

# The Birth of the Right to Housing: Housing Policy in Early Twentieth Century Britain and the British Empire

Christopher M. Roberts\* and Lau Yi Chan†

*This Article explores the development of the idea of a right to housing that took place during and in the aftermath of the First World War in Great Britain. A combination of existing poor conditions, the need to ensure productive workers, a desire to minimize workers' resistance, and some degree of progressive sentiment led to the development of ambitious public housing plans during the war. While these plans were highly contentious, the postwar decades saw bold new public housing ideas converted into law, leading to the production of hundreds of thousands of public housing units in Britain. While nothing on the same scale took place around the British Empire, the idea that the state should intervene far more extensively in support of the adequate provision of housing advanced substantially in the period there as well—and prominently so in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore. While the idea of a right to housing was not enshrined in law in this period, these developments provided essential groundwork for that obligation, as well as for subsequent public housing policy developments around the world.*

|      |                                                                     |     |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| I.   | INTRODUCTION .....                                                  | 192 |
| II.  | WARTIME PLANNING.....                                               | 195 |
|      | A. <i>Background</i> .....                                          | 195 |
|      | B. <i>Growing Belief in State Action and Public Ownership</i> ..... | 197 |
|      | C. <i>State Action, Public Ownership, and Housing</i> .....         | 201 |
| III. | THE ADDISON ACT .....                                               | 206 |
| IV.  | SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS .....                                       | 215 |
| V.   | HOUSING IN THE EMPIRE .....                                         | 220 |
|      | A. <i>Bombay</i> .....                                              | 221 |
|      | B. <i>Hong Kong</i> .....                                           | 227 |
|      | C. <i>Singapore</i> .....                                           | 230 |

---

\* © 2026 Christopher M. Roberts. Roberts is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Law at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The research for this Article was supported by General Research Fund Number 14600724 from the Research Grants Council of the University Grants Committee in Hong Kong.

† © 2026 Chan Lau Yi, a J.D. Candidate at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of a right to housing has been recognized in numerous contexts. In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed that “[e]veryone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including . . . housing” and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognized the same in 1966.<sup>1</sup> In 1991, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights further emphasized the importance of a broad understanding of the right to housing,<sup>2</sup> and since 2000 the United Nations special rapporteur on the right to adequate housing has been mandated to attempt to ensure better fulfillment of the right.<sup>3</sup>

In Britain, more than a million houses were built in the aftermath of the Second World War—the majority by local councils.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt emphasized the importance of economic security, including “[t]he right of every family to a decent home” in 1944,<sup>5</sup> while the 1949 Housing Act advanced the goal of “a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family.”<sup>6</sup> More recently, in 1989, the Institute for Policy Studies in

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, G.A. Res. 217 A (III), U.N. Doc. A/810, at 71 (Dec. 10, 1948); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Dec. 16, 1966, 993 U.N.T.S. 3. For historical development and doctrinal background, see Matthew Craven, *History, Pre-History and the Right to Housing in International Law*, in NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON HOUSING RIGHTS 103 (SCOTT LECKIE ed., 2003).

2. *Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 4: The Right to Adequate Housing*, U.N. Doc. E/1992/23 (Dec. 13, 1991); see also *Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 7: The Right to Adequate Housing (Forced Evictions)*, U.N. Doc. E/1998/22 (May 20, 1997).

3. See *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-housing> (last visited Oct. 23, 2025). For comprehensive analysis, see JESSIE HOHMANN, *THE RIGHT TO HOUSING: LAW, CONCEPTS, POSSIBILITIES* (2013).

4. For an overview of Britain’s post-World War II housing policy, see JOHN R. SHORT, *HOUSING IN BRITAIN: THE POST-WAR EXPERIENCE* (1982); A. E. HOLMANS, *HOUSING POLICY IN BRITAIN: A HISTORY* (1987); PETER MALPASS, *Wartime Planning for Post-War Housing in Britain: The Whitehall Debate, 1941-45*, 18 *Plan. Persp.* 177 (2003); Peter Malpass, *The Wobbly Pillar? Housing and the British Post-War Welfare State*, 32 *J. SOC. POL’Y* 589 (2003); Peter Malpass, *Private Enterprise in Eclipse? A Reassessment of British Housing Policy in the 1940s*, 18 *HOUS. STUD.* 645 (2003).

5. Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Message to the Congress on the State of the Union* (Jan. 11, 1944), in which he declared, “Unless there is security here at home, there cannot be lasting peace in the world.”

6. Housing Act of 1949, Pub. L. No. 81-171, 63 Stat. 413 (1949).

Washington, D.C. put out a paper titled *The Right to Housing*, which supported, albeit with limited success, the idea of a right to housing through policy initiatives supporting such a commitment.<sup>7</sup> Soon thereafter in South Africa, Article 26 of the 1996 Constitution provided that “[e]veryone has the right to have access to adequate housing,” and required that “[t]he state must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources, to achieve the progressive realisation of this right.”<sup>8</sup> Alongside these developments, leftist theorists have called for a progressive vision of the right to housing that emphasizes decommodification and the idea of the “right to the city.”<sup>9</sup>

As these examples make clear, the idea of a right to housing has achieved a substantial degree of recognition in the contemporary world—though of course the concept is also far from universally accepted, and is even farther from fulfillment in practice. As with much of contemporary international law, the post-World War II roots of the concept are most immediately apparent and recognized. As in other areas, however,<sup>10</sup> it was not in the post-World War II period, but rather in the aftermath of the First World War, that the concept of the right to housing—meaning, most broadly, the idea of an obligation on the government to take steps to ensure housing for the people—developed most dramatically. This development took place in numerous European states. “Red” Vienna’s famous progressive housing policies were developed in the interwar period.<sup>11</sup> Progressive housing policies were adopted in Germany and

7. *Institute for Policy Studies, The Right to Housing: A Blueprint for Housing the Nation* (1989). While several scholars have supported recognition of a right to housing in U.S. jurisprudence, they generally agree that such a right has not yet been established. See, e.g., Frank I. Michelman, *The Advent of a Right to Housing: A Current Appraisal*, 5 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 207 (1970); Chester Hartman, *The Case for a Right to Housing*, in A RIGHT TO HOUSING: FOUNDATION FOR A NEW SOCIAL AGENDA at 13 (Rachel G. Bratt, Michael E. Stone & Chester Hartman eds., 2006).

8. S. AFR. CONST. art. 26 (1996).

9. See HENRI LEFEBVRE, *LE DROIT À LA VILLE* (1968); CITIES FOR PEOPLE, NOT FOR PROFIT: CRITICAL URBAN THEORY AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY (Neil Brenner, Peter Marcuse, & Margit Mayer eds., 2012); Mary Pattillo, *Housing: Commodity Versus Right*, 39 ANN. REV. SOCIOLOGY 509 (2013).

10. See Christopher M. Roberts & Michelle M. Ong, *Anticolonial Rights Advocacy*, 8 CARDOZO INT’L & COMP. L. REV. 1 (2025).

11. See Robert E. Chaddock, *Housing in Vienna: A Socialistic Experiment*, 37 AM. J. SOC. 560 (1932); Ernst Karl Winter, *Housing and Resettlement in Vienna*, 26 NAT’L MUN. REV. 382 (1937); Reinhard Sieder, *Housing Policy, Social Welfare, and Family Life in “Red Vienna,” 1919-34*, 13 ORAL HIST. 35 (1985); Justin Kadi, *Recommodifying Housing in Formerly “Red” Vienna*, 32 HOUS., THEORY & SOC’Y 247 (2015); MARGARET HADERER, *REBUILDING CITIES AND CITIZENS: MASS HOUSING IN RED VIENNA AND COLD WAR BERLIN* (2023).

Switzerland in this period as well.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps even more remarkably and importantly, this development took place in Britain, too.

Why was the development of something like a right to housing in practice in Britain so surprising and significant? First, for much of the nineteenth century, British public intellectuals and government officials were, and were widely known to be, among the foremost exponents of a philosophy of light, 'laissez faire' governance.<sup>13</sup> In this context, the dramatic emphasis on a major public housing program in the aftermath of the First World War represented a fundamental change of approach. As one scholar has put it, in the postwar period public housing "was not only the most dramatic issue of social reform . . . [but] also the one that raised most clearly all the general ideological issues of planning *versus* a free market."<sup>14</sup>

Second, developments in Britain were important because during the interwar period Britain arguably remained the preeminent global power, with an empire that at its height encompassed close to a quarter of the world's land and population.<sup>15</sup> While approaches to governance were, of course, dramatically different in Britain and the empire, and even between different parts of the empire, the boundaries were also porous, allowing for evolving approaches to governance in the metropole to influence the colonial world as well as for colonial approaches to be imported to Britain.

This Article explores both developments. Part II explores the importance of the First World War experience relative to approaches to governance in Britain in general, as well as relative to public responsibilities for housing in particular. Part III considers the forceful new public housing legislation adopted in the immediate aftermath of the war. Part IV briefly covers developments over the subsequent two decades. Finally, Section V explores housing policy in the British Empire

12. See BAUER WURSTER, *MODERN HOUSING* (1934); Dan P. Silverman, *A Pledge Unredeemed: The Housing Crisis in Weimar Germany*, 3 *CENT. EUR. HIST.* 112 (1970); Susan R. Henderson, *Self-Help Housing in the Weimar Republic: The Work of Ernst May*, 14 *HOUS. STUD.* 311 (1999); CATHERINE HADERER, *REBUILDING CITIES AND CITIZENS: MASS HOUSING IN RED VIENNA AND COLD WAR BERLIN* (2023).

13. H.L. Crouch, *Laissez-Faire in Nineteenth Century Britain: Myth or Reality* (1967); A.J.P. Taylor, *Laissez-Faire and State Intervention in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1972); Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State* ch. 5 (1973); W. Hanlon, *The Laissez-Faire Experiment: Why Britain Embraced and Then Abandoned Small Government, 1800-1914* (2024).

14. Philip Abrams, *The Failure of Social Reform: 1918-1920*, 24 *PAST & PRESENT* 43, 44 (1963).

15. "British Empire," *Oxford Reference* (Oxford Univ. Press), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095528202> (last visited Nov. 23, 2025).

2026]

## RIGHT TO HOUSING

195

during this same period, with a focus on three major colonial cities: Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

## II. WARTIME PLANNING

## A. Background

The housing situation in Britain was far from positive in the nineteenth century, a situation exacerbated by the rapid urbanization that took place over the course of the century. Perhaps the primary manner in which housing advocates addressed the issue in the period was under the heading of “sanitary reform,” with reformers viewing poor quality housing as closely associated with both “disease and vice.”<sup>16</sup> Some reform efforts were made over the course of the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, including legislative measures such as the 1890 Housing of the Working Classes Act<sup>17</sup> the 1909 Housing, Town Planning, etc. Act,<sup>18</sup> alongside which some more radical ideas developed as well, such as Ebenezer Howard’s Garden Cities proposal.<sup>19</sup> Increasing references to the idea of a right to a decent home could be seen from the late nineteenth century as well.<sup>20</sup> Despite these steps, the housing stock in Britain remained in poor condition in the years prior to the First World War.<sup>21</sup>

16. PETER SCOTT, *THE MAKING OF THE MODERN BRITISH HOME: THE SUBURBAN SEMI AND FAMILY LIFE BETWEEN THE WARS 20-21* (2013).

17. Housing of the Working Classes Act 1890, 53 & 54 Vict., c. 70 (U.K.).

18. Housing, Town Planning, Etc. Act 1909, 9 Edw. 7, c. 44 (U.K.).

19. See EBENEZER HOWARD, *TO-MORROW: A PEACEFUL PATH TO REAL REFORM* (1898); MARK SWENARTON, *HOMES FIT FOR HEROES* 1-47 (1981); MARTIN J. DAUNTON, *A PROPERTY-OWNING DEMOCRACY? HOUSING IN BRITAIN* 13-26, 43-55, 74-75 (1987); ROBERT BEEVERS, *THE GARDEN CITY UTOPIA: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF EBENEZER HOWARD* (1988); Helen Meller, *Urban Renewal and Citizenship: The Quality of Life in British Cities, 1890-1990*, 22 *URB. HIST.* 63, 63-72 (1995); Helen Meller, *Housing and Town Planning, 1900-1939*, in *A COMPANION TO EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN* 389-95 (Chris Wrigley ed., 2003); JOHN BOUGHTON, *MUNICIPAL DREAMS: THE RISE AND FALL OF COUNCIL HOUSING* ch. 1 (2018).

20. See, e.g., *Workmen’s Rights*, *SOUTHAMPTON DAILY ECHO*, Aug. 5, 1893, at 3 (observing the workman’s right “to have a decent home in which to spend his leisure,” and calling on local authorities to improve housing quality); *Landlords and Tenants*, *BROOKLYN EAGLE*, Dec. 19, 1895, at 9 (asserting “every man and woman of the country has a right to a decent home,” but that they were deprived of that right by the cost of rent); *Taxing the Wrong Class*, *S. WALES ARGUS*, Apr. 24, 1902, at 4 (criticizing tax policies that burdened the poor and undermined their “rights to at least a decent home and table”); *A Free Church Convention*, *HULL EVENING NEWS*, Nov. 25, 1905, at 6 (suggesting “every man . . . has his right to a decent home”). See also Lawrence Veiller, *Housing and Health*, *ANNALS AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI.* 13, 13 (1911) (noting “a slowly dawning perception of our inherent right to decent conditions of living”).

