all the demands made at the conference the previous year but also added a significant number of new proposals in relation to housing. The resolutions criticised the Government's plans 'as totally inadequate' and called for the allocation of a Minister of Cabinet rank with adequate powers. Housing requirements should be determined in advance so that a definite housing programme could be prepared for a number of years ahead and the permanent houses to be built would conform to the standards set out by the Design of Dwellings Sub-Committee with all modern amenities and labour-saving devices. Large-scale productions of standardised fittings and household equipment were called for, using redundant government-owned and controlled war factories. Research into suitable alternative materials for building was urged. The resolution also singled out the bombed-out families and newly married ex-servicemen and women, whose needs would be especially catered for, and demanded that 'no houses be permitted to be built for sale until at least the immediate shortage of houses to let has been made good'. Pending the nationalisation of land, the resolution called for the compulsory acquisition of land for housing purposes to be accelerated and simplified.[57] The NEC resolution was carried by the conference, along with a number of other resolutions moved by local delegates. One such resolution moved by the Holborn Labour Party urged a party campaign to popularise well-planned, modern flats, while the East Birkenhead Divisional Labour Party criticised the monotony and uniformity of existing Corporation housing estates ('all the brick boxes with lids on') and called for a more communal form of dwellings, built around greens with recreational and cultural facilities, after C. H. Reilly's scheme for a housing estate in Birkenhead.[58]

By 1944, the Labour Party therefore had a range of proposals to deal with the

postwar housing problem. Even if some of the proposals were ill-defined, the Party made known its willingness to tackle the immediate shortage and its commitment to a large-scale, long-term housing programme. Most importantly, there was clear recognition of the need to solve the issue of land acquisition, in order to carry out comprehensive schemes for the redevelopment of towns, of which planned housebuilding formed an essential part. The Labour Party did not produce a land policy of its own during the war but, in supporting the full implementation of the Uthwatt recommendations, it distinguished itself from the wartime coalition Government and from the Conservative Party which had nothing to say on the questions of land in its housing policy statement.

A large TCPA presence in the housing policy making precess was probably a mixed blessing for the Labour Party. It brought to the deliberations of the Housing and Town Planning Sub-Committee a good grounding in town planning matters (though, admittedly Silkin was an expert in housing and town planning in his own right) and might have played a part in the Party adopting the Uthwatt recommendations in place of outright land nationalisation. Here again, though, Dalton's initiative in getting the Policy Committee and the NEC to agree to the recommendations might have proved crucial. The fact that no party campaign was launched advocating the Uthwatt Report, as promised by the NEC, showed a strong undercurrent of opinion in favour of land nationalisation, both at the grassroots level and within the Party hierarchy. Silkin himself remained loyal to the idea of public ownership of land throughout the war.[59] On the other hand, the TCPA's particular brand of planning philosophy, especially in the field of housing, was at adds with Silkin's thinking on the matter and ultimately with the more pragmatic stance, taken by the Labour Party, of providing much needed housing mainly within the existing patterns of urban development.

Labour's pragmatism also dispensed with the services of professionals on the questions of architecture and town planning. Neither architect nor town planner was to be found among the membership of the Housing and Town Planning Sub-Committee, despite the existence of a more reformist outlook evident within these professions. The traditional class antipathy was probably a factor preventing collaboration. *Housing and Planning after the War*, in its only passage commending the role of architects in designing efficient and beautiful buildings, noted:

> Greater encouragement and help are needed for the architectural profession, and entry thereto by the sons and daughters of working-class parents should be facilitated as well as assistance given at the outset of their career.[60]

Thus, Labour betrayed its suspicion of largely middle-class professionals. But this feeling of unease appeared to be mutual. As Thomas Sharp, a distinguished town planner, later remarked:

> It is a saddening experience to find Socialist governing bodies so little interested in beauty, and indeed actively antagonistic to it. When beauty is mentioned, trade unionists and local Labour councillors are apt to reach for their guns. Labour in Durham was altogether unreasoning and became quite hysterical

in its demands for the erection of the power station which would have raped the finest cathedral in Britain. Oxford Labour is more concerned to keep the Nuffield works at Cowley than to secure the future of one of the half-dozen noblest cities of the world.[61]

