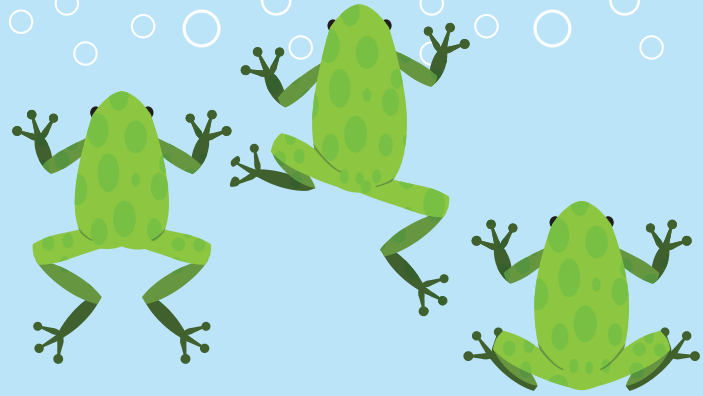


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Social housing in hot water?



It is said that frogs placed in cold water, then brought to the boil slowly, don't notice the increasing heat, and thus perish.

I've not tried the experiment, and would worry about anyone who did. My guess is that real frogs put to the test would jump away and live to hop another day. But the metaphor holds good. The water is getting slowly hotter for affordable housing, and it's easy to carry on with business as usual while overlooking the fundamental changes that have already taken place, and continue so to do.

Now in fairness, there is much uncertainty about the future direction of housing policy. We have a new government, with priorities that are not yet fully clear, but will probably reprise some of those from the Cameron administration. There is the uncertainty of Brexit, the certainty of a property market down-turn at some stage in the next few months... or might it be years? Benefit reform creaks on, and will remain a work in progress for a generation or more.

We also find ourselves living in the era of Trump, Farage, Putin and Johnson, to name but a few. Facts are no longer the currency of politics, and we see the growing phenomenon of evidence-averse policy making. Ostensibly rational politicians will espouse pretty much any cause that is judged to be electorally popular. The demonisation of certain groups – asylum seekers, bankers, benefit claimants, travellers, Eurocrats, charity fat cats and others – is always a good game to play, with the populist media an invariably willing accomplice.

So, just because social housing is – to me and perhaps many readers of this article – a self-evident and scarce boon to society, doesn't mean it will be fully supported any time soon. Yes, it makes our cities work as functioning and diverse places to live. Yes, it helps the very poor out of poverty, into work and education. Yes, it drives equality of opportunity and of outcome. But no, it isn't a market-based solution; in fact, you could say that it is a form of antidote to market failure. It isn't really about increasing home ownership. And nor are many of its tenants in that dwindling category of the perceived 'deserving poor'.

One way and another, the water is indeed heating up. The new right to buy, the bedroom tax, new benefit caps, the diversion of investment into home ownership, the 1% annual rent cuts, and more besides, are harbingers of more to come. The poorest in society are at the sharp end, and those who serve them are castigated for causing their poverty. Evidence-averse policy making in action – you can look to the USA to see the same picture in three dimensions, with added cheese, not to mention walls.

What then is to be done? The occasion demands a mixture of pragmatism and principle, both collectively and individually. At the national level, the battle of ideas needs to be engaged. Without housing that workers can afford,

public services and other industries will eventually grind to a halt. Without hope for the poorest, social unrest and crime will surely increase. Even the keenest free marketeers become uneasy stepping over the homeless on the way home from the opera. The mistake is to rely too much on the facts – it's about the emotion and the perceptions. We need the populist media on our side.

Defiance and bitter invective will not help. The real-politik of working with government must be appreciated, or the metaphorical water will indeed be brought to the boil. Local authorities know this well, and housing associations can learn from their example. There is no disgrace in adopting the lesser of two evils. It's preferable to help someone into home ownership than do nothing; if a homeless family can be housed with the surplus from the same deal, then better still. Local impacts and relationships will add up to national impact over a period of time, and the more new homes we can build, the better it will get.

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