21. See SCOTT, *MAKING OF THE MODERN BRITISH HOME*, *supra* note 16, at 29. The German model was influential in shaping early British housing policy. See, e.g., T. C. HORSFALL,

The problem was further exacerbated by the demolition of numerous working-class housing units, due to their poor quality, and general failure of housing construction to keep pace with need.<sup>22</sup> Overcrowding only exacerbated the poor quality of much of the urban housing that did exist, and together with poor sanitation, led to persistent public health struggles.<sup>23</sup> Many houses were beyond repair due to unsound construction, deteriorating structures, lack of basic amenities, and unsanitary conditions.<sup>24</sup> Overall, the British government estimated houses needed to be replaced at a “rate of sixty-thousand per annum” in the years leading up to the war.<sup>25</sup> The major political parties had already staked out their relative positions on the issue: the Conservatives advocated state grants to support local provision of houses for the poorest; the Liberals proposed a general grant, while hoping increasing wages would solve the problem; the Labour party took a more radical stance, calling for “a comprehensive national housing policy to provide for ‘every citizen’ by means of the compulsory acquisition of land by the state, state financing of building and municipal administration of housing schemes under state supervision.”<sup>26</sup>

The housing situation remained poor during the war. The movement of workers in accordance with the needs of wartime industry led to even more severe housing shortages in some areas.<sup>27</sup> The government recognized the potential need for exceptional measures in regard to housing from an early point. The Housing (No. 2) Act of 1914, passed less than a week after the commencement of the war, made four million pounds available for spending to relieve unemployment through housing construction, in recognition of the challenges the construction industry might face under wartime conditions.<sup>28</sup> Rent strikes over the subsequent period led to another major step at the end of 1915, the Increase in Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Act, which established rent

---

THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE DWELLINGS AND SURROUNDINGS OF THE PEOPLE: THE EXAMPLE OF GERMANY (1904).

22. See CHRISTOPHER ADDISON, *THE BETRAYAL OF THE SLUMS* 20-21 (1922).

23. *Id.* at 13-21.

24. *Id.*

25. Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 43.

26. *Id.* at 53.

27. See SCOTT, *MAKING OF THE MODERN BRITISH HOME*, *supra* note 16, at 35. Around 10,000 homes were also constructed to house munitions workers. *See id.* at 36.

28. See SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 48-49. Because unemployment in the building trade was not a problem during the subsequent period, the act was not implemented in practice. *See id.*

control.<sup>29</sup> For Labour member of Parliament (MP) George Barnes the measure represented “the demise of political economy . . . or unlimited competition,” which, he noted, “had a fairly long and . . . dishonorable life,” “enabl[ing] dealers in monopoly values to enrich themselves at the expense of the community.”<sup>30</sup>

*B. Growing Belief in State Action and Public Ownership*

Among other things, the wartime experience helped make strong public action seem much more feasible. Over the course of the war, the government took an unprecedented level of control over the economy. By the end of the war, land and sea transport, agricultural production, and coal and iron mining were all extensively controlled by the government through price fixing, profit controls, organized distribution, and large-scale buying and selling.<sup>31</sup> On top of that, “over 90% in value of the whole import trade of the country, together with [certain] home-produced supplies . . . were purchased” by the government.<sup>32</sup>

The Ministry of Munitions played a particularly important role in this context. The Ministry was established in May 1915, following a scandal and a change of government prompted by a shortage of shells on the Western front. By the end of March 1918, the government, through the Ministry of Munitions, owned “over 250 national factories, mines and quarries; superintended the operations of about 20,000 controlled establishments; employed directly in the first and indirectly in the second over 2,000,000 workers . . . and spent . . . an annual average of round about £570,000,000.”<sup>33</sup> All things together, at least “two-thirds of the gainfully employed workers in the country were by 1918 engaged in industries subject to one form or another of war-time regulation.”<sup>34</sup> Around £4,300,000 was spent on housing by the Ministry of Munitions over the course of the war, moreover, leading to the construction of around ten thousand new homes and temporary hostels housing twenty

29. Increase of Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Act 1915, 5 & 6 Geo. 5, c. 97 (U.K.).

30. See JOSEPH MELLING, RENT STRIKES: PEOPLES’ STRUGGLES FOR HOUSING IN WEST SCOTLAND, 1890-1916 101-02 (1983).

31. See R. H. Tawney, *The Abolition of Economic Controls, 1918-1921*, 13 ECON. HIST. REV. 1, 2 (1943).

32. Tawney, *supra* note 31, at 3.

33. *Id.* at 2-3 (citing E. H. M. LLOYD, EXPERIMENTS IN STATE CONTROL AT THE WAR OFFICE AND THE MINISTRY OF FOOD, 24 (1924)).

34. *Id.* at 3.

thousand or so.<sup>35</sup> While far short of the need for housing, this showed what could be done if the will was there.<sup>36</sup>

This was important not only because of the direct control the Ministry of Munitions assumed, but also because of the types of concern it thereby came to adopt. In September 1915, the Health of Munition Workers Committee was established within the Ministry of Munitions.<sup>37</sup> In January 1916, a welfare section was established within the Ministry of Munitions under the supervision of Seebohm Rowntree.<sup>38</sup> Over the course of the war, the Health of Munition Workers Committee issued twenty-one memoranda, on subjects including hours and days of work, female employment, juvenile employment, diet, health, housing, transport, and conditions of work and accidents.<sup>39</sup>

In its final report, the Health of Munition Workers Committee reflected on some broader themes of its work. Notably, the Committee observed “the ever increasing intervention of the State” in the interests of supporting public “welfare” from the nineteenth century on.<sup>40</sup> In this context, the Committee directed particular attention to “the health of the industrial worker—man and woman,” which it described as “but part, essential, plastic, living, of the health of the people as a whole, which in its turn raises manifold problems of administration, economics, social relationships and even ethics, which though apparently remote from questions of medicine, are in truth, intimately associated.”<sup>41</sup> Within this broader field, the committee noted issues relating to “the old problem of the relation of the man to the machine.”<sup>42</sup> On the last point in particular, the Committee observed the “tendency . . . for the man to be made subservient to the machine,” and the need to “reverse” this, to make “the machine . . . subservient to the man,” to secure “his individual health, mental development and moral well-being”—though the primary reason for all of the above, in the eyes of the Committee, was not to increase

---

35. See SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 51.

36. *Id.*; SCOTT, MAKING OF THE MODERN BRITISH HOME, *supra* note 16, at 36. The principal designer of the permanent homes was Raymond Unwin, a member of the Garden Cities Association. See HOWARD, TO-MORROW, *supra* note 19, at 159.

37. MINISTRY OF MUNITIONS, HEALTH OF MUNITION WORKERS COMMITTEE, FINAL REPORT: INDUSTRIAL HEALTH AND EFFICIENCY, 1918, Cmd. 9065, at 3 (UK).

38. *Id.* at 6.

39. *Id.* at 5. These topics were often summarized under the heading “welfare.” See Ministry of Munitions, Health of Munition Workers Committee, Memorandum No. 2: Welfare Supervision, 1918, Cmd. 8151 (UK).

40. Cmd. 9065, *supra* note 37, at 8.

41. *Id.* at 7.

42. *Id.*

individual wellbeing, but rather in support of “effective labour” and to guarantee “harmony and smooth working, to secure efficiency and maximum output.”<sup>43</sup> “A working man’s capital is, as a rule, his health and his capacity to perform a full day’s work,” the report continued, urging maximum care that a worker’s health not be “impaired,” lest “he becom[e] . . . a liability and even a charge on the State,” or fall victim to disease, harming himself and others.<sup>44</sup>

Several parties, moreover, urged the continuance of this novel approach to economic governance in the post-war period. In early 1917, the British Workers’ National League, established in 1916 by Lord Milner and other pro-tariff Conservatives, had its first conference, in which it adopted a constitution for itself. That constitution emphasized “that unrestricted commercial competition in, and the private ownership of, vital and key industries lead to waste, inefficiency, fraud, and national disunion,” and that, in contrast, “the full utilization and development of National and Imperial resources, in peace or war, mainly depend on the public ownership and control of vital and key industries.”<sup>45</sup> The 1917 War Cabinet emphasized the dramatic development of the British government in 1916 and 1917, including via the creation of the Ministries of Labour, Food, Pensions and Reconstruction.<sup>46</sup> More broadly, the Cabinet noted that the “developments” undertaken over the period in question were “bound to produce lasting and far-reaching effects on the social and economic life of the community.”<sup>47</sup> In this context, the Cabinet observed “the organic life of the community ha[d] been greatly strengthened,” including via the employment of vast numbers of individuals “directly or indirectly on public service”; state “control . . . over certain national industries, such as the railways, shipping, coal and iron mines, and the great majority of engineering businesses”; state “responsibil[ity] for the securing of adequate quantities of certain staple commodities and services, such as food, coal, timber and other raw materials, railroad and sea transportation”; state responsibility “for distributing the available supplies justly as between individual and individual in the national interest”; and government measures to “regulate prices and prevent profiteering.”<sup>48</sup> Overall, this meant “the war, and especially the year 1917,

---

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.*

45. *The Constitution of the League*, BRIT. CITIZEN & EMPIRE WORKER (Mar. 31, 1917), at 183.

46. THE WAR CABINET, REPORT FOR THE YEAR 1917, 1918, Cmd. 9005, at vii (UK).

47. *Id.* at xv.

48. *Id.* at xv-xvi.

ha[d] brought about a transformation of the social and administrative structure of the State, much of which is bound to be permanent.”<sup>49</sup> Among other things, these developments were presented as having led “the whole community [to] receiv[e] an education in the problems of practical democracy such as it has never had before” and to “a growth in the sense of public service and of the power to improve and adapt economic and social and administrative methods which will make it far easier to build up a healthier and more equitable organised society in future.”<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, in December 1918, the Machinery of Government Committee—established in July 1917 as a subcommittee of the Ministry of Reconstruction—issued its report on the question it had been appointed to consider, relative to “the responsibilities of the various Departments of the central executive Government, and . . . in what manner the exercise and distribution by the Government of its functions should be improved.”<sup>51</sup> Broadly, the Machinery of Government committee recommended “that the ‘enlarged scope’ of government activity made necessary by war . . . be retained in peace,” a proposal Beatrice Webb suggested was “‘vital to the success of the equalitarian state.’”<sup>52</sup> Even individuals who previously would have been classified as “capitalists” and “‘champions of individual effort’” were persuaded, in this context, of the need for public ownership in some areas, such as in the electric supply.<sup>53</sup>

Going even further, the Labour Party included a call for “common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange” in the constitution it announced at its February 1918 conference.<sup>54</sup> At its summer conference, the Labour Party adopted a new program, titled *Labour and the New Social Order*, in which it aimed to “formulat[e] its own programme for Reconstruction after the war.”<sup>55</sup> The program was based on four key principals. The first proposed “[t]he universal enforcement of the national minimum,” including “the legislative regulation of employment,” a policy of full employment, “social insurance against unemployment,” and provisions ensuring health, education, subsistence,

---

49. *Id.* at xvi.

50. *Id.* at xvi, xx.

51. MINISTRY OF RECONSTRUCTION, REPORT OF THE MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE, 1918, Cmd. 9230, at 4 (UK).

52. Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 48 (citing BEATRICE WEBB’S DIARIES 1912-1924, at 98 (Margaret I. Cole ed., 1952)).

53. Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 48-49.

54. David Reisman, *Anthony Crosland: The Mixed Economy* 123 (1997) (discussing the 1918 Constitution of the Labour Party).

55. Labour Party, *Labour and the New Social Order* (1918).

leisure and housing.<sup>56</sup> The second called for “[t]he democratic control of industry,” based on “common ownership of the means of production,” “the equitable sharing of the proceeds among all who participate in any capacity” and “systems and methods of administration and control . . . found, in practice, best to promote, not profiteering, but the public interest,” and involving “immediate nationalisation” in key sectors as well as controls in other areas aimed at preventing “profiteering” and the formation of “monopolist Trusts.”<sup>57</sup> The third proposed “a revolution in national finance,” meaning a system responsive to and aimed at promoting the interests of the population in general, rather than the wealthiest few, including via highly progressive taxation.<sup>58</sup> And finally, the fourth principle called for “the surplus for the common good,” meaning that surplus wealth would be spent on general public welfare, rather than private luxury.<sup>59</sup> In one resolution from its summer conference, Control of Capitalist Industry, the party called for “the necessity of retaining after the war and of developing the present system of organizing, controlling and auditing the processes, profits and prices of [the] capitalist industry,” for continuing “the economies of centralised purchasing of raw materials, foodstuffs and other imports,” and for “security against the extortion of profiteering” through “the ‘costing’ of manufacturers’ processes and auditing of their accounts, so as to discover the necessary cost of production, together with the authoritative limitation of prices at the factory,” with the aim of “protect[ing] the consumer by limiting prices.”<sup>60</sup> Other resolutions called for “the nationalization of coal, electricity, railways, canals, and land”; expansion of public education and social services; “emancipation of women”; and “conscription of wealth.”<sup>61</sup>

### C. *State Action, Public Ownership, and Housing*

In addition to a stronger state and common ownership in general, the Labour Party called for a million houses to be built.<sup>62</sup> While their number was particularly high, the call for more houses was widely supported at the time. Organizations like the National Housing and Town Planning

---

56. *Id.*

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.*

59. *Id.*

60. See ROSS MCKIBBIN, *THE EVOLUTION OF THE LABOUR PARTY, 1910-1924* at 104 (1974).

61. *Id.* at 104-05.

62. Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 43.