(VI) In addition to the two main political parties, the Liberal Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) also produced their respective proposals for postwar housing. Both parties committed themselves to a long-term programme of building 4 million houses in ten years. There was little difference of opinion on improved housing standards between the CPGB and the two main parties, Labour and the Conservatives, nor was there much divergence of view on the urgency of the need to reach those standards. The Liberal document, *Land and Housing* (no date but c. 1943) mainly considered the town planning aspects of housing and the land issue. It called for a national plan to deal with the main traffic routes, the preservation of the countryside, the growth of towns, green belts and the location of industry. The Liberal report also characteristically warned against rigid planning. It urged that planning should not be too rigid in segregating industrial from residential or commerical areas, or in dividing a district into areas of large and small houses. The former led to wasteful travel and the latter to 'accentuation of our national vice of snobbery'.[62] As regards housing, the need to limit any further growth of large towns was stressed. Hence in proceeding with postwar housing, the report called for the reconstruction of existing towns with houses and flats, the building of suburbs beyond the green belt connected with the city by a rapid transport system and the creation of new towns with its own industries.[63] A distinctive feature of the Liberal report could be seen in its policy on land. It called for the adoption of the Uthwatt proposal for the immediate acquisition of development rights in all land outside built-up areas. As far as urban land was concerned, the Liberal report added a scheme for gradually basing the assessment of local government rates on the capital value of sites, to the proposed periodic levy on increases in the site values. This scheme, it argued, would have the effect of reducing the economic rent of a new working-class house and make slum clearance and rebuilding a commercial proposition for the owners.[64]

In the case of the CPGB, the emphasis was very much on public control of the whole building process and housing industry. The CPGB report, *A Memorandum on Housing* (1944), called for 'the State to control and organise the resources of the nation in land, finance, materials and labour for the purpose of providing homes for the people'.[65] Legislation would be introduced to bring all land under public ownership, while it was proposed that central government should control rents, building societies and the building industry. The local authorities were visualised as playing a predominant role, entrusted with carrying out a large part of the housing programme. Moreover, of all the parties, the CPGB was most keen on the idea of harnessing the technical advances that were being refined during

the war (e.g., in the speedy construction of factories, aerodromes and hostels, and in the mass production of aeroplanes) to the swift and satisfactory solution of the housing problem. The CPGB report advocated 'the maximum use of mass produced standardised parts coupled with new methods of speedy assembly on the site'. Under public control, science and the benefits of mass production used for the purpose of meeting people's needs could 'mean a higher standard of stability, warmth, hygiene and quietness, as well as incorporating refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, metal sinks, modern lighting, fittings, airing and heating facilities'.[66] As a means of achieving public control over the building process, the CPGB proposed in a further policy memorandum the establishment of joint production committees throughout the building industry, which would set targets and work to maintain high standards of construction, as well as safeguarding the wages, hours and conditions of the workers. These committees were to include technical staff in addition to the workers' representatives.[67] The CPGB report also discussed town planning and called for a limit to the further extension of large cities, the ending of ribbon development and the preservation of all existing open spaces. The focus was, however, very much on the reconstruction of existing urban areas and consequently there was no mention of new towns. The primary task was seen to be the creation of residential communities with simultaneous provision of associated amenities in the way of shopping facilities, workplaces, transport, and social and recreational facilities.[68] One other feature of the CPGB report was its advocacy of flats. The combination of houses and flats as proposed in the *County of London Plan* was held up as a model for rehousing operations in large cities. It went on to argue the advantages modern flats possessed over separate houses, that they could be provided with 'lifts, central heating and hot water service, sun balconies, roof gardens, club facilities, efficient refuse disposal, together with open space, children's playing grounds and amenities free from traffic'.[69]

(VII) Thus, by the beginning of 1945, all the political parties had prepared their respective proposals, with different emphases, for the solution of the housing problem. With the ending of the war in Europe in May 1945, the wartime coalition Government finally broke up and a general election was called for July. Meanwhile, during 1944 and 1945, there appeared to be renewed surge of public opinion demanding 'definite planning' and postwar reconstruction. To be sure, this upsurge was qualified by 'evergrowing' scepticism that 'it will be just like the last time; they promised us the moon and we got the depression'. However, more specifically it was said that 'A sure steady job and a decent house at a rent we can afford to pay' were the two things for which people hoped most.[70] Housing and employment vied with one another as the chief topic of concern among the general public. According to a series of polls carried out by Gallup throughout 1944 and up to the 1945 General Election, housing actually took over from employment in August 1944, in popular estimation, as the most urgent domestic problem facing the country after the war.[71]

