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The council housing debate [1]

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Wednesday saw [3] both a government promise to build 2,000 new council houses across England, and a critical report from the Audit Commission explaining that there has been too much focus on building council houses, at the cost of maintaining the existing stock.

The response from the main parties has been one of predictable point-scoring, with the Government declaring that they, ?reject any claims that there is too much emphasis on new house building," while the Conservatives were sure that, ?there is a powerful case for renovating rather than demolishing rundown housing stock," and the Lib Dems complained that Labour was, ?denying councils the money they desperately need to improve local housing."

Bickering over how best to provide housing, no-one pointed out the obvious: that no government, however well-intentioned, well-managed and well-resourced, can possibly hope to run something so complicated as the provision of housing for two million people. The political parties don?t send out press releases telling us how they think it?s best to provide bananas, or cars, or holidays, so why do they think they know what to do with houses?

The moment that government realises the arrogance and the folly of Soviet-style central administration of low-cost housing, is the moment the lives of those stuck in council houses will start to improve. Council houses should be sold off and the government should build no more.

So what instead? In the long-term, we should abandon the failed welfare, education and economic policies that generate state dependency, but in the short-term we should look to the system of housing allowances which give the consumer the choice of where they want to live, and leave provision to the market.

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