Council took the experience of state ownership and welfare provision to heart in the context of housing. In April 1916, the Council drew up a resolution calling for a “post-war policy [under which] ‘all parties [will] take combined action to secure that every family shall be housed under proper conditions,’” and for “the nation[,] not the family[, to] bear the cost . . . of ‘providing decent housing for those unable . . . to pay an economic rent.’”<sup>63</sup> On another occasion, the National Housing and Town Planning Council called for 800,000 houses to be built “as a minimum target compatible with social justice.”<sup>64</sup> In July 1917, various regional Commissions of Inquiry Into Industrial Unrest, that were convened with the aim of attempting to understand, and minimize, worker protests, issued their reports. Several of the commissions saw “lack of housing” as one of the main issues leading to unrest.<sup>65</sup> The Commission of Enquiry Into Industrial Unrest in the North-Western Area, for instance, indicated that “a most unsatisfactory condition of things existed in relation to” housing, had grown worse over the course of the war without “any practical steps [taken] to deal” with it, and called for “an emergency housing scheme” to be formulated “and carr[ied] out . . . promptly.”<sup>66</sup>

In September 1917, the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Industrial Population in Scotland, convened, as its title suggested, with a mandate to inquire into housing issues in particular, issued a lengthy report.<sup>67</sup> The report observed that “of the many social problems which, after the War, will demand treatment and solution, none is more pressing or more vital, in the interests of the welfare not only of the individual but also of the nation, than the housing problem.”<sup>68</sup> The picture the Commission painted of the situation in Scotland was bleak, noting:

unsatisfactory sites of houses and villages, insufficient supplies of water, unsatisfactory provision for drainage, grossly inadequate provision for the removal of refuse, widespread absence of decent sanitary conveniences, the persistence of the unspeakably filthy privy-midden in many . . . areas, badly constructed, incurably damp labourers’ cottages on farms, whole townships unfit for human occupation in the crofting counties and islands,

---

63. *Id.* at 49.

64. *Id.* at 43.

65. COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY INTO INDUSTRIAL UNREST, SUMMARY OF THE REPORTS OF THE COMMISSION, 1917, Cmd. 8696, at 5 (UK).

66. COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY INTO INDUSTRIAL UNREST IN THE NORTH-WESTERN AREA, 1917, Cmd. 8663, at 31 (UK).

67. REPORT OF THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON THE HOUSING OF THE INDUSTRIAL POPULATION IN SCOTLAND, RURAL AND URBAN, Sep. 1917, Cmd. 8731 (UK).

68. *Id.* at 4.

primitive and casual provision for many of the seasonal workers, gross overcrowding and huddling of the sexes together in the congested industrial villages and towns, occupation of one-room houses by large families, groups of lightless and unventilated houses in the older burghs, clotted masses of slums in the great cities.<sup>69</sup>

In response, the Commission sought to explore “how to provide a healthy, comfortable dwelling for every family in the land,” observing further that this pertained “not only to the interior of the house, but also the conditions exterior to it,” of which “space, air, light, and water are necessary elements.”<sup>70</sup> Among other things, the Commission recommended “that the State . . . accept . . . direct responsibility for the housing of the working classes in Scotland,” and that “responsibility” for such “be place on Local Authorities,” with financial support from the central government.<sup>71</sup>

On July 17, 1917, Christopher Addison was appointed Minister of Reconstruction. Addison was previously the Minister of Munitions, a post he took over from Lloyd George when the latter became Prime Minister in December 1916.<sup>72</sup> As Minister of Reconstruction, Addison’s mandate was “to consider and advise upon the problems which may arise out of the present war, and may have to be dealt with upon its termination.”<sup>73</sup> Among other things from within the realm of this exceedingly broad mandate, the Ministry took some steps on the housing front.<sup>74</sup> These initiatives included the appointment of an Advisory Housing Panel, chaired by Lord Salisbury and included Seebohm Rowntree and Beatrice Webb, which was charged with coming up with housing policy proposals.<sup>75</sup>

The Advisory Housing Panel issued its report in October 1917. The panel began by noting that it was not “attempt[ing] . . . to deal with the permanent housing problem,” but rather “to consider the difficulties

---

69. *Id.*

70. *Id.*

71. *Id.* at 346.

72. See Kenneth O. Morgan, *Progressivism to Democratic Socialism: The Special Case of Dr. Christopher Addison*, in *MAKING SOCIAL DEMOCRATS: ESSAYS FOR DAVID MARQUAND* at 232 (Hans Schattle & Jeremy Nuttall eds.) (2018).

73. New Ministries Act 1917, 7 & 8 Geo. 5, c. 44, § 2(1) (U.K.).

74. See ADDISON, *supra* note 22, at 21-22; Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 51.

75. See MINISTRY OF RECONSTRUCTION, *HOUSING IN ENGLAND AND WALES: MEMORANDUM BY THE ADVISORY HOUSING PANEL ON THE EMERGENCY PROBLEM, 1918*, Cmd. 9087 (UK). Salisbury and Rowntree were both members of the Garden Cities and the Town Planning Association. See DENNIS HARDY, *FROM GARDEN CITIES TO NEW TOWNS: CAMPAIGNING FOR TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING, 1899-1946* 120-21 (1991).

which will confront us at the end of the war, and to choose the remedies which appear best suited to the emergency, but which may not necessarily be part of an ultimate permanent measure of reform.”<sup>76</sup> The panel called for the immediate construction “of sufficient houses for the working classes,” estimated as 300,000 at “the lowest limit,” “within the first year after the war.”<sup>77</sup> It recognized that prices would doubtless remain high the year after the war, necessitating “financial aid . . . from public funds.”<sup>78</sup> The Advisory Housing Panel’s report recognized that the Public Utility Societies, while they might contribute, did not have the capacity to contribute much, and noted that “a direct subsidy from the State to the private builder” would be “regarded as a dole . . . to one out of many equally important industries,” and “in any case” would not accomplish much as it would have to be “coupled with restriction as to rent and selling price,” which “would defeat its object.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, it followed past housing acts in looking to “Local Authorities . . . as the main agents to carry out the emergency house building,” financed by the central state.<sup>80</sup> As Abrams put it, key to this scheme was the ability of “the state to dominate the market as the Ministry of Munitions had done,” including via “powers to control the supply of materials, to fix prices and investigate profits and to purchase directly on its own account.”<sup>81</sup> A related Committee, chaired by the Conservative MP Leslie Scott, looked into the related issue of the acquisition of land.<sup>82</sup> The Committee recommended the formation of “a Joint Sub-Committee of the two Houses of Parliament” with power to “tak[e] . . . private land,” recognizing along the way that “the varied public purposes for which land is to-day wanted are multiform in character,” and “that, after the War, many new public requirements will be brought within the general category of public policy which justifies the taking of private land.”<sup>83</sup> Among other things, the Committee recognized that “large schemes for providing housing accommodation w[ould] have to be undertaken by certain public

---

76. Cmd. 9087, *supra* note 75, at 3.

77. *Id.* at 4.

78. *Id.*

79. *Id.* at 5.

80. *Id.* at 5-7 (suggesting “power be reserved to the State itself to build the necessary houses” should local authorities fail to act promptly).

81. Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 54.

82. MINISTRY OF RECONSTRUCTION, FIRST REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE DEALING WITH THE LAW AND PRACTICE RELATING TO THE ACQUISITION AND VALUATION OF LAND FOR PUBLIC PURPOSES, 1918 Cmd. 8998, at 4 (UK).

83. *Id.*

departments and local authorities” after the war.<sup>84</sup> As Abrams put it, it was notable that even this conservative-dominated committee called, in the circumstances of the times, for the “extensive compulsory acquisition of land for cottages and small-holdings.”<sup>85</sup>

In October 1918, another report—commonly referred to as the Tudor Walters Report, after the chairman of the committee which drafted it—was officially issued, marking another significant assessment of housing needs.<sup>86</sup> The Tudor Walters Committee had been tasked with “considering questions of building construction in connection with the provision of dwellings for the working classes.” The Committee’s report suggested that, should a minimal level of housing quality be respected, at least 300,000 new houses were needed in England and Wales, and another 200,000 in Scotland, requiring in sum around “500,000 houses . . . in addition to the ordinary demand of 100,000 per annum.”<sup>87</sup> At the very least, immediately after the war, the Committee assessed private enterprise would be unlikely to accomplish the task, given the high prices that would prevail.<sup>88</sup> The Committee recommended the creation of “a strong Housing Department” with “local commissioners appointed [and] working under . . . central control but with executive powers vested in them,” that would “encourage and assist local house building, and . . . secure effective co-ordination.”<sup>89</sup> The report imagined new housing with relatively “higher standards of design and comfort,” moreover, urged by Raymond Unwin in particular.<sup>90</sup>

Only a week thereafter, the Ministry of Reconstruction Committee on the Building Industry After the War issued its report.<sup>91</sup> The Committee

---

84. *Id.* at 9.

85. Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 54.

86. LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOARDS, REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE APPOINTED BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOARD AND THE SECRETARY FOR SCOTLAND TO CONSIDER QUESTIONS OF BUILDING CONSTRUCTION IN CONNECTION WITH THE PROVISION OF DWELLINGS FOR THE WORKING CLASSES IN ENGLAND, WALES AND SCOTLAND, AND REPORT UPON THE METHODS OF SECURING ECONOMY AND DISPATCH IN THE PROVISION OF SUCH DWELLINGS, 1918 Cmd. 9191 (UK).

87. *Id.* at 4.

88. *Id.* at 4, 8.

89. *Id.* at 5.

90. HARDY, *supra* note 75, at 137-38. In addition to being a member of the committee, Unwin was a principal designer of the first Garden City, Letchworth, developed in 1904. *See id.* For detailed discussion of the Tudor Walters Committee’s qualitative recommendations, *see* SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 92-108.

91. MINISTRY OF RECONSTRUCTION, REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE APPOINTED BY THE MINISTER OF RECONSTRUCTION TO CONSIDER THE POSITION OF THE BUILDING INDUSTRY AFTER THE WAR, 1918, Cmd. 9197, at 2 (UK).

had been given a mandate to consider supply and demand of relevant materials after the war, and “to consider and report upon any conditions affecting the building trades which tend to cause unduly high prices, and to make recommendations in regard to any measure of control which it may be desirable to exercise over the purchase, production, transport, or distribution of material.”<sup>92</sup> Under this mandate, the Committee called for “the establishment of a Central Building Industry Committee,” and for that “Central Committee . . . to utilise the building resources of the country in such a manner as to regulate . . . supply and demand, with the object of instilling a feeling of security and confidence.”<sup>93</sup>

In sum, the wartime years helped enable a radical new approach to housing in several ways. First, the preexisting bad housing situation got worse. Second, pressure on the government increased, due to the growing strength of the working classes and working-class consciousness during the war. Third, the state grew dramatically, and became much more confident adopting an assertive position on social policy issues. Fourth, the state gained direct experience constructing housing for workers. Finally, the empowered state began to develop plans for major public investment in the housing sector, under the broader heading of ‘reconstruction.’ All of this paved the way for Britain’s first major public housing initiative, discussed in the following section.

### III. THE ADDISON ACT

During the First World War, elections were suspended in Britain. After the armistice between Britain and Germany on November 11, 1918, elections were promptly called. As Keynes put it, this haste, “widely recognised at the time as an act of political immorality,” was driven by the fact that Lloyd George “perceived that the conclusion of hostilities might soon bring with it the break-up of the political bloc upon which he was depending for his personal ascendancy, and that the domestic difficulties which would be attendant on demobilisation, the turnover of industry from war to peace conditions, the financial situation, and the general psychological reactions of men’s minds, would provide his enemies with powerful weapons, if he were to leave them time to mature.”<sup>94</sup>

---

92. *Id.*

93. *Id.* at 7, 9.

94. JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES, *THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF THE PEACE* 86 (2013) (1st ed., 1919).

The post-war election was novel not only because it was the first held since the end of the war, but also because it was the first election subsequent to passage of the Representation of the People Act,<sup>95</sup> which more than doubled the electorate by extending the franchise to poorer men and to women aged thirty or over who met certain property or occupation qualifications.<sup>96</sup> In a speech on November 23, Lloyd George, the Liberal Prime Minister who had overseen a coalition government since December 1916, suggested a primary task of the government following the war was “to make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in.” Around the same time, Auckland Geddes, the head of the Local Government Board, suggested around one million dwellings should be built.<sup>97</sup> In general, Lloyd George and the coalition government made the promise of comprehensive reforms in support of the British people, who suffered so much during the war, a key plank of their election campaign. Among other things, this included promises to “provide a rational system of public health, new educational opportunities, innumerable small-holdings, security of employment, and especially . . . to build houses.”<sup>98</sup> As Lloyd George and Bonar Law put it in their election manifesto:

The steadfast spirit of our workers, displayed on all the wide field of action opened out by the war—in the trenches, on the ocean, in field, mine and factory—has left an imperishable mark on the heart and conscience of the nation. One of the first tasks of the Government will be to deal on broad and comprehensive lines with the housing of the people . . . upon which the well-being of the nation so largely depends.<sup>99</sup>

Of course, housing needs were only heightened by the mass return of soldiers following the war’s end.

The election resulted in a new government alignment, as the Conservative Party obtained an outright majority of seats. Lloyd George had adopted a maximalist position relative to Germany, including a demand for “fullest indemnities” during the course of the elections; while unrealistic, this call proved very popular.<sup>100</sup> In contrast, “the old Liberal party, having nothing comparable to offer to the electorate, was swept out

95. Representation of the People Act 1918, 7 & 8 Geo. 5, c. 64 (UK).

96. For background on the 1918 Act, see NEIL REDFERN, SOCIAL-IMPERIALISM IN BRITAIN: THE LANCASHIRE WORKING CLASS AND THE TWO WORLD WARS 98-102 (2018).

