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Towards an urban renaissance – the underrecognized legacy of John Prescott

Tackling the housing crisis and building 1.5 million homes in England is one of the milestones this Labour Government has set itself. There are plenty of lessons to be learned from how the previous Labour Government supported tenants, rescued decaying council housing and boosted the regeneration of England's cities. Anne Power remembers John Prescott and his vision for and contribution to an urban renaissance.

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John Prescott, who passed away in late November, aged 86, was a popular figure in Labour politics. But his transformational contribution to Britain's urban renaissance hasn't been mentioned in the many tributes since his death. He was also the instigator and driver of a radical, yet relatively low-cost programme, for rescuing council housing from its decay, the *Decent Homes programme*, which was both popular and extremely effective. Similarly, his largely disastrous plan *Sustainable Communities* involving large scale demolition of Victorian terraced homes across the North of England and the Midlands has been largely buried. It is true Prescott was a titan, but he earned this title on solid ground through radical action in areas long ignored.



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A year into New Labour's change-oriented government in 1998, the government, at Prescott's instigation, decided to set up an Urban Task Force to investigate and identify the drivers of the acute decline in Britain's older industrial cities, and recommend ways of reusing the valuable infrastructure locked up in them. I was invited to join the Urban Task Force to represent housing and social interests and to help link wider urban problems with the Labour government's commitment to neighbourhood renewal in high poverty areas, most of which were in decaying cities. Prescott asked Lord **Richard Rogers**, the renowned architect, to chair the Urban Task Force. Rogers and Prescott were hugely contrasting figures, but at one on the urgency of rescuing our decaying cities. Richard Rogers, like John Prescott, was deeply committed to restoring cities. They formed a brilliant partnership, although their styles could not have been more different.



The Urban Renaissance report, with its 100 recommendations, is a monument to the vision of a fairer, better run society that Prescott and Rogers shared.



The **Urban Task Force report** was launched by John Prescott in Manchester in 1999 with great fanfare, and cities like Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham, and Liverpool received a massive boost. Their significant recovery is a monument to Prescott's far-sightedness, following as it did in the footsteps of his predecessor, Michael Heseltine, who was Britain's first Minister for Cities. The **Urban Renaissance report**, with its 100 recommendations, is a monument to the vision of a fairer, better run society that Prescott and Rogers shared.

Another transformative idea that Prescott drove was the Decent Homes Programme, which was launched in 2002 with the aim of dedicating £10,000 per property to every council home in the country in order to make them wind and weatherproof, warm and updated, with modern kitchens and bathrooms. The total cost of this programme was £19 billion, and it ran smoothly with few

hiccups over 10 years, making nearly 2 million council homes “decent”. It had a dramatic impact not only on the condition of council properties but also on the views of both tenants and council landlords. Housing Associations were expected to upgrade their property, including transferred council property, from their own surplus revenue.



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Prescott was strongly committed to tenant empowerment through his support for the National Tenant Training Programme, run by the National Communities Resource Centre at Trafford Hall. He visited Trafford Hall more than once and he spoke eloquently at the great gathering in Chester of over 1000 tenants to celebrate the millennium in 2000. Two memories stand out from this. The first was his reaction to the tenant activist from Hull who spoke about their experiences as council tenants. Prescott realised his formal, civil servant style speech was all wrong, threw the text to the side when on stage, and spoke his mind about how tenants should have a voice and how social and council housing should be reformed. It received a standing ovation from the packed audience of tenants. Prescott had three official minders, as they are called, but they were not confident they could handle the situation, so I was asked by government officials to help “look after” Prescott for this event. In spite of fears, his impromptu speech hit just the right note, and he drove away proud to have shifted gear on tenant empowerment.



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and minimalist approach to urban renewal.



Much more controversial was the **Sustainable Communities Plan** which Prescott launched in 2003. It contained proposals for “rectifying” the whole country’s housing problems. It included proposals to demolish up to 400,000 Victorian terraced properties that were considered obsolete and in low demand. I was a vocal critic of this extreme form of “housing market renewal” as it was called, and Prescott, always sensitive to criticism, was aware of this. By chance we were both waiting by the lifts in the office block where he was based. He confronted me with the accusation “I hear you don’t like my Sustainable Communities plan”, leaving with little chance to respond as the lifts took off. We later had several intense discussions about the uncostered damage of demolition. In the end only about 10,000 of the proposed 400,000 homes were demolished, far too many, but far from the devastating scale Prescott had originally advocated. However, the damage lingered, even to this day, as huge swathes of the country were blighted by the threat of pending demolition. Money for upgrading was, in most cases, in short supply.

The era of the Urban Renaissance came to an abrupt end when the Coalition came to power in 2010 with its austerity and minimalist approach to urban renewal. John Prescott’s leadership brought about real progress on the ground, alongside some aberrations. The re-birth of our older cities and the survival of council housing owe much to his energy and foresight.

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