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Spatial Economics Research Centre

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Planning reforms: A challenge for left and right

George Osborne and Eric Pickles write in the FT this morning [defending their planning reforms](#). The National Trust and the CPRE are increasingly vociferous in their opposition. Happy times for the opposition, one imagines, but in the longer run the 'homes crisis' presents as many problems for the left as it does for the right.

The left are more naturally disposed to planning so their gut instinct is to oppose conservative plans to deregulate. However, the negative consequences of the planning system are most strongly felt by the poor - so opposing reform supports the housing rich at major cost to the housing poor. Not a comfortable position for the left you would hope (although hard to tell from some of the commentary). Focusing on [\(and exaggerating?\)](#) the environmental costs distracts attention from the underlying problem of the effect that low housing supply has on poor families.

It's helpful to separate out the issues around the process (complicated top down plans versus local plans with incentives) from questions around the desired outcomes. Today, I want to focus on the latter. Let's assume that we all agree it would be good to make more use of long term vacant properties (especially if neglected). Let's agree to disagree on second homes. But let's acknowledge that even if we tackled both these issues it wouldn't do much to [tackle the overall problem \(even if we knew how\)](#). Debates around the sale of council homes are another red herring because those homes still constitute part of the supply. There is, of course, a debate to be had about how much [new housing the government \(or local councils\) should directly provide](#). However, I haven't seen any serious suggestion as to how a large government home building programme would be funded if it was necessary. And that would still leave open the question of where these homes would be built. By opposing reforms because of the impact on the environment, people on the left are continuing to champion brownfield land policies. But these policies [haven't delivered the kind of homes people want, in the place they want them, in the kind of numbers needed](#). Where are the concrete proposals for dealing with that problem?

As a recent [CLG report observed](#): "This report has shown that housing has been badly affected by the credit crunch and will continue to be so in future. Many partners believe that the housing business model that underpinned the boom of the 1990s will not work in the next business cycle. Even before the crisis there were real concerns about the over provision of city centre apartments and the absence of family homes and the infrastructure that makes them viable. Addressing these issues will remain a challenge." That report was commissioned and published by the *previous* government. The coalition has laid out what it would do to address that challenge. Perhaps it is time for those who oppose their solution to come up with some credible ones of their own?

Posted by [Prof Henry G. Overman](#) on [Monday, September 05, 2011](#)

1 comment:

Ryan E said...

I would say the biggest impact on the poor was the end of large-scale public sector housebuilding (an ideologically driven policy) rather than anything fundamental about the planning system. How many new Barratt housing developments are built for people on council waiting lists? Plus the idea that high density on brownfield works against the delivery of family homes is a red herring- both can be achieved successfully. But it often means focusing on the other things that make a location attractive to families (aside from the specific attributes of a home- driveway, garden etc) which may indeed require more, not less planning.

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