97. See SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 79.

98. Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 43.

99. MANIFESTO OF LLOYD GEORGE AND BONAR LAW (1918).

100. KEYNES, *supra* note 94, at 90. Meanwhile, the Garden City and Town Planning Association began efforts toward postwar international collaboration aimed at reconstructing Europe. See HARDY, *supra* note 75, at 168-70.

of existence.”<sup>101</sup> Despite the coalition’s victory, the Labour Party still had its strongest showing to date, likely motivated in part by “working class support for Labour’s [progressive] stance on housing reform,” support that was “particularly [high] among women.”<sup>102</sup>

As intimated above, the late war period saw proposals for strengthening national control over the economy, including proposals to convert the Ministry of Munitions into the Ministry of Supply, and to nationalize the milk and railway industries.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, Labour and left politicians and activists continued to advocate for strong progressive policies after the elections. In February 1919, William Adamson, the leader of the Labour Party, for instance, emphasized the need

to reward [national] service and . . . sacrifice by heralding in at the earliest possible moment a new and better social order of national life, in which a resolute war will be waged against poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing, and the many other remediable ills which unfortunately . . . still exist in this country.<sup>104</sup>

As 1919 progressed, the Cabinet continued to call for major state intervention, including partial nationalization in the mining, transport, and building sectors in particular.<sup>105</sup>

The dominant Conservative membership in Lloyd George’s coalition government engaged in strong attacks on his previous promises, however, leading proposed reforms on many fronts to be scaled back.<sup>106</sup> Many progressive programs fell in 1919, and most of the remainder over the following years.<sup>107</sup> The assertive progressive housing policies proposed in 1917 were among the proposals not adopted.<sup>108</sup>

While the maximally progressive wartime housing proposals weren’t adopted, major social pressure remained, and new housing policies were supported by several high-powered government advocates.

---

101. KEYNES, *supra* note 94, at 91.

102. REDFERN, *supra* note 96, at 124.

103. See Tawney, *supra* note 31, at 11 (citing WAR CABINET, REPORT FOR THE YEAR 1918, Cmd. 9006, at 212-17 (UK); Lloyd, *supra* note 33, at 247-53, 449-50).

104. H.C. Deb. (Feb. 11, 1919) (5th ser. 112) col. 56.

105. See Tawney, *supra* note 31, at 11.

106. See Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 47.

107. See Tawney, *supra* note 31, at 7-8. The mining, railway, and food provision sectors represented partial exceptions. See *id.* As Tawney observes, the rapid reduction in state capacity owed much to the temporary, wartime nature of many emergency programs. See *id.* at 11-12.

108. See Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 54-57. On Dec. 20, 1918, “against the advice of a Ministry of Reconstruction Committee,” the government abolished the licensing of buildings. Paul Wilding, *The Administrative Aspects of the 1919 Housing Scheme*, 51 PUB. ADMIN. 307, 310 (1973).

In late 1918, Auckland Geddes was among those pushing forcefully for enhanced administrative power through the creation of a new Housing Department, and greater financial support to housing from the central government.<sup>109</sup> On November 7, 1918, a health bill that had been urged by the Ministry of Reconstruction was brought forward for a first reading in the House of Commons by Addison.<sup>110</sup> Among other things, the bill would create a new Ministry of Health responsible for housing as well. In bringing forward the bill, Addison suggested that until “the chief Government Departments concerned in matters affecting the health of the people” were “br[ought] together,” “it is hopeless to expect any real and substantial improvement.”<sup>111</sup> On January 10, 1919, Addison replaced Geddes as president of the local government board, where he continued the push for assertive reforms. While Addison faced an uphill struggle, he obtained some initial successes on the internal organizational front,<sup>112</sup> and general support for a progressive housing bill remained high in the period.<sup>113</sup>

The Housing Bill was introduced in the Cabinet in early March 1919, with support from Lloyd George. As he put it,

In a short time we might have three-quarters of Europe converted to Bolshevism . . . Great Britain would hold out, but only if the people were given a sense of confidence . . . We had promised them reforms time and again, but little had been done. We must give them the conviction this time that we meant it, and we must give them that conviction quickly . . .

Even if it cost a hundred million pounds, what was that compared to the stability of the State?

So long as we could persuade the people that we were prepared to help them and to meet them in their aspirations . . . the sane and steady leaders among the workers would have an easy victory over the Bolsheviks among them.<sup>114</sup>

As this forceful rhetoric suggests, significant government investment in housing was understood as a controversial policy, support for which might be rallied through emphasis on the existing state of major social unrest, which, it was suggested, might be alleviated by a large-scale

---

109. See SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 79-80.

110. MINISTRY OF RECONSTRUCTION, REPORT ON THE WORK OF THE MINISTRY FOR THE PERIOD ENDING 31ST DECEMBER 1918, Cmd. 9231, at 27.

111. *Id.*

112. See Wilding, *supra* note 108, at 310-14.

113. See SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 77-83.

114. PRO CAB 23/9 WC 539 (Mar. 3, 1919), *cited in* SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 78.

housing program. Perhaps recognizing the limits to the political support that could be mustered, however, the Bill imagined public investment as a sustained but ultimately temporary measure, with the aim of eventually restoring rents to a market-determined level, in order not to drive “private enterprise . . . out of working-class housing, forcing the state to take its place on a permanent basis.”<sup>115</sup>

The Housing Bill was introduced in Parliament on March 18, before being extensively discussed during its second reading on April 7 and 8. Addison introduced the Bill by suggesting “this matter is of the utmost importance, from the point of view not only of the physical well-being of our people, but of our social stability and industrial content.”<sup>116</sup> Later in the debate, Major Astor, the parliamentary secretary to the Local Government Board, observed that while the housing program would be expensive,

when we talk of expense and cost let us realise that everything is comparative, and let us measure the cost of our housing proposals by the cost of Bolshevism to the country and the cost of revolution. The money we propose to spend on housing is an insurance against Bolshevism and revolution.<sup>117</sup>

In support of the Housing Bill, Donald Maclean, leader of the opposition Liberal Party at the time, emphasized that it was “the real Health Bill,” that was aimed at addressing the “very serious” “social conditions” in the country, and in particular the serious health issues “and the other vast array of human ills of which overcrowding is one of the main causes.”<sup>118</sup> Tudor Walters also supported the Bill, emphasizing that housing pertained directly to “the health, happiness, and moral welfare” of the British people.<sup>119</sup> A Labour MP, Davison, similarly strongly supported the legislation, suggesting such measures would be necessary if Britain were “to rear a strong, healthy, virile race,” while a leading Conservative MP, Ormsby-Gore, emphasized the “intolerable condition of the present state of affairs . . . whether from the point of view of the health and welfare or the moral welfare, or the social and intellectual progress of the people of this country.”<sup>120</sup> John Cairns, a Labour MP, suggested the new Bill was “going to be the Magna Carta of housing,”<sup>121</sup>

---

115. See SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 82-83.

116. Deb. H.C. (Apr. 7-8, 1919) (5th ser. 114) col. 1713 (UK).

117. *Id.* at col. 1956.

118. *Id.* at col. 1740.

119. *Id.* at col. 1898.

120. *Id.* at cols. 1747, 1798.

121. *Id.* at col. 1919.

while John Birchill, a Conservative MP, emphasized the closely conjoined importance of “housing, health, and transport” and “education.”<sup>122</sup> Griffiths, a Labour MP, praised the bill for going beyond previous ‘permissive’ bills through an emphasis on “compulsory” steps.<sup>123</sup> For his part, an independent MP, Billing, emphasized that “[i]f we are going to abolish slum property, private enterprise cannot do it.”<sup>124</sup> Billing went further, calling on the government “to take steps immediately to control the price of building essentials.”<sup>125</sup> Tudor Walter similarly observed that if “resource for house-building” were utilized “in the same way” munitions had been approached during the war, “you would [get a] million houses at a less cost than any other way.”<sup>126</sup>

Meanwhile on April 2, some rent controls were extended by the Increase in Rent and Mortgage Interest (Restrictions) Act,<sup>127</sup> in recognition of the protests and social unrest that would inevitably occur if rents increased too quickly.<sup>128</sup> The tensions around and need for rent controls underscored the need for more houses to be built, and for an active government role in the process. On April 11, King George V observed, in an official address, “the immediate need of [500,000] working class houses,” a need which he urged must be met with “the same untiring energy and enthusiasm . . . which enabled the country to meet the demand for munitions of war. It is not too much to say that an adequate solution of the housing question is the foundation of all social progress.”<sup>129</sup> A few months later, in June, the previously proposed Ministry of Health Act<sup>130</sup> was passed, and the Health Ministry was

---

122. *Id.* at col. 1935-36.

123. *Id.* at col. 1806.

124. *Id.* at col. 1783.

125. *Id.* at col. 1791. The debates also reflected cross-party surprises: for instance, Josiah Wedgwood, of the Independent Labour Party, criticized the bill’s financing scheme as unrealistic and urged support for private sector recovery. *Id.* at cols. 1763-70. In response, Pretymann, a Conservative MP, argued that “private enterprise cannot deal with some areas—for instance, slum-area property where the question is most urgent . . . and can only be dealt with by public action.” *Id.* at cols. 1772-73. Conversely, Martin Conway, another Conservative MP, endorsed the bill’s social ambition, urging state provision of communal housing amenities such as “magnificent warm pools,” “a large comfortable [hall] from which the British climate is excluded,” “a restaurant . . . where men and their families could feed,” and “a great library attached where they could read.” *Id.* at cols. 1914-16.

126. *Id.* at col. 1906.

127. Housing (Additional Powers) Act 1919, 9 & 10 Geo. 5, c. 7 (U.K.).

128. See SCOTT, *supra* note 16, at 35.

129. ADDISON, *supra* note 22, at 13.

130. Ministry of Health Act 1919, 9 & 10 Geo. 5, c. 19 (U.K.).

created.<sup>131</sup> On June 24, 1919, the position of the president of the Local Government Board was abolished, and Addison was instead appointed minister of health, responsible among other things for housing.<sup>132</sup>

About a month later, at the end of July, the government passed the Housing, Town Planning, &c. Act (commonly known as the “Addison Act”).<sup>133</sup> The act has been summarized by one commentator as “combin[ing] all Addison’s basic principles—a strong role for the central state alongside a civil chain of connection through individual subscribers via the approved societies and, very importantly, the trade unions.”<sup>134</sup> The primary aim of the act was to provide authorization for the disbursement of extensive subsidies to local authorities, with the aim of financing the construction of 460,000 units by the end of 1923.<sup>135</sup> It required local authorities to develop home construction plans, by imposing a “duty” on local authorities to devise and carry out “the provision of houses for the working classes,” to be financed by loans, while protected from significant losses by the central government.<sup>136</sup>

The new Act faced numerous challenges, pertaining primarily to the difficulties of securing adequate men, materials, and financing at reasonable rates.<sup>137</sup> By late 1919, it was apparent plans were not progressing well. On November 14, the Cabinet decided “immediate action was necessary to stimulate and increase the output of houses.”<sup>138</sup> The Minister of Labour suggested that control of wages and building through a permit system would be necessary. Addison recognized this would likely be politically unacceptable, and pushed instead for the more limited power to prohibit non-essential building.<sup>139</sup> The Chancellor of the Exchequer Austen Chamberlain pushed back forcefully, however, against such a form of centralized economic control, and ultimately it was agreed

---

131. *Id.*

132. For further discussion of the Ministry of Health, see Morgan, *supra* note 72, at 233-34.

133. Housing, Town Planning, &c. Act 1919, 9 & 10 Geo. 5, c. 35 (UK).

134. Morgan, *supra* note 72, at 230.

135. *Id.* at 235.

136. Housing, Town Planning, &c. Act 1919, 9 & 10 Geo. 5, c. 35, §§ 1-2, 7 (UK).

137. See Wilding, *supra* note 108, at 314-20. Among other factors, builders preferred more lucrative private projects; unions resisted rapid new membership expansion; and Chancellor of the Exchequer Austen Chamberlain maintained a high interest rate policy in pursuit of the eventual restoration of the gold standard. See Morgan, *supra* note 72, at 235-36; SCOTT, *supra* note 16, at 38. The Housing (Additional Powers) Act 1919, *supra* note 121, attempted to stimulate construction through modest subsidies but proved largely ineffective. See SCOTT, *supra* note 16, at 38.

138. PRO CAB 23/18C 7 (19) (Nov. 14, 1919), cited in SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 115.

139. See SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 116.

local authorities would be given such a power instead.<sup>140</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Housing (Additional Powers) Act was passed, putting this agreement into effect by allowing local authorities to limit construction where deemed necessary to support the provision of public housing.<sup>141</sup> As Addison recognized would be the case at the time, however, this approach was ineffective in practice.<sup>142</sup>

Input prices were high until mid-1920, leading to minimal housing construction up to that point.<sup>143</sup> In June 1920, recognizing “that there was no prospect of [building workers] agreeing to mass dilution as an isolated issue,” Addison urged the Cabinet “to secure a comprehensive settlement with the industry which would have to include a national wage settlement, some form of guaranteed week, and a scheme for the employment of ex-servicemen as adult apprentices.”<sup>144</sup> These proposals were resisted by organized labor and not accomplished in practice, however, as construction industry workers were adamantly opposed to dilution.<sup>145</sup> A recession came in the winter of 1920, which reduced the cost of labor and materials.<sup>146</sup> Construction picked up substantially thereafter, and by July 1921 a little over 210,000 dwellings had been built with one or another form of government support, the majority, around 170,000, by local authorities.<sup>147</sup>

The publicly supported construction of hundreds of thousands of houses represented a historic success, a far greater level of public investment and effective delivery of housing than anything seen before. At the same time, it was a number far short of the initial target of around half a million houses, allowing the scheme to be painted as a failure. Against this backdrop, conservatives, opposed to public spending on welfare as a matter of principle, intensified their attacks. In the summer of 1920, the government remained reluctant to cut back the program, recognizing the ongoing potential for serious protest and unrest.<sup>148</sup> By 1921, the situation had changed. The economy was in a depression, reducing employment, wages, and the bargaining power and strength of

---

140. *Id.*

141. Housing (Additional Powers) Act 1919, 9 & 10 Geo. 5, c. 99 (UK).

142. See SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 116.

143. See Peter Malpass, *Public Utility Societies and the Housing and Town Planning Act 1919: A Re-Examination of the Introduction of State-Subsidized Housing in Britain*, 15 PLAN. PERSP. 377, 385 (2000).

