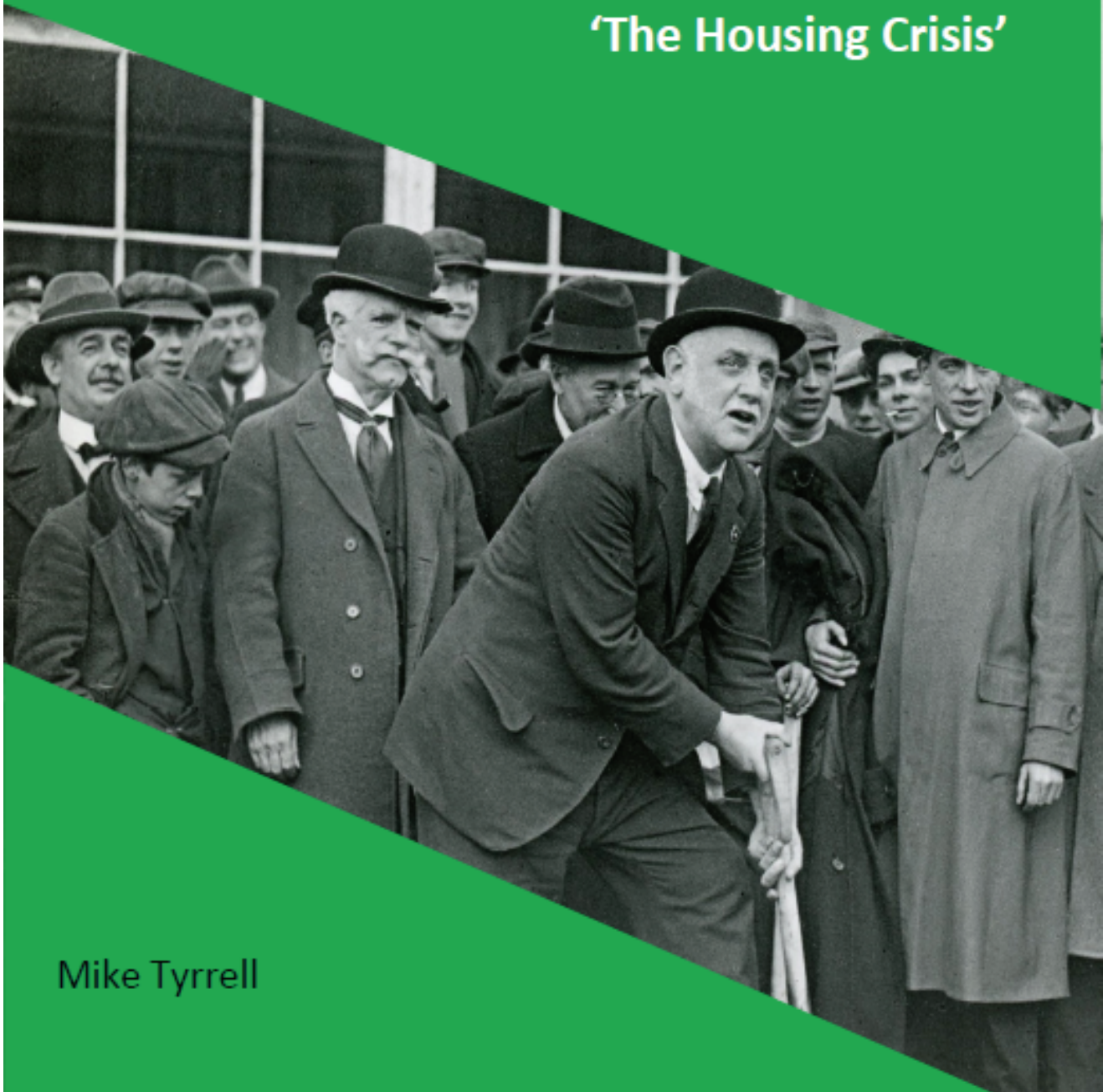


The 7th George Lansbury Memorial Lecture

'The Housing Crisis'



Mike Tyrrell

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Thank you very much for inviting me to give your annual lecture. I feel privileged to be able to speak to you all whilst honouring the name of George Lansbury.

I am from a family that can trace its roots in Poplar back to at least the 1680s, and for a family that has spent around 340 years here the name of George Lansbury means so much especially to the generations who lived through the 1920s when he and his colleagues on Poplar Borough Council put the people of Poplar first.

My Nan spoke so highly of Mr Lansbury as that generation knew him as. He was a hero to the people and she spoke fondly of the time she met him when he came to her

school in Dingle Lane and she spoke to him.