The Ministry of Information's weekly reports on home morale from this period were full of references to widespread and often bitter complaints about the shortage of every kind of accommodation, disquiet and frustration at housing prospects after the war, and dissatisfaction with what was felt to be the Government's slowness, vagueness and even apathy in dealing with the situation. The public was particularly critical of the Government for failing to give local authorities a definite indication of forthcoming financial assistance, to enable them to start building immediately.[72] The categories of people especially hard hit and aggrieved by this housing crisis were families with children, young married couples who had 'never had a chance to live a married life under decent conditions' or who had to live with their parents, transferred war workers and returning servicemen and women. Cases were cited of people 'sleeping in Andersons' or 'living in a corner of the kitchen'.[73] The prefabricated bungalow, which was taking shape during 1944, elicited a fair amount of comment from the public. These were generally unfavourable, because of its appearance (described as 'a glorified shed' or a 'tin' house) and smallness, its short life, its unsuitability for a wet northern climate, its layout (e.g., the absence of a back door or the bedrooms leading out of the other rooms) and, increasingly, of its high cost ('indicates profiteering somewhere'). People also feared that these prefabricated houses would become permanent, and there was anxiety lest the Government was making no other provision in housing. At the same time some people approved of them. Women particularly liked the kitchen, with its labour-saving devices and the fittings, especially the built-in wardrobes. Others felt that prefabricated houses were better than nothing or than 'the horror of sharing a house'.[74] People certainly expressed a good deal of interest and, thus, there was great disappointment towards the end of 1944 when it became clear that the original Portal bungalows were not forthcoming.[75] The tone of these Ministry of Information reports became progressively gloomier with talk of riots and serious unrest. The final weekly report noted at the end of 1944:

> There are bitter complaints of the present shortage and high prices of accommodation, and widespread anxiety about the future···the public is said to be growing "more and more restless on account of Government delay".[76]

Gallup polls suggested that housing commanded most people's attention right up to the general election. In May 1945, 41 per cent of those asked thought that housing would be the most discussed topic in the coming general election, whereas full employment came a poor second with only 15 per cent of respondents thinking so. Further, a mere 6 per cent of them mentioned social security. Probably of more significance was another Gallup poll taken during the general election, which asked respondents to name a government (Conservative, Liberal or Labour) which they thought would better handle the housing problem. Labour was the popular choice with 42 per cent endorsements, while the figures plumping for Conservative and Liberal governments were 25 per cent and 13 per cent respectively. By the end of the general election, the proportion of those who thought that housing was

the most urgent domestic issue had risen to 63 per cent.[77] Mass-Observation similarly found from its survey of constituencies in London that 'The issues uppermost in people's minds were straightforward practical ones'. On the evidence of a poll taken for the survey, housing was the most important issue being discussed during the election.[78] The tenor of popular desire for a house was struck best by the remark of a young middle-class woman, married and homeless, at the '*Daily Herald*' Post-War Homes Exhibition, which coincided with the general election:

> They could just give me *any* of it, and I should think it wonderful. Honestly I liked it *all*. I'm so desperate for a house I'd like anything. I can't criticise or judge it at all—four walls and a roof is the height of my ambition.[79]

Both the main parties in the general election placed due emphasis on housing and their respective abilities to tackle the problem. The Conservative plan[80] was an elaborate and intensified version of the coalition programme, intended to deal with the immediate shortage with specific targets set for the first two years. The extravagant target set in the final report of the Conservative Housing Sub-Committee had gone but, in line with its traditional thinking, private enterprise was to be given 'the fullest encouragement to get on with the job' alongside local authorities. The Conservative Propaganda also gave people a reminder of the cost involved and, exhorting them on the need for an export drive, emphasised 'the flexibility, experience and pioneering spirit of free enterprise' as opposed to planning.[81] The Conservative policy beyond the first two years was ill-defined, as was its position on the wider issues of town planning and particularly on the question of land acquisition which affected the rebuilding of bombed areas and housing.[82] Labour, on the other hand, combined its commitment to the solution of the housing problem with a modest statement of its intentions in the manifesto.[83] In particular the need for an efficient building industry and land planning was stressed. Bulk purchases of material by government and local authorities, together with price control, was called for and the utilisation of modern methods and new materials was urged. Labour committed itself to the Uthwatt Report as a solution for 'the crippling problems of land acquisition and use', though in theory the Party also retained its commitment to land nationalisation. Housing, moreover, was to be dealt with in relation to 'good town planning——pleasant surroundings, attractive lay-out, efficient utility services, including the necessary transport facilities'.

