Introduction

Ideas and Housing

We are all Conservatives Now

Why should we bother with conservatism[1] any more? Indeed, it might seem wilfully perverse to concentrate on such ideas in Britain after three election defeats for the Conservative party, and after nearly a decade of New Labour. The more generous might concede that conservatism is of some historical interest, and we might learn something from this. However, to talk of a conservative consensus, such that it is implied that conservatism remains relevant to the present and the future is taking things rather too far. Of course, most academics and commentators writing about housing in Britain would not see this as particularly problematical. For them the Thatcher period was an unfortunate and misguided time that sent housing policy in entirely the wrong direction. Accordingly, the housing policies that came out of it, particularly the Right to Buy and the support for owner occupation, were, at best, regrettable and at worst, disastrous.

Now there is fortunately no correlation between weight of numbers and being correct, otherwise these academics would have had to concede something very significant after four straight Conservative election victories between 1979 and 1992. Therefore, in what follows I wish to present the case that housing policy—current policy in and around the year 2006, and not just in the past—is based around a conservative consensus. This consensus was forged in the period between 1979 and 1997 but has been extended and to an extent strengthened by the policies of New Labour since 1997.

---

[1] As I explain in chapter one, I differentiate between conservatism as a series of ideas that does not relate to any particular party or set of institutions, and the Conservative party by the use of lower and upper case respectively.

This is admittedly a controversial thesis, and one that will be resisted by those who support New Labour, as well as those who see any taint of conservatism as unacceptable and in need of immediate eradication. Yet it is one that I shall hang on to tenaciously throughout this book, in the hope that by the end I might have persuaded at least some of its readers of the strength of my case.

It is my view, therefore, that if we wish to understand housing as it currently is we need to look backwards to the policies made between 1979 and 1997 (and indeed even earlier), but that then we also need to view these policies through the prism of what I shall term the *conservative disposition*. This sense of the world, which centres on pragmatism, scepticism towards government and a desire for property ownership, is what has created the current attitudes towards housing that governments over the last twenty five years have responded to.

But even if this were not the case there would still be a need to understand the 1979–97 period and the housing policies that came out of it. First, the Conservatives were in office for so long that they were able to make many structural changes and to alter the culture in which housing policy and housing organisation operated. In short, the Conservative governments under Thatcher and Major created the framework in which current policy still sits. The major housing acts in 1980, 1988 and 1989 still set the structural context, and attitudes towards the major tenures solidified as a result of these policies towards owner occupation and social housing.

Indeed, there has been nothing since 1997 to match the vision or sense of purpose of a policy such as the Right to Buy or the intellectual clarity and forthrightness of the 1987 Housing White Paper (DOE, 1987). As *Roof Briefing* (no. 39, April 2000, p. 2) commented immediately after the publication of the 2000 Housing Green Paper: 'This is a managerial rather than an ideological green paper, producing an avalanche of new procedures from every nook and cranny of the housing sector. But the big picture remains the same'. It goes on to state that the Green Paper, 'will not herald a sea change like the 1980 Act's Right to Buy or the 1988 Act's deregulation of private renting and the switch to private finance'. This was despite the fact that the Blair government announced the Green Paper as being the first comprehensive review of housing policy in twenty three years. If this really was the case then one would have to conclude that there was not much that was wrong. Indeed the one phrase that rang out

of the 2000 housing Green Paper — perhaps because it was used three times — was 'Most people are well housed' (DETR/DSS, 2000, pp. 7, 15, 20). This can be read as an implicit recognition that New Labour found much to agree with in pre-1997 policies.

What this suggests, then, is that much of policy since 1997 has been about extending existing mechanisms and tinkering at the margins. Therefore if we want to understand where current policies come from, and why they have such longevity, we need to go back to before New Labour and look at the ideas of those who actually formulated and implemented them.

In any case, no government exists in a vacuum, but has to deal with the legacy of its predecessor, especially one that was in power for as long as the Conservatives had been. This legacy might be a benefit, as it clearly was in terms of the state of the economy, level of taxation and the control of public spending in 1997, but it can also be a liability in that a government, assuming it actually wants to carry out radical reforms, cannot stop providing services whilst it changes things: the 'year zero' option is not open to British politicians when it comes to reform.

