

## **Prefiguring the Revolution - 'Taking back control!' and 'better together!'**

*In the first of Stephen Hill's series of blogs, he drew on his Churchill Fellowship research in the USA, Canada and England to explore the roles and responsibilities of politicians and the professions, especially his own, in housing and land policy. (A shorter version of his blog will appear in the November issue of the RICS monthly journal Modus).*

*In his second (Blog 4), he shows how citizens have increasingly taken the initiative to plan and deliver the housing and land reform solutions that genuinely meet the needs of their communities, when public policy and the market fail to do what is needed, making visible new ways for land to be priced, owned and used in the public interest.*

### ***TIME FOR A CITIZENS' HOUSING REVOLUTION!***

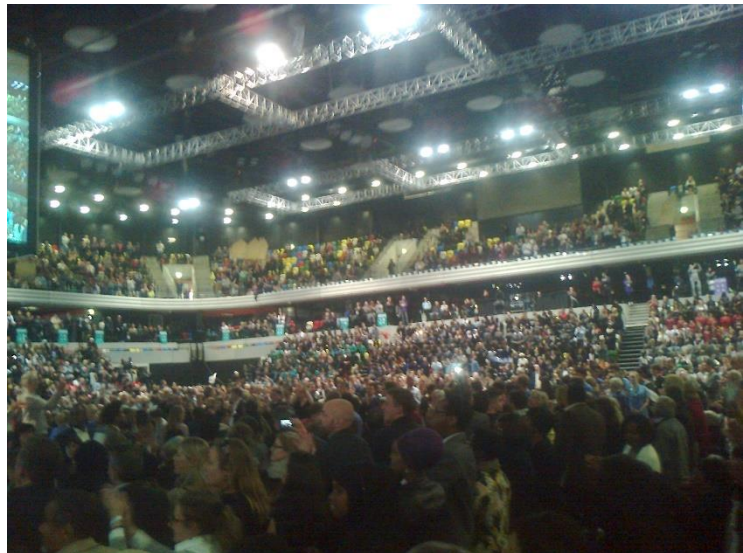
This was the rather hopeful title of a paper that I wrote in 2009 for a very sober assessment of the post-crash housing market '[Who should build our homes now?](#)', published by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

Drawing on work with the bright young men and women at [Zero](#)

[Zero](#), I proposed a Right to Build, the essence of which was to liberate the potential of

citizens to house themselves. It urged citizens to be [disruptors](#) of the housing market and public policy 'system' that has given us an ever more limited range of housing choices in the generation since 'Big Bang'. It cast the state in a new enabling role to the citizen and community organisations, through the use of planning policy, land assembly and financial support so that citizens could do the things that the state no longer wished or seemed able to do.

As a genuinely non-partisan policy idea, it was cautiously taken up by Labour's John Healey, and then with increasing enthusiasm by subsequent Coalition and Conservative Housing Ministers: all five of them since 2010. The effective roll-out of policy into practice has been promoted by the National Custom and Self Build Association, and the indefatigable Richard



*6000 members of London Citizens at the 2016 London Mayoral Hustings hear Mayoral candidates promise to support community land trusts and cohousing*

Bacon MP. He championed new legislation last year and this, to support the acceptance of people building their own home into mainstream policy.

Curiously, senior Conservatives have shown no reluctance about adopting the rhetoric of revolution. What could Bacon (“[a bottom up revolution in how housing is done in the UK](#)”), and Grant Shapps, (when Housing Minister, intending to “[start a revolution where communities would get involved in providing housing for themselves](#)”) possibly mean?

Many of the community rights embodied in the Localism Act, especially Neighbourhood Plans, have certainly upset the traditional power relationships between the state and the citizen. And now, the Custom Build Register, which all councils should have had in place since April 1<sup>st</sup> this year, offers much greater potential for active citizenship. It is open to anyone who wants to build their own home, or have it built for them.

