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Council Housing in London

4.1 Council housing and the post-war consensus

In many ways, this final case study tells a similar story to the previous one. In Britain as in France, the post-war housing crisis became so acute that the state was forced to intervene and eventually did so with system-built modernist apartment blocks. In both countries, the polar distinction between the state-housed underclass on the one hand and owner-occupiers or those in the private rental sector on the other has become perhaps the most socially divisive signifier of class in a time at which peace and prosperity – not to mention social democracy – might have been expected to overcome this execrable marginalisation of a whole sector of society. This much is true of both London and Paris. But the conditions under which this scenario unfolded in the two countries differ in fundamentals.

After the years of post-war depression in France, during which a floundering government sought in vain to plug the gaping holes in the housing market, a strong, centralising and deeply paternalistic administration took the reins and built *grands ensembles* in the *banlieue*. In Britain, the emphasis was not on strong leadership and a reassertion of nationalism, but on a broad social-democratic consensus that saw the state’s role as being to provide for its citizens. The Labour government of 1945–51 was dedicated to eliminating the ‘Five Giants’ of poverty and inequality – in the terms of the Beveridge report of 1942 – Want, Ignorance, Disease, Idleness and Squalor (Timmins 1995: 23). State provision of social security, education, healthcare, full employment, and housing accordingly became the chief aim of government and the welfare state was born. Paris remained intact during the war after being declared an open city in 1940 (Pryce-Jones 1981: 3) and most of the
slums had already been pushed outside the walls. London by contrast had been devastated by German bombs, and still had slums in central areas. This meant that, while Paris centrifugally cast its poor out of the city into HLM housing in the banlieue, London’s lumpen class were gathered into inner city tenements concentrated on the sites of former slums and in areas where the Luftwaffe’s clearance programme had been most effectively prosecuted.

The reasons for these differences in political outlook and social geography are complex and manifold. On a basic level, France was humiliated and divided by five years of Vichy rule, while in Britain there was a feeling that rich and poor had united to repel the common enemy (Timmins 1995: 31). Even Churchill had said, in 1940: ‘When this war is won, as it surely will be, it must be one of our aims to establish a state of society where the advantages and privileges which have hitherto been enjoyed only by the few shall be far more widely shared by the many, and by the youth of the nation as a whole’ (Quoted Timmins 1995: 37). Labour’s unexpected landslide in the general election of 1945 must be seen in the context of this egalitarian turn in the rhetoric of British politics in wartime. Put very simply, the gloom and instability of post-war France was not shared by England. Britain managed to shuck off the remnants of her empire relatively peaceably – with India gaining independence in 1947 – while France was locked into expensive and bloody colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria (Hobsbawm 1995a: 218–22). In Britain, the resources of collaboration and heroism that had been discovered in the war on Nazism were now to be strategically deployed in what Beveridge called a ‘war on Want’. There was a feeling that the efforts of war had already ushered in a kind of socialism that must now make good on its promises. As Hobsbawm notes, across Western Europe, for the first time, ‘[s]ocial and economic reforms were introduced, not (as after the First World War) in response to mass pressure and the fear of revolution, but by governments committed to them on principle’ (1995a: 163). In Gaullist France the emphasis was on nationalist revival after the shameful capitulation of the Vichy years. But Clement Attlee’s government, as well as its housing policy, was infused with a spirit of optimism. The post-war government was on a social-democratic mission to ‘build equality into the fabric of the national landscape’ (Hanley 2007: 77).

The man charged with this ambitious task was Aneurin Bevan, also architect of the National Health Service (NHS). Housing was a part of the Ministry of Health until 1951, when Attlee combined it instead with local government (Timmins 1995: 141). While in France large scale