But looking back and seeing what remains and why will also bring to light the disparity between rhetoric and action in New Labour. Looking at the extent of continuity that there is between New Labour and their Conservative predecessors will help us to see just what sort of government we have had since 1997. Just what is it about New Labour, or the circumstances in which it finds itself, that prevents it from creating policies all of its own or even going back to traditional Labour policies such as council house building? When we consider the policies prior to 1997 we see just how timid a government has been in power since 1997, one that seems only able to follow and not to lead, and this applies whether we are considering housing policy, the banning of fox hunting or even being led by the USA into war.

But stressing this continuity also allows us to deal with one of the oddest aspects of the last 7 years. This is the denial on the left that the current government is actually really rather conservative and thus it has not really made any difference at all. One frequently hears criticisms about New Labour housing policies, which end rather defiantly with the phrase, 'But at least it's not the Tories'. Indeed one does hear people state, with apparent sincerity, that New Labour stock transfer is actually different from Tory stock transfer, or people

might argue that at least New Labour consults local authorities before imposing its restrictions on them. There is something of a desperate belief that New Labour really is different—*it just has to be*—apparently held by the majority of people who work in housing or comment on it. One, of course, can feel sorry for those whose political certainties are shot, but it is still necessary to deal with this delusion, and to state as clearly as possible what the level of continuity is and, more importantly, what that consensus is around: it is not on municipalism but ending council housing; it is not about extending social housing, but supporting owner occupation. One must assume that most people know this, but it is another thing to get them to admit it.

But this very sense of continuity works more in favour of New Labour than for the Conservative party, and so another aim of this book is to explore what effect this conservative consensus has for the future of conservatism. Whilst we can argue persuasively that the Conservatives would not have done much differently from New Labour, we also need to ask just what would they immediately change when or if they regained power again? The question, therefore, is what would be different under the Tories? What this suggests is that the Conservatives have very little to say on housing that cannot be immediately gainsaid by New Labour: what more could be done to support owner occupation or transfer social housing to the private sector? So unlike the late 1970s, when they took up the Right to Buy, the Conservatives do not appear to be able to use housing as a stepping stone to government. Those on the right, therefore, need to study the last twenty five years just as closely as those on the left.

Do Ideas Still Matter?

Perhaps what this shows is that thinking on housing is rather different from the traditional left/right split. This traditional, and hugely simplistic, analysis of the politics of housing associated owner occupation with the Conservatives and council housing with Labour. The priorities of the Conservative party were seen to be the development of individual choice, personal responsibility and independence, which can best be achieved through property ownership. Hence the Conservatives are associated with owner occupation, with their rhetorical support for the 'property owning democracy' and policies such as the Right to Buy. The Labour party in turn was associated with the growth of council housing and active government intervention, with a social agenda aimed at fostering solidarity

and ensuring that society is organised as much for those at the bottom as at the top. To caricature, then, the Conservatives are the party of the market, while Labour is the party of the state.

This is indeed something of an oversimplification. The early labour movement may have initiated the debate on state subsidies to local authorities in the 1890s and the Labour party oversaw the massive expansion in public house building after World War Two. However, it was the Conservative governments between 1951 and 1964 that managed much of the expansion of council housing. Also whilst Labour can rightly be considered to be the party of public housing, senior Labour politicians can be found making supportive noises towards owner occupation as early as the late 1940s. We should therefore beware of stereotypes when we are considering the development of housing policy.

As an example of this, it was a commonplace to suggest that there was a consensus in housing policy from the later 1940s until 1979. The Conservative governments under Churchill, Eden and Macmillan continued with the expansion in public housing which began under Attlee's Labour administration. The consensus was continued through the 1960s and 1970s. But this too is something of an oversimplification. Whilst there were substantial areas of consensus, there were hard-fought disputes over issues such as the removal of rent controls in 1957 (Malpass, 1990) and the introduction of statutory provision for the homeless in 1977 (Richards, 1992). Thus the consensus might have been rather more noticeable in hindsight and once the divisions between the parties had become more marked after 1979.

Indeed the differences, manifested particularly over the implementation of the Right to Buy in 1980, were very real. The early 1980s saw a polarisation of political ideology and the dispute over housing tenure was a key area of dispute (Saunders, 1990). In some ways, this was a return to the position at the start of the twentieth century when the Conservatives were seen as the party of property, and Labour was closely associated with the inadequacy of working class housing. So one can point both to areas of real difference between the two parties, but also to periods in which policies converged, and we may now be in such as period of convergence. It may, however, necessitate our taking a step away from the action, so to speak, before we are able to recognise this.