In the Housing & Planning Act 2016, government has put a new duty on councils to ensure an adequate supply of land for those on the Register. Who wouldn't want to build their own home, especially if you don't have one, or can't afford or reject what is available? So maybe we should **all** go on the register? Would this, at last, be the way in which the demand side begins to have a genuine voice in housing policy and the way the market works? That would be revolutionary...people getting what they need and want, and no longer being told what they can have? Post-WW2 housing policy has been made between the state and the supply side. The voice of the public has been totally silenced in the imperfect market politicians and suppliers (that includes landowners and banks) have created between them; unaffordable, undersized and environmentally obsolete homes before a brick is laid.

### **The problem with revolutions is that they are normally quite bloody**

The English Civil War... the French Revolution...Brexite....well, maybe not quite yet. At worst, they destroy political, social and economic capital over generations before benefits begin to flow in the new order. At best, transitions can be less painful if there are already models of what works better. This particular revolution is already being prefigured by self-builders, custom build developers, and particularly community housing groups...coops, community land trusts (CLTs), cohousing, self-help housing, mutual housing associations, and community development trusts.

What all those groups share is a belief that their housing needs are defined by important political ideas about how we need to live: some of these ideas seem to come straight out of our recent referenda campaigns...with a twist. In the future, we will have to rely more on each other, if we are to enjoy a decent quality of life (Better Together). This will only happen if we live in a state in which citizens are encouraged and enabled to act autonomously to create that ideal situation (Taking Back Control). The state and the citizen have to find new ways of sharing power and working (better) together, to achieve what neither can do on their own.

One of the most important but barely noticed political acts of recent years was the inclusion of a [legal definition](#) of CLTs in an Opposition amendment to the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008. It looks unremarkable. It was intended to be. CLTs must be set up expressly to further the social, economic and environmental interests of their communities. They can hold and use assets only for the benefit of the community and they have to be democratic institutions accountable to their communities. Revolutionary?

## What are most CLTs actually upto?

Their primary concern is the dysfunction of the land and housing market in their place. So they decide to stop the land and housing market working in the 'normal' way, by constraining the price of land to ensure that CLT homes are genuinely and permanently affordable. That's quite a big deal. Governments dare not do the same. To legitimise their action, however, they must be democratically accountable and be demonstrably acting in the public interest...exactly what the definition states with their wellbeing objectives reflecting the wellbeing powers of all tiers of local government. The parliamentary draftsmen at the time were very reluctant to do this, but four years later, perhaps realising what they had inadvertently done, they adopted the CLT definition to describe the kind of organisation that could give itself planning permission through a Community Right to Build Order: another big deal, the citizen taking on the planning function of the state.

## CLTs are not just another 'model' of community housing.

They have no specific legal or financial form, but they do have very clear values and purposes; they are a political idea that belongs to neither the left nor the right. Citizens promoting CLTs are not only "problem solving", they are "problem defining". They embody an approach in which citizens have been able to take the time to explore and understand the complexity of their villages, towns and cities, and their communities and what makes them work.

John Davis, the benign wizard of CLTs in the USA, offers a more homely version of this revolution: "As the sweet old lady recently confided...when talking about her own CLT, which is promoting both urban agriculture and affordable housing on common ground: 'What we are really about is **land reform**, dear, but we hide behind the tomatoes.' CLTs may occasionally 'hide behind the tomatoes', but what they are 'really about' is re-planting the contested ground at the intersection of **property, power, and place.**"

## Who was the parliamentary sponsor of that CLT amendment in 2008?

Step forward Grant 'Che' Shapps!  
"I have the opportunity to transfer power to where it really belongs - local communities. [Today it's time to start that revolution.](#) I'm not asking you to join me at the barricades (pity) - this will be a very English revolution. But it will still be dramatic. And long lasting. We will turn things upside down".



On this, he could still be right...

**In his final contribution (Blog 7), Stephen will suggest that the phenomenon of citizen or community housing is itself an important sign of the changing power relationship between the citizen, the market and the state that could have important lessons for democratic renewal as all politicians grapple with post-truth or post-Brexit politics, and the collapse of public trust in political elites and professional experts.**

