

Britain: Government housing bill promotes nationalist “local homes” policy

By Simon Whelan
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Supposedly in response to British National Party (BNP) gains in the European Union elections, Prime Minister Gordon Brown is promoting the notion of “local homes for local people.” Just as with his previous demand for “British jobs for British workers,” the promotion of “localism” is another means of rationing vital social resources on the basis of nationalism.

Introducing the government’s new legislative programme for housing, Brown claimed its intention was to ensure local authorities are able “to meet housing needs of people in their areas.” To this end, he proposed that “local” people are given priority on social housing waiting lists.

The strategy document released by Downing Street states, “There is a perception that allocation policies for social housing are unfair, inflexible and act as a barrier to people being able to move when they need to.”

Citing “perception” is a means of concealing the fact that anti-immigrant sentiments have been encouraged by the incessant promotion by the right-wing media of the lie that migrants and asylum-seekers receive preferential treatment from the welfare state.

Such claims are not only false, but turn things on their heads.

A survey by the Institute of Public Policy Research found that 64 percent of people who arrived in the UK within the last five years live in private rented accommodation; and just 11 percent of these new arrivals get help with housing—of which almost all are asylum-seekers.

Most migrants rent from the private sector and suffer some of the worse substandard housing facilities in the UK.

After five years, when many immigrants are able to get residency and become entitled to government help,

just one in six live in social housing—the same proportion as those who were born in Britain. Immigrants to the UK over the past five years make up less than 2 percent of the total number of people living in social housing.

Nonetheless, the media and the official parties continue to parrot claims to the contrary. Their scapegoating of immigrants for the lack of social resources serves both to divert attention from the real source of these shortages—the consistent attack on public spending—and to demand that welfare provision be further limited to those considered most “deserving.”

The economic recession has exacerbated the housing crisis in Britain. Many people are unable to gain mortgages, and large numbers of those who do so are finding it hard to keep up repayments. The number of people expected to be on council house waiting lists by next year is estimated to reach 5 million.

The charity Shelter Scotland has calculated that the number of council and housing association houses available for rent is at its lowest level for 50 years. The charity warns of a “growing chasm between the number of homes required and the number available.” Their “Building Pressure” report calculates that 142,000 households in Scotland are currently on council waiting lists.

The number of households in temporary accommodation increased by 135 percent between 2001 and 2008. In 2001 there were 3.9 people on council waiting lists for every property let. By last year this figure had sharply risen to 6.6. It will take an average of seven years for everyone on waiting lists today to gain a council rented property. In these circumstances many more people no longer bother to put their names on council lists.

Shelter Scotland lays the blame for the chronic shortage at the door of successive governments who, since 1980, have promoted the “right-to-buy” legislation introduced by the Conservative administration of Margaret Thatcher.

Between 1980 and 2005, almost 450,000 council residences for rent have been sold at large discounts. Very few council homes have been built in the intervening 30 years. The result is that last year there were only 599,000 council properties available to rent from UK local authorities, a fall of 18 percent since 1998.

By way of comparison, in the year prior to Thatcher’s election in 1979, some 100,000 council properties were built, while the private sector built approximately 150,000 new homes for sale. By 1983 the number of new council houses and housing association houses fell precipitously to approximately 50,000.

In her book “Estates: An intimate history,” Lynsey Hanley notes that during the 1970s, 70 percent of all Scottish housing was rented from councils. In England in 1979, almost half the British population lived in council homes. Such percentages were even higher in cities like Sheffield, where council rentals approached two thirds of all housing being rented.

Today, just 12 percent of the British population are housed by the local authorities. Another 6 percent of the population live in properties managed by housing associations.

The government’s “Building Britain’s Future” policy discussion will not change this situation one iota.

Brown claimed that his government will build more homes—an extra 20,000 over the next two years, in addition to the 90,000 in the pipeline. But analysis of the government’s figures reveals how they will fall far short of even their own inadequate targets, set just two years ago, which in any event fail to seriously address the shortage of affordable homes.

The pledge to inject £2.1 billion into the construction of these additional homes has been announced as a tripling of the £600 million presented in the last budget. But half the additional £1.5 billion will come from the Department of Communities and Local Government. The remainder will be redirected from within Whitehall.

In 2007, then housing minister Yvette Cooper said the government would build more than 70,000 affordable homes a year by 2010-11. Affordable homes are not the same as council housing. Such housing is not available to rent, but to buy. As writer Anna Minton has explained, “Affordable housing isn’t public housing at all, it’s market housing which the government hoped to make affordable by encouraging developers to build in such large numbers.”

Even so, the government is falling far short of its targets—by at least 13,550 a year. It will deliver just 56,450 homes in 2010-11, and 55,500 in 2009-10.

In a further deviation from the 2007 pledge, just 13,500 of the 56,450 homes to be built will be to rent from the council. At the time Cooper had said 45,000 of the 70,000 target would be for social renting.

In addition, the Construction Products Association (CPA) has revealed that regardless of the government building fewer homes than promised, the programme will cost more money.

Chief Executive of the CPA, Michale Ankers, said, “It is difficult to understand why they need additional money to deliver fewer homes. The last comprehensive spending review allocated the necessary funds to deliver the government’s programme to the end of 2010-11. So why do they now need to divert money from other capital programmes to deliver a lower target that should be costing less?”

In short, the 20,000 additional affordable housing units to be built are nothing of the sort—and still leave an approximate 20 percent shortfall on the original announcement. To add insult to injury, the public will have to pay even more money for less housing.

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