One way of viewing the development of housing policy is as a series of dichotomies, as a dialectical progression where controver-

sies are resolved and key departures made. In some ways this is the simplest and most convenient manner in which to see housing policy developing: this is because it separates us into opposing camps or ideological positions with entrenched views and ways of looking at the world. It allows us to see policy developments through particular prisms, and thus to link housing with important political and ideological movements and the clash of ideas.

But just how accurate is this way of perceiving housing? Is it not overly simplistic to see housing policy—or any complex area of public policy—as being centred round a binary opposition? More fundamentally still, is it not erroneous to view housing as being in any real sense ideological at all? Should we not take up the Third Way mantra, and see housing policy as a concern for 'what works'?

This way of looking at housing policy may have some superficial appeal, but it is my view that it would actually obscure more than it would enlighten. It seems to me that one of the main problems with housing is a lack of appreciation of the history of how we arrived at where we are now. We have become too concerned with current issues and problems to learn lessons from the past, and in consequence we risk the possibility of repeating the same mistakes again. The Blairite concern for 'modernisation' can and does quite easily lead to the disparagement of any consideration of the past. This is something we should remember when the apparent 'step change' promised in English housing provision (ODPM, 2003) is to be achieved in part through the use of off-site techniques which are generally considered to be expensive and are relatively untested. Should we not be worried when housing associations such as the Peabody Trust are criticised by the Audit Commission for being more concerned with innovative schemes such as the 'award-winning BedZED scheme in Sutton, North London, (which) cost £10m more than had been planned' (*Housing Today*, 14 May 2004, p. 9) than modernising their older properties? Are we not, in our rush to do things now, at risk of repeating the mistakes of the past? Indeed, is not looking back to the past a rather good way of finding out what works and what does not?

The Blair government is often criticised for its apparent ignorance of history: it is accused of discarding ancient traditions and institutions without appreciating their material and symbolic significance, and of promoting change and 'modernisation' for their own sakes. In response to this, the government claims it is dealing with new problems and has to respond to these in innovative ways. We are, they

claim, now operating in a new paradigm, which demands a new form of politics. It thus appears to concur with its critics that it has little to learn from the past: it appears to believe that the problems it is facing are new ones.

In any case it is a particular conceit of policy makers and practitioners to dismiss the concerns of academics with the argument that they are too concerned with day-to-day issues—with immediate problems—and have no time to reflect on the past or on concepts and theories. But putting this less charitably, we can restate this as policy makers being too concerned with making their own mistakes to be concerned with the mistakes of the past!

But just how new are the problems facing government? As an example, the one constant of the last 25 years is the observation that 'housing is in crisis'. *The Housing Crisis* was the title of an excellent book from the mid 1980s (Malpass, 1986), yet one only has to read the current housing press to be confronted regularly with the notion of crisis and imminent disaster. Now, this might be because the problems are different, but a cursory look at Malpass's volume shows a concern for rent levels, overly limited public spending, the quality of the housing stock, and access. The cry, then as now, is for more investment, more affordable rents and effective means of dealing with homelessness and disrepair. So just what is new?

It is my view that *there really is nothing new to current problems*. One can suggest that the key issues in housing have always been about affordability, quality and access (King, 2001) and this applied to the nineteenth century public health acts, the early housing legislation in the 1920s, the *Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977* and the 2000 Housing Green Paper. It is these same basic issues that policy makers are grappling with; what differs are people's expectations and hence the acceptability of a range of solutions (King, 1998). What this suggests is that we can better understand our current problems by looking at how these same issues were dealt with in the past. The reason for this is that any current problems can be traced back to past policies which have developed in ways which were not intended and were unforeseen: current issues are often the result of past policy failure.