This venue is also poignant, because five floors above here was exactly where my Nan lived, in the flats that stood on this site.

In addition, this land was once in the ownership of my 5 times Great Grandfather William Sumner, who was living here from around 1815 until his death in 1841. He owned 18 cottages and a carterage on this site, as he had a monopoly of carting goods for the East India Company.

So I can hear you thinking, with all that wonga in his family why isn't this Tyrrell fella speaking in a cut glass accent?

That's because when my 5 times Great Grandfather died he left his money to his second family so that my family were left homeless and like most other East Enders ended up living in poorly maintained overcrowded homes with no rent controls and no security of tenure.

Such Victorian conditions continued for nearly all East End families until they were able to secure social housing, which commenced with philanthropic companies in the 1860s like Peabody and Council housing, the first London example being the Boundary Estate in Bethnal Green in the 1890s.

It took though until the late sixties for most of the last remaining slum clearances to give people the kind of

homes we take for granted today,
inside toilets and bathrooms,
WOW.....

My maternal grandparents lived until 1962 in a house in Limehouse lit by gas, with no bathroom and an outside toilet when they got a flat with all mod cons. I was five in 1968 when we moved out of a Victorian tenement “flat” which was two rooms with a shared toilet on the landing, into a two bedroomed maisonette.

My Mum tells me we paid double the price for the two rooms in the tenement “flat” that her parents did for the luxury of a two bedroomed council flat.

In the 1960s I remember so many relatives who lived in shared houses

with no bathrooms and outside toilets, and by the 1970s they had all mainly been rehoused and shared homes were a thing of the past.....

How naive was I.....

I am appalled that such times have returned.

I cannot believe so many homes on Council estates are now HMOs. We are seeing properties with rooms being subdivided to create more so-called bedrooms, some without windows. I have even recently come across a new trend of people in privately rented homes and subletting them on a room-by-room basis without the knowledge of the owner.

Beds in sheds.....What is that all about.....the exploitation of people!

Next door to me, the property was let out on a room-by-room basis. I cannot believe that it means that next door to me was a family living/sleeping/eating in a room I use as a bedroom and that they had to share a single bathroom and toilet with other families renting a room. It has now been converted to an Airbnb.

Shelter reported at the end of last year (2018) that there were 320,000 homeless people in England alone and 1.1million on housing waiting lists. The National Housing Federation estimate 145,000 new homes are required annually.

How on Earth did we get into a housing crisis of this epic proportion?

How have we managed to turn the clock back 50 years?

How has the shortage of homes got so bad?

What can we do about it?

After the second world war, there was a political consensus that there had to be a massive boom in building social housing, I suppose the actions of the Luftwaffe made this inevitable, to truly fulfil the aim of creating homes fit for heroes that failed after the First World War when

the 500,000 new homes target within three years was only 50% met.

In the inter war years, forward-thinking Councils such as Poplar, Stepney and Bethnal Green invested in new homes for their residents, and on the Poplar Council the estate on which George Lansbury cut the first sod has stood the test of time. However, I think we all know the reaction he would have, knowing that most of the houses on the estate have been sold under the Right-to-Buy and are no longer available for social housing.

Between 1945 and 1980, there were on average just over 118,000 new social housing units built per annum: the average between 1951 and 1955

was 188,000 per year. I should remind you that between 1951 and 1955 there was a Tory government.

The provision of new council homes to deal with overcrowding and poor housing conditions was an integral part of the creation of the welfare state.

Since 1980 social housing completions are a fraction of what they were and at the same time over 2.5 million homes have been sold under the Right-to-Buy.

This has meant that the number of homes for rent from councils or housing associations in the UK has been decreasing from a peak of around seven million in the early

1980s to just under five million in 2014.

In Tower Hamlets, because house prices are so high, you can buy a property through the Right-to-Buy after just three years. So, you can get £105,000 discount after paying just £15,000 in rent..... A £90k gift from the state because you were fortunate enough to get a council tenancy.

It is no wonder we are in a crisis.

Over the years people who could afford to buy in the private sector gave up their council tenancies which could go to someone else in need.

Massive house price inflation has halted this source of social housing. Average house prices in the UK between 2005 and 2017 rose from £150k to £220K.

Here in the East End it is much worse. Over the same period a three bedroomed ground floor maisonette in an ex-council block rose from £165k to £415k.

At those prices home ownership is unaffordable with average salaries in Tower Hamlets being £40,000.

Homes are being bought as investment properties which is forcing up prices further.

