

FINCH

Gove on housing: a broken record

When will we introduce a Housing Development Board which actually builds homes instead of making speeches about how they are going to fix a 'crisis'? asks Paul Finch

When Russian harvests failed to meet production targets in the 1930s, Stalin would simply increase the target for the next year. He was doing his bit, why couldn't the farmers do theirs?

By contrast, the abject failure of successive UK governments to provide enough decent housing for the UK population has resulted in capitulation. Instead of increasing targets, the Secretary of State for 'Levelling Up', Michael Gove, has thrown them in the bin. Another election manifesto promise ditched.

Now, he claims, the entire system of housing provision is 'broken'. There is indeed a breakdown, which is the faith that the housing sector or anybody else might have in this government's interest in building homes. Five housing junior ministers in the past year tells its own story: that the political class no longer regards housing as important. In particular it suggests that a Conservative government, in denial about its own achievements in earlier generations, no longer thinks that home-owning is an election winner.

The number of articles and speeches Mr Gove makes on this subject is in inverse proportion to systematic activity intended to increase numbers. Take the recent announcement, as though it were some sort of triumph, that councils would be allowed to spend more of their receipts from council house sales on housebuilding, predicted to generate an additional 4,000 council homes. What a magnificent achievement! How relieved people on council waiting lists will be! Imagine: a pledge to produce 300,000 homes a year is binned, but on the other hand councils will be munificent new providers, one hopes not on the Croydon model.

In a foreword to a publication of think-pieces by people who have never built anything, Mr Gove has the cheek to observe that: 'We desperately need more homes to bring ownership within reach of many more people'. He doesn't say what he is doing about it, because the answer is more or less nothing.

The publication, by a think tank called Bright Blue (Red Faces would be more appropriate), contains mainly half-baked nostrums which do little to

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address the key issue: how do you get more homes delivered? Gove claims that the entire system is 'broken', but mortgages are still being granted and housebuilders still go about their business of building for the market. What is missing is a sufficiency of supply, which is not a 'crisis' as Gove claims, but a condition which has been with us for decades, since Conservatives decided they didn't want to build homes for the poor, and Labour gave the policy tacit support.

This is a failure of the political class as a whole, and as ever it seeks scapegoats on which to project its own failings. In recent years this has included the planning system; housebuilders failing to pursue the national interest; land hoarding; building regulations (they dropped that one after Grenfell); and the lending policies of banks and building societies.

Planning policies, it is true, have become increasingly complex and nit-picking, premiating development control over the necessary delivery of new homes. But it is the same basic planning system. Housebuilders quite properly build for the market; their reward has been a punishment beating from governments and London mayors who force them to deliver an entirely inadequate social housing programme. Land hoarding is largely a fantasy, as successive independent inquiries have confirmed.

The reasons we have an ongoing shortage are not that difficult to comprehend: virtually no local

Founded in 2014, Bright Blue aims to "defend and champion liberal, open, democratic and meritocratic values, institutions and policies." Bright Blue is a membership-based think tank open to anyone who identifies as a liberal conservative.

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authority or new-town housebuilding since, for want of a better date, 1979. Margaret Thatcher's redistribution of wealth to council tenants, hated of course by a Labour party with no interest in seeing the poor jump up the social ladder, was unaccompanied by a building programme, shamefully. Michael Heseltine claims that it was supposed to happen. All one can say is that it didn't.

Given the population increase over the last 40 years, particularly in London, it is scarcely surprising that we have a shortage. Prices and rents have risen inexorably, which explains why housing benefit payments, often to double-income families, are out of control but result in zero additional homes being built. Nice for landlords of course, and buy-to-let purchasers who become competition for the strugglers trying to get their first step on the housing ladder.

When will we introduce a Housing Development Board on the Singapore model, which actually builds homes instead of making speeches about how they are going to fix a 'crisis'? Not while cynics like Mr Gove are in charge – along with whichever poor sap is destined to become the next replacement 'housing minister', a job which would be more accurately described as another 'minister without portfolio'. ■

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