But as much as this book deals with history, so is it also concerned with ideology, and what effect this has had on housing policy. This concern for ideological development is important because we readily slip into cliché when considering policy. We use shorthand terms to create an impression and to suggest a meaning—'social' as

opposed to 'private', 'choice' as opposed to 'need'—and we do this because we know that these terms have a particular resonance. The mere attachment of the word 'private' conveys a particular image, conjuring up notions of profit, markets and a right-wing agenda. Conversely 'social' conveys the ideas of equality, fairness and justice. The significance of the Third Way and the appendage of the prefix 'New' to Labour is that the Blair government is trying to claim it has transcended these clichéd categories, and has found a means to combine the competitive nature of markets with social justice and equality.

Clearly, we have a choice as to whether we accept this transcendence or merely see New Labour and the Third Way as a chimera or a con trick—as 'global capitalism with a human face' (Žižek, 2000, p. 63)[2]. But what we need to do, *in either case*, is come to terms with what these ideological positions are, what impact they have had, and whether they still retain any relevance for the early twenty first century. If we can do this, then we might be able to understand what is at stake when New Labour claims to have reached a new synthesis. Put more simply, we might be able to determine whether there is anything new here or whether there is in fact a consensus built around long-standing conservative ideals.

It is not particularly my aim to see housing policy in Hegelian terms, as some sort of great dialectic process culminating in a unifying transcendence on 2 May 1997. I am not claiming, along with Fukuyama (1992), that we have reached 'the end of history', so that the current set of housing policies and tenure arrangements has been the purpose of past struggles[3]. Rather I am interested in exploring how far housing policy is a creature of ideology.

One cannot discuss modern housing policy without an appreciation of key ideological differences. So we cannot understand the significance that property ownership has, or is meant to play, in the lives of autonomous households without seeing that this has an ideological function. Similarly, the ownership of public assets such as council housing raises questions of the nature of the state and the manner in which it should provide for its citizens, and again this has an ideological import. These are all fundamental questions that, in

[2] Throughout this book I prefer to use New Labour rather than the 'Third Way'. This is largely because New Labour has almost entirely rejected the term and moved on to other justifications for its actions.

[3] As Fukuyama is always keen to reiterate, even as his critics seem equally disinclined to hear, his use of 'end' was intended to denote purpose and not closure.

their general import, have taxed thinkers since Plato and Aristotle. We should therefore not be surprised that a policy such as the Right to Buy, which involves both an extension of property ownership and an accusation of the stripping of public assets for private gain, divides politics and energises ideologues on both left and right. Policies, we should not forget, are the practical expression of ideas.

But politics is not as simple as this, of course. As I have suggested already, it is the case that any government, upon taking office, must start with what it is given in terms of the prevailing political institutions, economic conditions and policy instruments. Creating change takes time and, in democratic societies at least, must be undertaken gradually and through consent. This means that, whatever ideals one wishes to turn into practice, one can only proceed along predetermined paths and use already existing institutions, some of which may be the very antithesis of one's idea of good government. One might characterise this view by quoting the punch line to the bad joke about someone asking directions to Dublin: 'If I were you I wouldn't start from here'. The point of the joke is precisely that we do have to start from *here*. This might be a difficult spot, and getting out of it might be our priority, but we cannot ignore the fact that we are there. Moreover, understanding how we got there might prove to be of some use to us, particularly so that we can learn how not to end up there again. The important point is that we cannot wish away the journey up to the point where we got lost and sought directions.

Policy makers have to start with the institutions, resources, and policies that they inherit. But because they have to reform existing institutions this means they come up against vested interests, traditional ways of operating, and precedents. It is noticeable that those who defend both the NHS and council housing rely on the historical purpose of these institutions. Likewise, it is not coincidental that the Thatcher government did not attempt any serious welfare reforms until their third term (1987 onwards), nor that the Blair government is criticised for its slow progress on reform.

This situation being so, we can pick out a dichotomy in policy between pragmatism on the one hand, and radicalism on the other. We might describe this as the choice between vision and managerialism. The dichotomy is between those who seek rapid and fundamental change, and those who wish to work with current institutions and amend them slowly, ensuring there is no great disruption and upset. Hills (1991) has described housing policy as a cat's cradle, a complex interweaving of threads where the connections

and inter-dependencies are not immediately obvious. We might be tempted to pull hard, but doing so is just as likely to create a mess, which we will then struggle to sort out. But on the other hand, there are those who contend that unless we act quickly and decisively, we risk being compromised by existing vested interests. If we want fundamental change this can be done better by 'shock therapy' rather than gradual change (Skidelsky, 1995). After all, if current institutions are the problem, why should we expect that we can use them to achieve our ends?