144. Wilding, *supra* note 108, at 320.

145. See SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 117.

146. *Id.* at 125-26.

147. See Malpass, *supra* note 143, at 385.

148. See SWENARTON, *supra* note 19, at 130.

the working class in general.<sup>149</sup> In February 1921, the government indicated that control over the mines would be returned from the government to private owners at the end of March, defeating miners' call for nationalization and heralding a steep wage cut.<sup>150</sup> In response to miners' subsequent strike, the government called out the armed forces.<sup>151</sup> Railway and transport workers' leaders decided not to join the miners and the strike was defeated, leaving the government feeling empowered.<sup>152</sup> Shortly after, the government announced central funding for home construction would be sharply cut back, a policy in the works since late 1920 but only announced following the miners' defeat.<sup>153</sup>

This policy was supported by the press magnates William Maxwell Aiken (Lord Beaverbrook) and Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe), who launched a public campaign against waste in general and Addison in particular.<sup>154</sup> In the face of this public campaign, as well as similar calls from Conservative members of the government coalition, Lloyd George removed Addison as Health Minister at the end of March, shuffling him into a position as "Minist[er] without Portfolio" instead.<sup>155</sup> In late June 1921, there was a debate in Parliament over Addison's performance, which, among other things, led to his salary being dramatically reduced.<sup>156</sup> Addison resigned less than a month later on July 14, 1921. Around the same time, the government decided on further curtailments to the housing program.<sup>157</sup>

The end of the coalition government's investment in progressive housing was, in general, linked to the increasing ideological polarization around the issue. This was evidenced, among other things, by Addison's move to the Labour Party in 1922. He published *The Betrayal of the Slums* the same year. *The Betrayal of the Slums* emphasized the poor housing and health conditions faced by large numbers of the poor in Britain, and the costs, both to the individuals in question and to society, of those poor conditions.<sup>158</sup> The book underlined the injustice in such a situation by

---

149. *Id.*

150. *Id.*

151. *Id.*

152. *Id.*

153. *Id.* at 132.

154. *Id.* at 132 (noting "the attitude of the financial world towards the housing programme" during this period was "one of more or less complete hostility").

155. Morgan, *supra* note 72, at 237.

156. See 143 H.C. Deb (June 23, 1921) (5th ser.) cols. 1600-49 (UK); Abrams, *supra* note 14, at 44.

157. See Swenarton, *supra* note 19, at 133-35.

158. See Addison, *supra* note 22, at 43-47, 59-92.

describing the manner in which all those in Britain, “from rich homes and from poor, from mansions and from tenements,” worked together during the war. While wealthy survivors of the war could enjoy a good life, others had to get by in “drab, unsavoury and unhealthy conditions,” not only leading to their individual suffering, but also weakening the British state.<sup>159</sup> This led, as Addison observed, to “pledges” for social reform “of a definite character,” “embodied,” among other places, “in the Housing and Town Planning Act of 1919.”<sup>160</sup> Addison continued by observing these promises had been betrayed, however. He noted that while it was suggested this was due to financial concerns, large sums were being spent on war department asks and on imperial ventures.<sup>161</sup> Addison also criticized the government’s failure to respond to the massive employment crisis of the postwar years through an expanded government funded program of employment in construction.<sup>162</sup> In sum, there was nothing inevitable about Britain’s poor social reality in the period—rather, it was a policy choice. *The Betrayal of the Slums* concluded by urging renewed commitment to a progressive housing program in future, and suggested it be complemented by “a more effective check on the high costs of building,” that “the community . . . be equipped with more effective powers,” and that “State assistance . . . be made on such a basis that it entail[l] within itself an incentive to economical working.”<sup>163</sup>

#### IV. SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENTS

The removal of Addison as Housing Minister marked the effective end of the original ambitions of the Housing Act.<sup>164</sup> In October 1922 the Conservative majority decided to end their support for Lloyd George, and the Conservative Party leader Bonar Law took over as prime minister. In March 1923, Neville Chamberlain was appointed to be the minister of health. In May 1923, Bonar Law resigned due to illness, and Stanley Baldwin took over as prime minister. In July, the Conservative government passed a new Housing Act (the “Chamberlain Act”).<sup>165</sup> The Chamberlain Act provided modest subsidies for houses built over the next

---

159. *Id.* at 9.

160. *Id.* at 11.

161. *Id.* at 14-18, 113-20.

162. *Id.* at 32-38.

163. *Id.* at 121-23. In 1926 Addison continued his leftward trajectory by publishing, in two volumes. *See generally* Christopher Addison, *Practical Socialism* (1926).

164. *See* Morgan, *supra* note 72, at 237.

165. The Housing &c. (Chamberlain) Act 1923, 13 & 14 Geo. 5. c. 24. (1923).

two years.<sup>166</sup> The grants were primarily available to private builders, as well as to local authorities, but only where they could convince the minister of health they would do a better job than private builders.<sup>167</sup> The subsidies applied whether the houses were built for renting or for sale.<sup>168</sup> The Conservative government also extended rent control.<sup>169</sup> While the Conservative program helped to promote house construction, it was much less successful in terms of the production of affordable houses for the working class.<sup>170</sup> It has subsequently been characterized as “the vehicle by which Baldwin’s Tory government proclaimed its ‘property owning democracy’ mantra, favour[ing] the construction of houses by private enterprise for sale or rent, [and] benefiting mainly the lower-middle class,”<sup>171</sup> and indeed, the idea of a “property-owning democracy” was put forward by a Conservative MP the same year.<sup>172</sup>

A general election was held in early December 1923. After the election the Conservatives had 258 seats, a decline of almost 90, with most seats picked up by Labour, which ended up with 191 seats, and the Liberals, who ended up with 158. The Labour Party under MacDonald was subsequently able to form a minority government on January 22, 1924.

Among the Labour Party’s principal criticisms of the preceding Conservative government were the suggestions it had failed to adequately address unemployment and housing.<sup>173</sup> John Wheatley, a Scottish member of the Independent Labour Party, quickly became the leader within the party on the housing issue. The 1924 Housing Act (the “Wheatley Act”) recommitted the government to a large-scale housing construction campaign. The Act maintained the subsidies of the Chamberlain Act, while complimenting them with further subsidies for houses built for controlled rents which would apply to all houses built over the next fifteen years.<sup>174</sup> Those subsidies were available to local authorities or public utility societies, not private builders, and the requirement that local authorities must convince the Minister of Health

---

166. SCOTT, *supra* note 16.

167. *Id.*

168. *Id.*

169. Rent Restrictions (Notices of Increase) Act of 1923, 13 & 14 Geo. 5. c. 13 (Eng.).

170. See Richard W. Lyman, *THE FIRST LABOUR GOVERNMENT*, 1924 110 (1958).

171. See *id.*

172. See Ben Jackson, *Revisionism Reconsidered: ‘Property-Owning Democracy’ and Egalitarian Strategy in Post-War Britain*, 16 *TWENTIETH CENTURY BRIT. HIST.* 416, 419 (2005).

173. See Lyman, *supra* note 170, at 111.

174. Marian Bowley, *HOUSING AND THE STATE, 1919-1944* 40-44 (1945).

they would do a better job than private builders was repealed.<sup>175</sup> The act also provided for stronger central oversight and control, and maintained a relatively high standard.<sup>176</sup> Wheatley meanwhile “reached a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ with the building trade unions, promising an increase in building work in return for a relaxation of rules limiting the entry of skilled men into the trade,” allowing for expanded construction in practice at more affordable rates.<sup>177</sup> As Paul Wilding has put it, the act

showed that three vital points had been grasped—that private enterprise was no longer able or willing to supply working class houses to rent, that the shortage was far bigger than anyone had previously thought, and that a precondition of a successful housing programme was an expansion of the building industry.<sup>178</sup>

Over the subsequent fifteen years, almost 600,000 houses were constructed under the terms of the Wheatley Act, though poorer workers and families still often struggled.<sup>179</sup>

A Conservative government returned to power on November 4, 1924. In 1927 and again in 1928, the Conservative government reduced the Chamberlain and Wheatley subsidies.<sup>180</sup> While such measures represented traditional fiscal conservatism, not all conservatives were so set against strong state action. In 1927, four young conservatives co-published a book advancing the argument that the First World War had “shattered pre-conceived economic notions, proved possible theoretic impossibilities, removed irremovable barriers, [and] created new and undreamt-of situations”—in short, it had shown that strong central state action was not only possible but necessary in the face of the “tremendous economic movements . . . which periodically surge across the world.”<sup>181</sup>

While more than a million houses were constructed over the course of the 1920s, only approximately one percent of this growth represented slum demolition and replacement.<sup>182</sup> This was recognized at the time,

175. SCOTT, *supra* note 16, at 44.

176. For more, see Marian Bowley, HOUSING AND THE STATE, 1919-1944 40-44 (1945).

177. See SCOTT, *supra* note 16, at 44-5. For more on the manner in which Wheatley and the act brought the builders’ unions, see Kevin Morgan, *The Problem of the Epoch? Labour and Housing, 1918-51*, 16 TWENTIETH CENTURY BRIT. HIST. 227 (2005).

178. Paul Wilding, *The Housing and Town Planning Act 1919—A Study in the Making of Social Policy*, 2 J. SOC. POL’Y 317, 333 (1973).

179. See E.D. Simon, *The Housing of the Large Poor Family*, 38 J. ST. MED. 37, 37 (1930); Scott, *supra* note 16, at 44.

180. See Bowley, *supra* note 174, at 44; Scott, *supra* note 16, at 44.

181. BOOTHBY ET AL., *INDUSTRY AND THE STATE: A CONSERVATIVE VIEW* 35-6 (1927).

182. See Margaret H. Schoenfeld, *British Housing and Housing Policies, 1919 to 1937*, 45 MONTHLY LAB. REV. 800, 806 (1937); Scott, *supra* note 16, at 45-46.

including by E. D. Simon, the former mayor of Manchester, who in 1929 published *How to Abolish the Slums*, which called for a large-scale program to demolish and replace Britain's slum dwellings, to be complemented by better public sanitation and more communal facilities.<sup>183</sup> The Labour Party made slum clearance one focal point of its 1929 election campaign,<sup>184</sup> in which it won 287 seats, the largest share of the three major parties, and entered into a coalition government with the Liberals. In 1930, the government passed a new Housing Act (the "Greenwood Act")<sup>185</sup> focused on slum clearance which provided subsidies to local authorities for the replacement of slum conditions with decent housing, as well as subsidies to those rehoused.<sup>186</sup>

The Great Depression began in late 1929. In 1931, MacDonald proposed major spending cuts; after these were rejected by the Labour Party, he formed a coalition with Liberal and Conservative MPs in support of the cuts. MacDonald was promptly expelled from the Labour Party, and formed the National Labour Organisation in its stead.<sup>187</sup> Following the 1931 elections, the Conservatives were by far the dominant party within MacDonald's coalition.

In 1933 a new housing measure, the Housing Subsidies and Housing (Financial Provisions) Act<sup>188</sup> was passed. The Act repealed the Wheatley subsidies on all houses approved after 1932. At the same time, it reinforced the government's commitment to slum clearance along the lines of the Greenwood Act, requiring local authorities to prepare five-year plans for slum abolition.<sup>189</sup> The Labour Party continued to advocate forcefully for slum replacement, moreover, and while out of national office, was able to advance this agenda in cities like London and Leeds where it took local power.<sup>190</sup> In 1935, shortly following Baldwin's return as prime minister, another Housing Act was passed, aimed at preventing

183. E.D. Simon, *HOW TO ABOLISH THE SLUMS* (1929).

184. See Scott, *supra* note 16, at 46.

185. The Housing Act of 1930, 20 & 21 Geo. 5 c. 39 (Eng.).

186. The support for the rehoused was, moreover, guaranteed for forty years. For more, see Bowley, *supra* note 174, at 135-38. The act has been subsequently described by one commentator as quite effective, in significant part due to the fact that building costs had dramatically declined from a decade earlier. See Scott, *supra* note 16, at 46; Bowley's assessment is more mixed, however. See Bowley, *supra* note 174, at 147-61.

187. For more on that split, see Arthur Marwick, *Middle Opinion in the Thirties: Planning, Progress and Political 'Agreement,'* 79 ENG. HIST. REV. 285, 288-90 (1964).