In the election campaign itself, housing again appeared to be the most important issue, with no less than 97 per cent of the Labour candidates and 94 per cent of Conservatives raising the question of housing in their election addresses.[84] But here again there were significant differences in the way the two parties treated housing in the campaign. The Conservatives, apart from their plans to court the small house buyers and to put private enterprise on its feet, were often reduced to attacking their opponents' proposals, as in the case of Ernest Bevin's remark about his plan to build four or five million houses 'in a very quick time', which attracted Tory cries of 'Shameless Vote-Cadging', or Lord Beaverbrook's assertion

that too much control held up housebuilding.[85] Labour, on the whole, tried to put across its manifesto pledges to the electorate in a concerted and detailed manner, emphasising planning and organisation in the solution of the housing problems. Wilkinson spoke of the need to harness the technique used in the war, mass production and control over materials and prices, to the task of house production. She was also scathing about the inability of private enterprise to provide good standard housing:

> If you want some practical examples of the difference between public and private enterprise in housebuilding, compare any of the local authorities' estates, with those mushroom projects whose promoters were only concerned to get the biggest profit possible.[86]

Lord Latham attacked 'unfettered landlordism and the high cost of land' that stood in the way of better housing and the rebuilding of blitzed areas, and argued a case for Labour's solution to land acquisition.[87] Herbert Morrison promised that a Labour Government would 'go ahead with great energy and vigour with the construction of houses of all types until every family in the country has a reasonable house in which to live'.[88]

In the event, the Labour Party swept to power, winning 393 seats with nearly 48 per cent of the vote. The Conservative Party was reduced to 213 seats, while the Liberals returned only 12 M.P.s.[89] The extent of the shift in popular allegiance was most pronounced in those areas which suffered the devastation of the blitz, for instance, as in Plymouth and Hull, where all three seats were captured in each case by Labour.[90] One Tory candidate in Plymouth gave his view of the defeat, which might have been repeated several times over across the country:

> I ascribe the change of opinion in Plymouth to the lack of housing accommodation and the overcrowding in the partially blitzed areas, which have caused a general feeling of resentment against conditions as they are today.[91]

In fact, *The Municipal Journal*, 'the eye and the ear of the civic services', was in no doubt about the significance of the housing issue in the outcome of the election:

> There can be little doubt that one of the reasons for the defeat of Mr. Churchill's Government at the General Election was widespread dissatisfaction with their attitude to the housing question. They made the grave mistake of thinking that this priority number one problem could be tackled by old threadbare methods, whereas a new outlook and a deeper realisation of the fundamentals of the problems were required.[92]

Nationally, the *Daily Herald* saw the general election as a triumph for Labour's 'bold and constructive policy for the future',[93] while *The Times*, in a more analytical vein, noted that

> the voters, who were deeply interested in real, urgent, and essentially non-party subjects such as housing of the people, seem to have visited their disappointment on the side which could be represented as taking but a perfunctory interest in the reconstruction programme.[94]

Similarly, G. D. H. Cole, looking back in 1949, noted that the electors voted in 1945 'for more speed in developing the social service state, for less social inequality, and for full employment policies as a means to social security'.[95] Scarcely had the news of the Labour victory subsided than Sir Stafford Cripps, who was to become a major figure in the 1945 Labour Government, opened a housing exhibition with these words:

> The aim we have before us is to bring into the lives of all the families in our land something of the ease and graciousness which has hitherto only been possible for a comparatively few.[96]

(VIII) Contrary to the notion of a social policy consensus emerging from the experience of war, this article has shown that the main political parties differed significantly in their respective approaches to housing. In the end, Labour's pragmatic approach to the housing problem coupled with the settlement on the question of land acquisition contrasted sharply with the Conservative plan, which was in effect a revamped version of the coalition Government's housing policy. The predominance of public interest in housing and the resulting Labour victory at the polls suggest a public endorsement of Labour's ability to tackle the housing shortage. The incoming Labour Government was thus given a chance to redeem its pledge that 'it will proceed with a housing programme with the maximum practical speed until every family in this land has a good standard of accommodation'.[97]

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