Of course, all this assumes that political parties act in a consistent manner and do not change from the route (and roots!) they are assumed to have. But, as appeared to be the case in the 1990s, there may be a disjuncture between a party's current and historical position. As Giddens (1994) has pointed out, the party of radicalism, Labour, and its allies in the trade unions, found themselves on the defensive in the face of an onslaught from a radical right-wing government. It was those on the left who were trying to preserve its traditional liberties and institutions. They were the reactionaries and the Conservatives were the radicals. Giddens (1994) therefore talks of a *philosophical conservatism*, where one has a general, perhaps time-limited, disposition against change. This disposition, he argues, has little to do with one's expressed ideology, but more to do with the prevailing political circumstances. Accordingly, the old guard of the Soviet communist party were the reactionaries, and free market politicians such as Yeltsin the radicals. This is an issue of considerable importance to the argument of this book and one that I return to at some length: indeed this entire book might be seen as a discussion on the consistency, or otherwise of assumed ideological positions.

Yet the question remains as to the actual role that ideology plays in policy development. Does ideology play much of a role at all, or is it more the case that the fine grain of policy is not determined by big ideas but more mundane matters? How far is politics about expediency and how much is down to principle? As it is quite rare for parties to split and for new alliances to form, we need to try to understand what connection there is between ideology and pragmatism, and how this relates to the essentially tribal nature of politics. At issue here is again the question of whether we should be concerned with ideology or with party.

One way of tackling all these questions at once is to suggest that ideology creates the framework in which more detailed policy mak-

ing sits. So, we can separate the principled decision to implement a massive council house building programme in the late 1940s from the detailed subsidy mechanisms used. Clearly there is a relation between the two, but the principle need not entirely depend on particular mechanisms. Likewise, the Right to Buy was based on an ideological presupposition, but the guidance developed to implement it and deal with the resulting capital receipts was not cast in stone as a result. One way of seeing this distinction might be that of ends and means: a government wishes to achieve certain ideological ends and then has to determine particular means to achieve them. It may choose radical means if these appear appropriate or feasible, or it might choose a more pragmatic tack. This may be a simplification of the political process (for instance, can ends and means really be separated?) but it might offer us a way of locating the significance of ideology and where its limits might be.

The importance of this discussion is that it raises the difficult, but crucial, issue of *continuity*. Perhaps like all governments, the Blair government claimed that perdition ended and heavenly virtue began only when they were elected in May 1997. Hence, as we have already seen, the 2000 Housing Green Paper with its emphasis on choice was called the first comprehensive review of housing policy for twenty three years. This conveniently sidetracked such significant policies as the Right to Buy and the fact that choice had also featured heavily in Conservative Housing White Papers in 1987 and 1995 (DOE, 1987, 1995). We might suggest that the idea of choice has been at the heart of housing policy since the mid 1980s, and what the Blair government has tried to do is to re-invent it as its 'big idea', when, in fact, it is merely continuing, or at best extending, the policies of its predecessors.

The problem for us here, however, is whether this is precisely what we should see New Labour as being about—that it is meant to be an ideological magpie—or whether this shows that politics is as much about opportunism and populism as principles. Of course, the answer we would give to this question would itself be coloured by ideology. It would depend on what we thought of the New Labour project. Accordingly, most of its critics are those who oppose its post-ideological position and who instead sit in what might be called the 'Old Left' or 'New Right' corners. This means, perhaps unsurprisingly, that we can only understand the criticisms of New Labour when we appreciate the ideological baggage they bring to the argument.

As should now be apparent, there is a considerable degree of circularity here: ideology is important to policy making precisely because we hold our ideologies to be important, and they thus determine how we contend with debates on policy. But this is because, for most of us, it is our ideological position—our fundamental beliefs—that tells us 'what works'. There is therefore no necessary opposition between continuity and ideology. What differs are the means by which we seek to achieve our ends, and consequently how near or far we are from those who oppose us. Sometimes the gulf is large and the policy debate is both deep and acrimonious, whilst on other occasions we can see a consensus. This is always a matter of degree, but ideology is always a matter of importance. This is because it can tell where we are, and, more importantly in this case, where others are. An understanding of the importance of ideology, therefore, can tell us much about what certain policies mean. This book, then, is essentially a study of ideology, and in particular the conservative ideology as it manifests itself in modern British, or more particularly, English politics. More particularly still, it is a study of the impact of the conservative ideology on English housing policy. And this connection between conservatism and housing is a peculiar one.