188. Housing (Financial Provisions) Act of 1933, 23 & 24 Geo. 5 c. 15 (Eng.).

189. For more, see Bowley, *supra* note 174, at 138-40.

190. See Morgan, *supra* note 72, at 242-43. Morgan argues this represented a turn from "notions of active citizenship or self-organization to a statist social reform tradition predicated on the helplessness of its beneficiaries," but it is not clear if this is an accurate description. *Id.* at 243.

overcrowding.<sup>191</sup> The Act required local authorities to prepare reports on overcrowding in their areas and prepare plans to address it over the five years following their slum abolition plans, after which overcrowded dwellings would be illegal, with landlords and tenants both facing penalties.<sup>192</sup> As Bowley put it, “in some respects the new policy of the Act of 1935 for abolishing overcrowding was revolutionary,” insofar as it “for the first time [made] overcrowding . . . a legal offence.”<sup>193</sup> This was limited, however, by the constrained definition of overcrowding provided.<sup>194</sup> Another Housing Act was passed in 1936,<sup>195</sup> which was generally focused on slum clearance and redevelopment.<sup>196</sup>

While the Greenwood Act and subsequent measures faced various obstacles and were the subject of ongoing criticism, they had a significant impact, including by leading to tens of thousands of housing units being replaced.<sup>197</sup> Simultaneously, as was recognized at the time, efforts under the Greenwood Act paled in comparison to the assertive investment in public housing made under the Wheatley Act.<sup>198</sup> In 1937, an article in the *American Economic Review* set out to investigate the “remarkable interference with private building enterprise” that took place in the postwar decades in Britain.<sup>199</sup> The article, evidently written from a progressive viewpoint, was generally approving, noting “English housing policy since the war may be credited . . . with having conquered the acute housing shortage which existed after the Armistice [and] with tackling successfully slums and overcrowding,” and that “‘housing the people’ . . . has come to be recognized more and more as a matter of public

191. The Housing Act of 1935, 25 & 26 Geo. 5 c. 40 (Eng.).

192. SCOTT, *supra* note 16, at 46-7.

193. See Bowley, *supra* note 174, at 142.

194. See *id.* at 142-43.

195. The Housing Act of 1936, 26 Geo. 5 & 1 Edw. 8 c. 51 (Eng.).

196. The act also allowed local authorities to sell their housing stock to tenants, with central government consent. See *id.* at § 76.

197. See *Trench Warfare*, GUARDIAN, Dec. 17, 1932, at 10; *Rotherham Slums to Go: Scheme Approved for Total Clearance in Eighteen Months-Rehousing on Pleasant Estates*, GUARDIAN, Jun. 8, 1933, at 9; *The Slum Campaign*, GUARDIAN, Mar. 14, 1934, at 8; Rev. F.G. Chevassut, *The New Housing Bill: Putting an End to Overcrowding*, MANCHESTER EVENING CHRON., Feb. 4 1935 at 6; A.M.M. Grierson, *Some Experiences of Slum Clearance Procedure in Manchester*, 1 J. ROYAL INST. PUB. HEALTH & POL’Y 724, 724 (1938).

198. See C. Killick Millard, *The Housing Problem with Special Reference to the Present Position*, 2 BRIT. MED. J. 1010, 1010 (1933); C. Killick Millard, *Problem of the Slums*, 42 J. ST. MED., 426, 426 (1933); *Phrases Do Not Build Houses*, LONDON DAILY HERALD, Sep. 20, 1934, at 10.

199. See Kaethe K. Liepmann, *English Housing Policy Since the War*, 27 AMER. ECON. REV. 503, 503 (1937).

concern.”<sup>200</sup> According to later estimates, whereas in 1914 ninety percent of the population of England lived in private rental units, while ten percent of houses were owner-occupied, by 1945 only sixty-two percent of the population were in privately rented units, with twelve percent in publicly rented units and with twenty-six percent of homes owner-occupied.<sup>201</sup> More broadly, as Marian Bowley put it during a study prepared during the Second World War, the new “sanitary policy” adopted in the interwar period had, novelly, “implied[d] state, or social, responsibility for” housing conditions.<sup>202</sup>

In sum, the period following the downfall of the Addison Act did not witness the state’s retreat from progressive housing policy. On the contrary, following a Conservative retrenchment, 1924 saw passage of the Wheatley Act, which led to even more effective and extensive government involvement in housing provision. While the latter portion of the decade saw direct public support scaled back somewhat, attention to the housing situation of the worst-off persisted. While significant public investment in housing was always opposed by some, a new model had clearly been set.

## V. HOUSING IN THE EMPIRE

The interwar years, in short, saw the development of a much more assertive approach to the government’s responsibilities regarding housing in Britain. British power was not limited to the British Isles in the period, however. Rather, British power was global, encompassing extensive colonies around the world. To what extent were the new approaches to housing of the period influential over this broader area? This section considers the comparative development of housing policy in three of the empire’s major cities, to which more attention was paid than many other places: Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore. These were not the only areas in which housing policy developed in the period: Following passage of the 1929 Colonial Development Act,<sup>203</sup> housing projects were undertaken in other colonies too.<sup>204</sup> However, this Article focuses on these

200. *Id.* at 518. The article had a few critiques, however, both of the potential that the poorest families might receive better accommodation than lower working-class families under the system, and the tendency of local authorities to tax poorer and working-class households at a disproportionate level in relation to the better off. *See id.* at 514.

201. *See* Peter Malpass and Alan Murie, HOUSING POLICY AND PRACTICE 11, 59 (1999).

202. *See* Bowley, *supra* note 174, at 186.

203. Colonial Development Act of 1929, 20 & 21 Geo. 5 c. 5 (Eng.).

204. *See* Richard Harris, *Making Leeway in the Leewards, 1929-51: The Negotiation of Colonial Development*, 33 J. IMPERIAL AND COMMONW. HIST. 393, 393 (2005).

three important Asian cities due to the sustained attention to housing that arose in all three contexts.

#### A. *Bombay*

Limited urban reforms were undertaken in mid-nineteenth-century India.<sup>205</sup> The rapid growth of both industry and the urban population in Bombay in the late nineteenth century outstripped the pace of those measures, however.<sup>206</sup> As in England, public health was a major concern.<sup>207</sup> In the late nineteenth century, health concerns were often linked to “overcrowding,” which “became a persistent theme in the writings of colonial officials” in Bombay.<sup>208</sup> Health concerns were dramatically magnified following recognition of an outbreak of the plague in September 1896, which, in Kidambi’s words, “precipitated [an] apolitical and social crisis unknown in colonial India since the summer of 1857.”<sup>209</sup> The outbreak of the plague helped lead to a renewed focus on urban redevelopment, in which emphasis was placed on effective sanitation in particular.<sup>210</sup>

The Bombay Improvement Trust was established in 1898, motivated in significant part by the plague.<sup>211</sup> It was the first such body in India, established with a mandate to ensure “the better ventilation of the densely inhabited parts of the city, the removal of insanitary dwellings, and the prevention of overcrowding.”<sup>212</sup> The Trust was initially supported by a one-time grant, annual contributions, and ownership of vacant lands, which could be developed into revenue-generating estates.<sup>213</sup> Over time, the Trust came to rely on loans as well, though the theory was always that

---

205. On reforms from the period see, e.g., Mariam Dossal, *IMPERIAL DESIGNS AND INDIGENOUS REALITIES: THE PLANNING OF BOMBAY CITY, 1845-1875* (1991).

206. See Prashant Kidambi, *THE MAKING OF AN INDIAN METROPOLIS: COLONIAL GOVERNANCE AND PUBLIC CULTURE IN BOMBAY, 1890 TO 1920* 10, 20-23 (2007).

207. See Helen Meller, *PATRICK GEDDES: SOCIAL EVOLUTIONIST AND CITY PLANNER* 145-47 (1990); Kidambi, *supra* note 206, at 36-37, 52-53.

208. Kidambi *supra* note 206, at 37.

209. *Id.* at 49.

210. See *id.* at 51.

211. See Mark Harrison, *PUBLIC HEALTH IN BRITISH INDIA: ANGLO-INDIAN PREVENTIVE MEDICINE 1859-1914* 184 (1994). The initial model was the Glasgow Improvement Trust, established in 1866 in response to typhus and cholera outbreaks in Glasgow. See Nicholas J. Morgan, *Building the City*, in *GLASGOW, VOLUME II: 1830-1912* 21 (W. Hamish Fraser & Irene Maver eds., 1996).

212. *REPORT OF THE BOMBAY IMPROVEMENT TRUST 1* (1899), *cited in* Harrison, *supra* note 211, at 184-5).

213. See Kidambi, *supra* note 206, at 74.

it would be financially self-sufficient, an important part of the appeal of the model.<sup>214</sup>

The Trust had power to acquire lands under the 1894 Land Acquisition Act for the purposes of development schemes, with government approval, and this was put to use over the following decades, such that by 1915, approximately ten percent of urban land in Bombay was Trust-owned.<sup>215</sup> The Trust's early, more progressive initiatives were frequently challenged by the Bombay Municipal Corporation, largely due to the concerns of elite property owners on the latter body that the Trust's initiatives might undermine their profits.<sup>216</sup> The Trust embarked on one assertive progressive housing scheme aimed at building 13,500 houses for Bombay's "poorer and working classes"; 8,000 were in fact housed over the Trust's first decade in existence, though at a rent that rendered the new units inaccessible to the city's poorer inhabitants.<sup>217</sup> Another 9,311 or so one-room tenements were constructed between 1909 and 1918, though once again, a relatively high rent was charged.<sup>218</sup>

Despite some positive intent, the Bombay Improvement Trust may ultimately have done more harm than good, as while it was active from an early stage in acquiring and tearing down slum dwellings, it was often unable to provide those dwellings' residents with alternative housing.<sup>219</sup> This was, in significant part, due to the Trust's reluctance to spend all the funding allocated to it on new housing units for the poor.<sup>220</sup> Instead, many of the buildings the Trust built were rented out to middle and upper class occupants.<sup>221</sup> Recognizing the problems with existing approaches, in June

---

214. See Michael William Sugarman, *Slums, Squatters and Urban Redevelopment Schemes in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore, 1894-1960* 68-69 (Nov. 30, 2017) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge) (on file with the University of Cambridge Library system). See *id.* at 57.

215. See Sandip Hazareesingh, *Colonial Modernism and the Flawed Paradigms of Urban Renewal: Uneven Development in Bombay, 1900-25*, 28 URB. HIST. 235, 241 (2001); Kidambi, *supra* note 206, at 75.

216. See Kidambi, *supra* note 206, at 84. Over time, the Trust seems to have become more captured by those interests, however, provoking criticism from some Indian elites who would have favored a more progressive policy. See *id.* at 84-85.

217. See REPORT OF THE BOMBAY IMPROVEMENT TRUST 5-6 (1899), cited in Harrison, *supra* note 211, at 184-85.

218. See Hazareesingh, *supra* note 215, at 246-47.

219. Kidambi, *supra* note 206, at 89-92.

220. *Id.* at 104.

221. See *id.* at 103, 107-09. An attempt was made to refocus the Trust on housing construction for the poorer residents of Bombay in 1913, but it was premised on the eager participation of private industrial interests, which was not forthcoming in practice. See *id.* at 106-07.

1912, J. P. Orr, the Chairman of the Bombay Improvement Trust, gave a talk in which he suggested that “wholesale demolition” and replacement of poor housing units was too expensive, and called instead for a regulatory approach based on fines on owners and occupiers alike where building standards were violated.<sup>222</sup> Orr also proposed “one standard of light and ventilation all over Bombay,” similar to the standards adopted in “the most important towns in England.”<sup>223</sup> Orr’s more progressive proposals were largely ignored or ineffective, however, and, as he himself noted in 1917, “only a fraction of the total dishoused” were rehoused by the Trust.<sup>224</sup>

This mixed practice developed alongside ongoing theoretical emphasis on, and at times concrete commitments to, the institution of town planning practices aimed at improving living conditions. In 1902, Bombay’s Health Officer, John Turner, observed the potential for “constant and determined efforts on the part of the authorities” to effectively combat disease by “improv[ing] the sanitary surroundings of the people.”<sup>225</sup> In 1903, he proposed the wholesale rehousing of the city’s slums via the rehousing of as many as 300,000 persons, though this proposal never came close to being implemented.<sup>226</sup> Improving terms of trade allowed for larger grants from the central authorities to local governments in the later part of the 1900s, aimed at improving sanitation.<sup>227</sup> Town planning in general was described as “the most urgent sanitary need” by the 1912 All-India Sanitary conference.<sup>228</sup> E.G. Turner, a member of the Indian Civil Service in Bombay, recommended progressive steps drawing on the German model.<sup>229</sup> Leading Indian political figures voiced frustration with how little power they had to tackle the problems of India’s growing cities as well, including limits on their ability to engage in adequate revenue collection and assert progressive

---

222. *See id.* at 99-101.

223. *Id.*

224. *See* J.P. Orr, SOCIAL REFORM AND SLUM HOUSING (1917), *cited in* Kidambi, *supra* note 206, at 102-03.

225. Kidambi, *supra* note 206, at 68.

226. *See* Harrison, *supra* note 211, at 185; Kidambi, *supra* note 206, at 68-69.

227. *See* Harrison, *supra* note 211, at 186-87.

228. Simla Government Central Branch Press, THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE ALL-INDIA SANITARY CONFERENCE HELD AT MADRAS 107 (1913). REPORT OF THE BOMBAY IMPROVEMENT TRUST 5-6 (1899), *cited in* Harrison, *supra* note 211, at 184-85. This recognition remained consistent over the following period: In 1925, for instance, H. V. Lanchester, an architect Geddes helped bring to India, emphasized in *The Art of Town Planning* that public health and overcrowding were even more significant issues in British India than in the metropole. *See* H.V. Lanchester, THE ART OF TOWN PLANNING 201 (1925).