The Way We Use Our Housing

It is my contention that what matters most of all in this discussion on housing and ideology is the manner in which we use our housing. Only once we understand the role that housing plays at the personal, and therefore non-political, level, can we come to terms with how and why a consensus has developed over housing policy, and how this has been modelled by conservative ideology.

As ordinary members of the public we like to think that elections matter, or else why do we have them? Politicians, being primarily tribal, would also tend to say that elections matter, and, in the sense of handing the keys to power over to one group rather than another, they certainly do count. Moreover, they do matter regardless of the number of people who vote in them: New Labour does not have less power because they won in 2005 with only 10 million votes compared with the 14 million garnered by the Conservatives in 1992.

But also most politicians tend to be risk averse, and this applies regardless of the size of their majority or popular vote. Modern politicians tend to stick with the popular and back away from the risky and the dangerous. The main principle is of 'safety first' and indeed

what happens when they do take risks is illuminating: does Blair really relish being remembered for the ill-advised adventurism that led to the quagmire of Iraq? Likewise, Thatcher is as much remembered for the Poll Tax and the Euro as any of her policy successes. Hence we can claim that caution has some merit to it.

Of course, this innate caution might not be matched by the rhetoric. Thatcher claimed that she was 'not for turning' and gave the impression that she was resolute and determined. However, her record shows considerably more caution, with a piecemeal approach taken to both privatisation and trade union reform. As with the miners' strike, she was astute at choosing the time and place for her battles[4]. Likewise, New Labour is full of a rhetoric of 'modernisation'. When we look at their housing policies we hear lots of talk about 'step-changes' and 'transformation': New Labour does not just build houses but 'creates sustainable communities', as well as ensuring that all homes are 'decent'. Their rhetoric is all about shifting to a higher gear, dealing with backlogs, and bringing in new initiatives and actions, all of which are 'joined-up' and 'modern'. We see targets and inspections and the drive to efficiency, with lots of pseudo-business jargon thrown in.

And yet I would suggest that what all this activity turns on is *property ownership*. For all the clamour about strategic planning and best practice, New Labour's record on spending and house building does not bear up well with any of its predecessors, with spending in their second term at a third in real terms of spending in 1980/81, and public sector housing completions declining every year from 1997 until 2003 (Wilcox, 2004). In 1980 110,000 social housing dwellings were built compared with 18,279 in 2003. It will need to be quite a step-change.

Social housing policy does not match the rhetoric which supports it, and this is because it does not actually matter to our current crop of risk averse politicians. What does concern these politicians is home ownership, and this is because this is what matters most to the public. In fact the public's concern is even more specific: they are not so much concerned with owner occupation as the particular house that they own and what they can do with it.

The majority of households are owner occupiers. What concerns this majority is issues such as the choices they can make, and how their dwelling affects them materially. This sense of ownership

---

[4] Of course, as Blair is finding to his cost, it actually helps you to appear resolute if you win the wars you start.

brings with it a feeling of affluence and a sense of independence so that one is not reliant on government. Owning our own dwelling allows us to ignore politicians, and to insulate ourselves from their boasts and hubristic noises, so that we really do begin to feel that perhaps elections do not matter after all: why bother with the ballot box when we are sovereign consumers? As consumers we can make choices that directly affect us on a daily basis and not just every 4–5 years. In this sense, it is our income and our property that enfranchise us. Accordingly, we can ignore politicians with impunity, or perhaps we have become immune to their arguments and pleadings.

I want to assert that the preponderance of owner occupation has had a considerable effect on politics and that has led to an ideological transformation. It is this which creates the conservative consensus I have claimed is present. What is important is that it is owner occupation which has created this ideological shift, and not the ideology which created the support for owner occupation. First, as owner occupiers we have become sceptical about what government can do for us. We want it to be cautious and in the background. We do not want to be nannied by politicians and we will seek to punish them when they try. We do indeed have 'a stake in the system', and this does not just make us rather more conservative, but also we begin to insist that our governments act conservatively. Second, we have come to relish having choices, and to have a sense that we are in control. We therefore feel that government can leave us alone as far as our housing is concerned (with the corollary that we want government to step in when we feel we cannot control our surroundings, and hence we want action on the fear of crime, health scares and so on). Third, we now quite naturally see property ownership as a good thing in itself: we enjoy the security it can give us and our children. In short, we feel that property ownership is natural.

What I want to suggest is that the attitude towards owner occupation is one of the main ways in which the conservative disposition is manifested. I shall, of course, spend a considerable amount of time in the first part of the book discussing what this disposition is, but for the moment I shall describe it simply as an important need that we have *to hold dear those things that are close to us*. It is the sense that we are made by our relations to those things that are around us, our family, our immediate belongings, our home, and that on and through these are founded our relations with others.

This disposition, as we shall see, is a peculiar form of ideology, one that is reactive and which does not act in the form of programmatical

statements starting 'I believe …' Rather we should see it as an attitude or even a practice, such that we live it out rather than declare it. It is in this way that our use of our dwelling is so instructive. But the conservative ideology is also peculiar in that it is not in essence political at all. It is rather inchoate, being an unarticulated series of habits and attitudes rather than anything with a slogan or banner attached. This diminishes its visibility, but not its profundity or its influence. What this means is that it is for politics to respond to the disposition: politics can help or hinder it, but not create it. It is formed outside politics and increasingly in the home.

Despite what many will and do think of conservatism, I do not consider the disposition I articulate here as being particularly reprehensible. Of course, there is much more to life than property and wealth; it is just that most of those other things only become possible if we have a place to live and some disposable income. The fault would be to see owner occupation as an end in itself, just as it would be an error to see an ideology as something that exists merely for itself. The reason that Marxism has ceased to operate as a serious idea is that it was found to be murderous. Accordingly, the test for the conservative disposition is what it does in people's lives and what it says about how they do and should live. What is different about it, certainly compared to Marxism, is that it derives not from any utopian sense of what society could or should be like, but rather from the manner in which we do things, such as how we live and spend our money. It is grounded in quotidian practices and in the things that we use to give our lives, as they currently are, their sense of meaning. This is certainly rather more mundane than building barricades and making speeches exhorting others to action, but at least it is safer.

Structure of the Book

This book is structured to go from the general to the specific and then back again, in that it begins with a consideration of ideology, moves on to a discussion of housing policy and then back to ideology again. Chapter one considers the conservative disposition, and offers a detailed discussion of what conservatism is and how it links to, and differs from, the Conservative party. In chapter two I move on to look at libertarianism to assess what influence these ideas have had on Conservative politics in the 1980s and 1990s. I suggest that, broadly speaking, the similarities between the two ideologies outweigh their differences, but that conservatism was able to absorb lib-

ertarianism without fundamentally altering itself. Chapter three then considers the actual impact that ideology had and whether this was tempered by pragmatism. The argument of this chapter is that, as a key part of the conservative disposition is pragmatism or gradualism, this too can be accommodated without any difficulty.

Chapter four moves on to policy and considers Conservative housing, making the links between the ideology and particular policies such as the Right to Buy and the use of private finance. This chapter does not restrict itself to the 1979 to 1997 period, although much of the discussion centres on it. Chapter five moves the story on to a consideration of post-1997 housing policies. The considerable degree of continuity is shown and any differences of emphasis discussed. Chapter six moves back to a discussion of ideology by considering the nature of New Labour and whether it has any substance independent of its predecessor's policies. This chapter also undertakes a critique of the language of New Labour, which might be used to hide a lack of substance. The conclusion considers the nature of the conservative consensus after nearly a decade of the Blair government, and what future the success of New Labour might mean for the Conservatives as well as the conservative disposition.

As should be clear this book takes a broadly sympathetic view of conservatism if not necessarily the Conservative party. I am generally critical of New Labour despite the fact that they are following a broadly conservative path. This, as far as I can tell, makes the book unique, in that there has been virtually no sympathetic assessment of Conservative housing policies and their impact on New Labour. This, of course, does not make my argument any better or worse. However, it does, I hope, offer a distinctly different view that opens up housing discourse into new areas. I hope that any conservatives who do read this do not object to my attempts at originality: it is not, I know, a very conservative thing to do.