229. *See* Meller, *supra* note 207, at 149.

redevelopment schemes.<sup>230</sup> In 1910, Gopal Gokhale and other Indian Congress Party members of the Legislative Council called for more funding to be given to local authorities for these purposes, but this was resisted by the British members of the government.<sup>231</sup>

While Bombay was perhaps the epicenter of attention to urban planning in India in the early twentieth century, similar developments took place in other regions as well. Improvement Trusts were established in Hyderabad and Calcutta in 1914.<sup>232</sup> Patrick Geddes, a prominent leader in the emerging town planning movement in Britain, went to Madras in 1915, following an invitation from the governor of the region.<sup>233</sup> Geddes was already a critic of improvement trusts from his time in England, observing that they tended to work in the interests of “the propertied and land-speculating classes and their economists” rather than in the interests of the poor.<sup>234</sup> His opinion on improvement trusts grew even more negative in India, and he went so far as to compare the buildings constructed by the Bombay Improvement Trust to prisons.<sup>235</sup> E.P. Richards, the inaugural chairman of the Calcutta Improvement Trust, was

230. See Meller, *supra* note 207, at 146. As Kidambi observes, in late nineteenth century Bombay “the Municipal Corporation was largely the preserve of [the] city’s propertied ratepayers: landlords, merchants and industrialists,” who, “for the better part of the late nineteenth century [effectively] resist[ed] . . . the reforming zeal of successive municipal executive officials.” Kidambi, *supra* note 206, at 41 (2007). See also Sandip Hazareesingh, *The Quest for Urban Citizenship: Civic Rights, Public Opinion, and Colonial Resistance in Early Twentieth-Century Bombay, 1900-25*, 34 MOD. ASIAN STUD. 797, 799 (2000).

231. See Harrison, *supra* note 211, at 188.

232. See Meller, *supra* note 207, at 142.

233. See *id.* at 147. Geddes, together with Robert Unwin, another prominent planner, were in Ireland the year before, where they had been brought in to advise on the implementation of a government scheme aimed at improving the very poor conditions of working-class housing in the city. The outbreak of the First World War and the subsequent Easter Rising substantially limited the implementation of these schemes in practice, however. See *id.* at 131-33. In Geddes’ view, had the funding for his schemes continued, they might have gone so far as preventing Ireland’s revolt against the English. See *id.* at 182, 282.

234. See *id.* at 147, citing Patrick Geddes, TOWN-PLANNING IN PATIALA STATE AND CITY: A REPORT TO H.H. THE MAHARAJA OF PATIALA 20-21 (1922) (1922). The governance structure of the improvement trusts supported this view; the Board of the Bombay Improvement Trust, for instance, consisted of the Military Commander of Bombay District, the Collector of Land Revenue, the Bombay Municipal Commissioner, and members of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce, the Millowners Association, and the Municipal Corporation. See *City Improvement Trust Report*, in BOMBAY IMPROVEMENT TRUST iv (1907), cited in Hazareesingh, *supra* note 215, at 240 (2001).

235. See Meller, *supra* note 207, at 147. In Madras, Geddes suggested a town planning officer should be appointed instead of an improvement trust, on the theory they would be able to operate with less negative restraints. With Geddes’s support, Lanchester, a founding member of the British Town Planning Institute, was subsequently appointed to the role. See *id.* at 148.

similarly critical in his 1914 *On the Condition, Improvement and Town Planning of the City of Calcutta and Contiguous Areas*, in which, as Meller puts it, he opined that “only a completely authoritarian regime with huge resources and a vigorous policy of demolition would make any impact whatsoever.”<sup>236</sup>

The authorities in Bombay, meanwhile, continued to take new steps. In 1915, Bombay adopted India’s first Town Planning Act.<sup>237</sup> During the latter part and in the aftermath of the First World War, as in Britain, further developments took place.<sup>238</sup> The Municipal Reform Association was formed in Bombay in 1918, with the aim, among other things, of extending voting rights (to the wealthiest twenty percent of the city’s population). The Congress Party, the Municipal Reform Association, and others waged an extensive campaign in the period in support of rent control, which led to passage of the Bombay Rent (War Restrictions No. 1) Act in March 1918.<sup>239</sup> The ability of anyone other than the best-off to benefit from the act was limited, however, due to the legalized nature of the procedure it instituted and the need for claimants to have rent receipts, which were only issued to renters in a narrow set of more expensive rental units.<sup>240</sup> A second measure, the Bombay Rent (War Restrictions No. 2) Act, was passed in November, which extended protections to those with rents below twenty rupees per month.<sup>241</sup> In the face of extensive popular mobilization in 1919, as well as the creation of the Bombay Tenants’ Association, the government decided to maintain

---

236. See E.P. Richards, *THE CONDITION, IMPROVEMENT AND TOWN PLANNING OF THE CITY OF CALCUTTA AND CONTIGUOUS AREAS* (1914); Meller, *supra* note 207, at 149. Geddes did have some success with the Improvement Trust in Lucknow, however, where he was able to help ensure that, “though some dispossession, for demolitions, [was] inevitable,” it would “be accompanied by actual re-housing.” Geddes, *supra* note 234, at 20-21. This success was limited, however, and after an initial period of support from liberal British governors, Geddes ended up generally on the outs with the British authorities, after which he turned to working for various Indian leaders. See Meller, *supra* note 207, at 144, 175-85.

237. The Bombay Town Planning Act, 1915, §1 (India). See Meller, *supra* note 207, at 149; Sugarman, *supra* note 214, at 109; Robert Home, *OF PLANTING AND PLANNING: THE MAKING OF BRITISH COLONIAL CITIES* 210-11 (2nd ed., 2013).

238. As Sugarman notes, in one of his last lectures in 1918, Orr specifically “compar[ed] the problems of Bombay’s housing conditions with those faced in England.” Sugarman, *supra* note 214, at 108. This helped lead to subsequent calls from members of Bombay’s Co-operative Housing Society for more aggressive measures, like those adopted in England. See *id.*

239. See Vanessa R. Caru, *Circumstantial Adjustments: The Colonial State, the Nationalist Movement, and Rent Control Legislation (Bombay, 1918-1928)*, 1 *LE MOUVEMENT SOCIAL* 81, 82-86 (2013). As Caru notes, the British example was cited as precedent. See *id.* at 85.

240. See *id.* at 87.

241. See *id.* at 87-88.

the Acts.<sup>242</sup> The Acts maintained strong public support in the early to mid-1920s, including from rising Indian political leaders, but as the 1920s progressed, the Acts' protections were gradually weakened, as official policy once again bent more in the direction of leading urban elites' interests.<sup>243</sup>

Meanwhile, an article in the *Bombay Chronicle* in 1919 suggested that “the greatest and most urgent task to which Bombay must devote itself now and for years to come is to build houses—to build, and build, and to build well and with foresight,” and further suggested that “local authorities should attempt to emulate the London County Council’s ambitious post-war subsidized popular housing programme.”<sup>244</sup> The government of Bombay responded to such calls by establishing a new “Development Department,” which was given responsibility for constructing “at least 50,000 one-room tenements” with the aim of “solv[ing] the problem of working-class accommodation.”<sup>245</sup> As with the Improvement Trust, the Development Department had the power to compulsorily acquire land, but only at “full market values,” while no subsidies were provided to support working class housing conditions.<sup>246</sup>

However, the Development Department’s efforts led to limited results. While 17,000 tenements were constructed over the subsequent years, they were built at significant cost, and only one fifth were ultimately occupied, largely by middle class rather than working class occupants.<sup>247</sup> On top of that, “the majority of rooms had no water connections, *nahanis* (washing places), or lighting, and very inadequate *chulha* (fireplaces for cooking purposes) and latrine provisions,” and not “the customary verandah, which poor tenants had come to regard as their essential ‘breathing space.’”<sup>248</sup> In sum, as Hazareesingh notes, while there was recognition of the need for a strong government that could both engage in town planning and undertake the measures needed to make that

---

242. *See id.* at 90.

243. *See id.* at 91-92. The acts were repealed in 1928. *See id.* at 93. In 1939, on the eve of World War II, rent controls were reinstituted via the Bombay Rent Restriction Act.

244. Hazareesingh, *supra* note 203 at 247, quoting BOMBAY CHRONICLE, Jun. 30, 1919.

245. Hazareesingh, *supra* note 203 at 248, quoting Government of Bombay, DEVELOPMENT PROCEEDINGS, 1921 49 (1921).

246. *See* Hazareesingh, *supra* note 203 at 248.

247. *See* Hazareesingh, *supra* note 203 at 248. *See also* Sugarman, *supra* note 202 at 112-21.

248. *See* Hazareesingh, *supra* note 203 at 248.

policy successful, the colonial government of Bombay was unable to implement an appropriately forceful mode of governance in practice.<sup>249</sup>

### B. *Hong Kong*

Housing conditions in Hong Kong were a subject of concern for British authorities almost immediately from the establishment of the colony.<sup>250</sup> In 1887, a Sanitary Board was established, but the authorities resisted the creation of a municipal council.<sup>251</sup> Several years later Osbert Chadwick, a sanitary engineer, was asked to prepare a report, following pressure from the Chamber of Commerce.<sup>252</sup> Chadwick's report helped motivate passage of the Public Health and Building Ordinance in 1903,<sup>253</sup> which advanced detailed minimum accommodation standards.<sup>254</sup> The idea of a new municipal corporation was proposed in the early 1900s by Frederick Lugard, the governor at the time.<sup>255</sup> In the early 1910s, Ebenezer Howard's Garden City idea achieved substantial public recognition in Hong Kong, though with only minimal impact in practice.<sup>256</sup>

Both the quantity and standard of housing in Hong Kong remained inadequate over the first decades of the twentieth century, a reality exacerbated by growth of the population of the colony to more than 600,000 in the post-World War I years.<sup>257</sup> The report of the Housing Commission in Singapore in the latter war years, which called for the adoption of a more forceful housing policy, "generated . . . enthusiastic

249. See Hazareesingh, *supra* note 215, at 249, citing B.W. Kissan, REPORT ON TOWN-PLANNING ENACTMENTS IN GERMANY (1913), in support of the theoretical recognition of the need for stronger government powers.

250. See E.G. Pryor, *A Historical Review of Housing Conditions in Hong Kong*, 12 J. H.K. BRANCH ROYAL ASIATIC SOC'Y 89, 89 (1972).

251. See Margaret Jones, *Tuberculosis, Housing and the Colonial State: Hong Kong, 1900-1950*, 37 MOD. ASIAN STUD. 653, 659 (2003).

252. See Pryor, HOUSING CONDITIONS IN HONG KONG at 102-03; Osbert Chadwick, MR. CHADWICK'S REPORTS ON THE SANITARY CONDITION OF HONG KONG (1882).

253. Public Health and Buildings Ordinance, 1903 No. 1 (1903) 3 O.H.K., §1 (H.K.).

254. Renewed calls for the establishment of a municipal council around the same time were again defeated, however. See Cecelia Louise Chu, *Speculative Modern: Urban Forms and the Politics of Property in Colonial Hong Kong* 86-89 (Apr. 18, 2022) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley).

255. See Robert Home, OF PLANTING AND PLANNING: THE MAKING OF BRITISH COLONIAL CITIES 209 (2nd ed., 2013).

256. See Chu, *supra* note 254, at 123-34. The most significant instantiation of the idea was Kowloon Tong Garden City, which received significant Chinese financial support in the 1920s. See *id.* at 135-36.

257. See Pryor, *supra* note 250, at 104-05.

responses in Hong Kong.”<sup>258</sup> Several prominent members of Hong Kong’s community at the time called for a similar enquiry and similarly bold measures to tackle the housing shortage, helping lead to an internal investigation in 1919.<sup>259</sup> Henry Pollock, the unofficial member of the Legislative Council representing the justices of the peace, suggested Hong Kong should follow Singapore in adopting an assertive rent control measure as well.<sup>260</sup> Medical experts, meanwhile, emphasized housing deficiencies as a factor contributing to the high tuberculosis rates in the colony.<sup>261</sup>

The postwar years saw increasing attention to social issues, and an increasing willingness to intervene assertively. The price of rice was fixed in 1919 in response to a global cereal shortage.<sup>262</sup> A 1921 report highlighted the use of child labor in the colony.<sup>263</sup> Following popular protests, Governor Stubbs called out the Hong Kong Land Investment Company for rental abuses and introduced the first draft of the Rent Restriction Ordinance in 1921.<sup>264</sup> While landlords unsurprisingly criticized the bill, the public overwhelmingly supported it.<sup>265</sup> The Rent Restriction Ordinance was passed in 1922.<sup>266</sup> The Rent Restriction Ordinance was minimally effective in practice, however, as landlords found ways to skirt its prohibitions.<sup>267</sup>

In 1923, a Housing Commission was appointed to consider the housing supply, in response to widespread recognition of the failures of Hong Kong’s rent control policy.<sup>268</sup> The Commission’s report called on the government to become much more proactive in relation to housing by opening new sites for development, providing better transportation services, penalizing owners of unused private land, providing support for low-cost housing and building and operating low-cost housing units.<sup>269</sup>

---

258. Cecelia L. Chu, *BUILDING COLONIAL HONG KONG: SPECULATIVE DEVELOPMENT AND SEGREGATION IN THE CITY* 178 (1st ed., 2022).

259. *See id.* at 178-79.

260. *Id.* at 178.

261. *See* Margaret Jones, *Tuberculosis, Housing and the Colonial State: Hong Kong, 1900-1950*, 37 *MOD. ASIAN STUD.* 653, 667-68 (2003).

262. *See* Chu, *supra* note 258, at 179.

263. *See* Leo F. Goodstadt, *The Rise and Fall of Social, Economic and Political Reforms in Hong Kong, 1930-1955*, 44 *J. ROYAL ASIATIC SOC’Y H.K. BRANCH* 57, 59 (2004).

264. *See* Chu, *supra* note 258, at 181.

265. *See id.* 175-76.

266. Rents Ordinance, 1922, No. 14 (1922) 5 O.H.K., §1 (H.K.).

267. *See* Chu, *supra* note 258, at 185-86.

268. *See id.* at 187.

269. *See Report of the Housing Commission*, in *SESSIONAL PAPER 10/1923* (1923); Pryor, *supra* note 250, at 105-06; Jones, *supra* note 251, at 674; Chu, *supra* note 258, at 188-89.

These recommendations were largely ignored in practice, however, including due to challenges with financing.<sup>270</sup>

By the mid-1930s, the population of Hong Kong was approaching one million.<sup>271</sup> In 1934, a commission was appointed to make recommendations on new approaches to economic policy.<sup>272</sup> Among other things, the Commission argued that “in a world of intensifying economic nationalism and trade barriers, laissez faire was no longer relevant” and that therefore “the Government ought to accept a more interventionist role and promote economic development,” and called for “increased taxation . . . to finance the expansion of social services.”<sup>273</sup>

In 1935, another housing commission was established, in significant part due to concerns with high tuberculosis rates.<sup>274</sup> The Commission issued its report the same year, in which it observed a shortage of 30,000 or so flats as well as severe overcrowding in some areas.<sup>275</sup> The Commission called for new, better-designed accommodation units, new community dwelling sites, more public parks, and the establishment of a permanent town planning and housing committee.<sup>276</sup> The report also suggested the government should become directly involved in housing the poor and in slum clearance, observing “private enterprise” could not fulfill the task “unassisted,” and called for “social services . . . to be provided . . . as in Europe.”<sup>277</sup> An Urban Board was set up in 1935 as well, replacing the Sanitary Board, though still without the full range of powers a municipal council typically had.<sup>278</sup>

Over the subsequent years, the government put serious work into developing a scheme that could provide the necessary level of financial support for major housing initiatives.<sup>279</sup> In 1938, Governor Northcote emphasized the intolerable “malnutrition and slum housing conditions” in the colony; called for improved housing, health care, nutrition, welfare, employment, and education measures, as well as for the adoption of

270. See Pryor, *supra* note 250, at 106; Jones, *supra* note 251, at 675.

271. See Pryor, *supra* note 250, at 106.

272. See Goodstadt, *supra* note 263, at 60.

273. REPORT OF THE COMMISSION . . . TO ENQUIRE INTO THE CAUSES AND EFFECTS OF THE PRESENT TRADE RECESSION 74, 93-4 (1935), *cited in* Goodstadt, *supra* note 263, at 60-61.

274. See Jones, *supra* note 251, at 675.

275. See Pryor, *supra* note 250, at 107.

276. See *id.* at 107-08.

277. CO 131/106, SESSIONAL PAPERS, REPORT OF THE HOUSING COMMISSION, 261 (1935) (UK); see Jones, *supra* note 251, at 676; Pryor, *supra* note 250, at 107-08. Recent British housing policy was clearly taken particularly into account in motivating these recommendations. See Jones, *supra* note 251, at 677.

278. See Jones, *supra* note 251, at 659.

279. See *id.* at 679.

heavier taxation in order to pay for such services; and committed in theory to implementing several of the recommendations of the 1935 Housing Commission.<sup>280</sup> 1938 also saw the appointment of a Labour officer, tasked with enforcing “the laws and regulations designed to benefit and protect labourers,” including by “investigation of the cost of living and wage-rates; the prevention and settlement by conciliatory means of industrial disputes; and the promotion of methods of collective bargaining.”<sup>281</sup> In 1939, the Labour Officer, H. R. Butters, issued a report which described Hong Kong’s housing situation as inadequate and questioned the existing approach to “property . . . as primarily a profit making concern.”<sup>282</sup> While World War II and the Japanese invasion in 1941 prevented the short-term implementation of these schemes, as Margaret Jones has observed, they make clear that “the problem of the housing conditions of the Chinese population had entered the agenda of the pre-war colonial government.”<sup>283</sup>

### C. Singapore

A municipal committee heavily controlled by the governor was created in Singapore in 1848.<sup>284</sup> In 1856, it was replaced by a Municipal Board.<sup>285</sup> Three of five members of the Municipal Council were chosen by the wealthier ratepayers; many members of the population continued to feel they were not sufficiently represented.<sup>286</sup> Contestation over the level of colonial executive control over the Board continued after the Straits Settlements exited British India in 1867.<sup>287</sup> A new Act was passed at the very end of 1887, which achieved a certain compromise between the powers of the governor and ratepayers and granted the Council expanded powers to advance sanitary aims.<sup>288</sup>

280. HONG KONG HANSARD (Oct. 13, 1938), at 116-27, *cited in* Goodstadt, *supra* note 263, at 62-63. In 1939 the Hong Kong Financial Secretary “was applauded by the [Legislative Council] after asserting . . . ‘that income tax is best fitted to secure an equitable distribution of the [welfare] burden.’” *Id.* at 63.

281. HONG KONG HANSARD (Oct. 13, 1938), at 127, *cited in* Goodstadt, *supra* note 263, at 62.

282. H.R. Butters, REPORT ON LABOUR AND LABOUR CONDITIONS IN HONG KONG (1939), para. 218.

283. Jones, *supra* note 251, at 679.

284. Brenda S. A. Yeoh, CONTESTING SPACE IN COLONIAL SINGAPORE: POWER RELATIONS AND THE URBAN BUILT ENVIRONMENT 31 (2003).

285. *Id.* at 32.

286. *See id.*

287. *Id.* at 33-34, 48-51.

288. *See* Yeoh, *supra* note 284, at 50-51.

In 1894, Singapore's Municipal Health Department issued new regulations which increased the power of sanitary inspectors.<sup>289</sup> The Peirce-Middleton-McDowell report in 1905 recommended that more space be created around accommodation units through the opening of back lanes and more frequent cross streets.<sup>290</sup> In 1906 and 1907, Professor W. J. Simpson, an expert in tropical hygiene, was commissioned by the Governor to investigate the high death rate from diseases in Singapore. He concluded poor housing was a primary contributing factor and agreed with the plans to create more space, air, and light, which he suggested would help enable better sanitation as well.<sup>291</sup>

In 1907, a bill was introduced that aimed to give municipal commissioners power to pursue these proposals through demolition and reconstruction.<sup>292</sup> Several members of the Municipal Council observed that any such demolition and reconstruction measures would lead to many residents being thrown out of their homes unless alternative accommodation was prepared in advance.<sup>293</sup> The government ignored these concerns and passed the measure into law without any relevant amendments.<sup>294</sup> In practice, little was done under the ordinance due to the expenses involved, among other issues.<sup>295</sup>

In 1913, a new ordinance resolved previous disputes as to the appropriate level of local involvement in urban governance by allowing the governor to nominate all members of the Municipal Council.<sup>296</sup> Ultimately, as Brenda Yeoh observes, restrictions on "greater local autonomy in the administration of urban affairs" were motivated by "fears that . . . would lead to the domination of Asian interests in city government."<sup>297</sup>

However, this centralization of powers didn't lead to an end to urban reforms. In 1917 and 1918, Singapore's government charged a Housing Commission with making recommendations as to the future of housing in

---

289. The regulations allowed the inspectors to enter dwellings and remove internal wooden partitions, among other things. *Id.* at 146-47. This policy was ultimately abandoned as ineffective in practice, however. *See id.* at 148.

290. *Id.* at 149.

291. *Id.* at 94-99, 137, 149; Sugarman, *supra* note 214, at 56-9. Simpson also called for the creation of a Sanitary Board, as existed in Hong Kong. *See id.*

292. *See* Yeoh, *supra* note 284, at 149-50.

293. *See id.* at 151.

294. *See id.* at 151-52.

295. *See id.* at 152-60.

296. *See id.* at 56-57.

297. *Id.* at 58.

the city.<sup>298</sup> The Commission called for a more systemic approach, and suggested the creation of an Improvement Trust similar to those employed in India.<sup>299</sup> This report was widely recognized in the region at the time, prompting calls for similar reforms in Hong Kong, as noted above. In Singapore, measures were promptly taken to prepare the way for the creation of such a body.<sup>300</sup>

Establishing an Improvement Trust proved difficult in practice, and it was only in 1927 after many years of debate that such a body was finally established by the Improvement Ordinance.<sup>301</sup> The Trust received a substantial initial investment, which lasted through its first twenty years.<sup>302</sup> In addition, the Trust was empowered to receive regular revenue through a property tax and matching government contributions.<sup>303</sup> While this represented an improvement over previous approaches, the Trust's powers were limited: While the Trust had the power to condemn buildings, it was not initially granted the power to provide housing.<sup>304</sup> Recognizing the issues this posed, the Trust worked together with the general Singapore authorities in support of limited housing schemes in more central parts of the city the late 1920s.<sup>305</sup> In 1930 and the years that followed, the Trust's mandate was amended several times to extend its powers, including by clarifying its ability to undertake construction directly.<sup>306</sup> The Trust also engaged in larger and more elaborate housing schemes around the city's periphery, creating thousands of units in different areas by the end of the 1930s.<sup>307</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

Both the dramatic history of rights declarations and the rise of international human rights law following the Second World War have tended to direct rights histories towards more readily identifiable formal statements of rights recognition. While valuable, a comprehensive human rights history must also pay careful attention to the nature of the relationship between state and society, observing the slow development

---

298. See Chu, *supra* note 258, at 178.

299. See Yeoh, *supra* note 284, at 161.

300. See *id.* at 162.

301. See *id.* at 164.

302. See J.M. Fraser, THE WORK OF THE SINGAPORE IMPROVEMENT TRUST, 1927-1947 4-5 (1948); Sugarman, *supra* note 214, at 91, 97.

303. See Fraser, *supra* note 302, at 4.

304. See Yeoh, *supra* note 284, at 164; Sugarman, *supra* note 214, at 123.

305. See Sugarman, *supra* note 214, at 123.

306. See Fraser, *supra* note 302, at 1, 10.

307. See Sugarman, *supra* note 214, at 126-28.

of a sense of state responsibility in particular areas over time. Viewed from this perspective, the early twentieth century, rather than the post-World War II period, appears to be the central moment in which the idea of a right to housing rose to prominence within the Anglo world.

In Britain itself this development had multiple sources. First, the need for housing had dramatically increased by the early twentieth century. Need alone is insufficient to explain the changes that took place, however—what was essential was the rising concern over the housing situation, and the new approaches to address it. Rising concern was articulated in several different manners, first as a matter of public health, and subsequently as a matter of ensuring maximum productivity from the working population as well. Most importantly, before, during, and after the First World War, the political strength of the working classes increased. In response, the government was forced to take steps to fend off potential revolution, in which context the construction of public housing came to represent a key step even some conservatives could accept, under pressure. To this mixture of factors militating in favor of a forceful new public housing policy was added the wartime experience, which made clear that the state had the capacity to take extensive control over the economy and engage in major public investment aimed at the reconstruction of society as a whole.

Progressive measures in this area were at first only possible while workers' strength was at its peak. Once the potential of revolution had diminished, conservative forces were able to effectively push back against the Addison Act, and the concept of significant public spending designed to increase social equality in general. While the Addison Act did not lead to the number of houses it had aimed for being constructed, and Addison himself was ignominiously removed from government, it accomplished several important goals. First, hundreds of thousands of houses were constructed. Second, the act "set new standards for working class housing as regards size, density and amenities"—suggesting the working class deserved housing of a significantly higher quality than they had enjoyed before.<sup>308</sup> Most importantly, the Act and Addison's efforts more broadly "established the principle that housing was a social service."<sup>309</sup> The positive orientation set by the Addison Act was revived and strengthened

---

308. Paul Wilding, *The Housing and Town Planning Act 1919—A Study in the Making of Social Policy*, 2 J. SOC. POL'Y 317, 333 (1973). As Scott notes, moreover, the typical floorspace of houses built under the Addison Act "ranged from around 950-1,400 sq. ft.," more than fifty percent larger than the typical household before the war, and still, as of the 2010s "among the most spacious council houses ever developed in Britain." Scott, *supra* note 16, at 42.

309. A.J.P. Taylor, *ENGLISH HISTORY 1914-1945* 148 (1970).

by the Wheatley Act, which had even more dramatic impacts in practice. While reform efforts were somewhat attenuated over the remainder of the interwar period, the old laissez faire philosophy of governance had clearly been strongly challenged.

The interwar period, in sum, played a key role in the development of the idea of the right to housing in particular, and of the idea of government responsibility for the socio-economic well-being of the population more broadly. At the same time, however, it also remained a high point of the British Empire. This led to highly unequal outcomes, as no similar concern was exercised around the colonial world.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, in at least some of the British Empire's major cities, the new approaches to housing policy of the period began slowly seeping into practice as well, as some combination of public health and economic concerns, popular pressure, and changing ideas as to the appropriate level of public involvement in areas like housing in the period meant that significant reforms took place in Bombay, Hong Kong, and Singapore, paving the way for further developments in future. While the impacts of these developments were highly limited in the period, they nonetheless introduced valuable new principles into diverse local contexts, providing a repertoire of ideas and experiences that could, given the right subsequent political climate, be productively drawn upon in time.