One investment path at the moment is Airbnb. I do not know about you,

but I have been stopped on many occasions by people looking for their “hotel”. Only to point the way to number 9 along the landing.....

So, what can be done? How can we start to tackle this housing crisis? What politicians have the guts to rock the boat, as that is what is required.

The date of this lecture was set well over a year ago and waking up this morning hearing the news on the general election manifesto announcements on housing, I asked myself are we entering a new political consensus on housing.

- The Greens are committed to 100k council homes per annum.

- The Liberal Democrats are committed to 100,000 new social homes annually
- Labour are committed to 100,000 council homes and 50,000 new housing association homes annually
- The Conservatives to 1million homes over 5 years, I presume resulting in 70,000 new affordable homes through Section 106 agreements.

Before this morning's announcements, I had written what I am about to say.

We need to get the social housing completions back to the 100,000+ plus mark per annum. How is this funded? When I started work in housing in the 1980s, grant covered

70% of the costs, compared to 10% in recent times. The £100k offer of grant per home by the GLA is a welcome change. Increases in grant so that there can be a massive boost in investment in social housing must be given as much importance as funding the National Health Service.

As I stated earlier, poor housing conditions affect health and it should be linked to savings on NHS expenditure.

If we are going to be building these new homes, we need to ensure we get allocation policies right. We have lost so much with families being dispersed. Communities have been destroyed and so the social care bill has increased. Slum clearances in

the 1950s ensured families lived near and could support each other. Allocation policies in the last 30 years have destroyed this. We must look at that if we are to get a massive increase in supply.

100k+ new homes per annum will not be enough on its own.

The Right-to-Buy scheme needs to be changed. We cannot afford to lose the homes that we are building. The only fortunate impact of the house price inflation in Tower Hamlets is that it means that family homes are unaffordable even with the large discounts for smaller properties like one bed roomed flats, though they are still being sold. Discounts are the same regardless of the size of property. The discount

needs to be changed so that it is linked to rent paid and size of home.

Action needs to be taken to stop homes being used as investment properties, driving up prices. House prices need to fall. Who can afford to buy? Occupations that were always seen as a good job, that gave you a good pension and the salary of which would cover a mortgage, such a teacher, local government officer can no longer afford to buy a home here. What action can be taken?

Overseas buyers are buying up many of the new homes that are being built as “investment opportunities”. We need to learn from our Danish friends on the other side of the North Sea where foreign nationals can only buy if they can

prove that they are residing in the property all year round so that properties are simply not bought and left vacant as happens with many new homes in Dockland area.

House purchasing must be linked to National Insurance Numbers so that anyone who owns two or more homes is forced to declare earnings from renting homes, so that tax is paid.

Investment properties that end up in the private-rented sector need to be kept in check through regulation, to protect tenants. A compulsory Landlord Registration System needs to be introduced so that tenants are protected in respect of:

- Tenancy agreements

- Deposits
- Repairs
- Health & Safety Checks.

In respect of the housing crisis, however, there are two other areas that I want to cover. One of these is obvious, the other is not.

I cannot fail to mention Grenfell. Everyone who saw those pictures when they woke up on that June morning in 2017 will never forget what they saw. The death of those innocent people can be attributed to the failure of compartmentalisation.

It has changed housing forever with landlords being under the spotlight on health and safety issues.

Reserves are now being used by landlords to replace cladding and

carrying out a backlog of fire safety works. This is essential work but obviously this eats into the money for new homes, which is why government grant must be increased to meet a target of 100,000+ new social homes per year.

My last concern in respect of the housing crisis is over the falling standards in housing management because social landlords seem to be becoming more remote. The last time that happened our precious Council housing became run down. The local management of housing set up by the pioneers like George Lansbury's Poplar Council was slowly eradicated until in the mid-1980s Councils invested in decentralised services

I fear that the move to embrace new technology is at the expense of less contact with residents, especially older residents who are not digitally engaged. We see that increasingly in a range of services, but we could in the housing world be taking a step backwards and the new homes built becoming as run down as they were in the early 1980s.

That's that rant over, so in summary we need:

- 100,000+ new social homes per year
- Changing the Right-to-Buy
- Stopping overseas investment buyers
- Linking properties to taxation
- Landlord Registration Scheme

Thank you so much for giving me the chance to make these points, especially in the name of George Lansbury.

Like me, I suspect he will be shocked that the clock has been turned back and the advancements in social housing after World War One that he and his fellow Poplar Councillors made through those homes that were built where he famously cut the first sod.

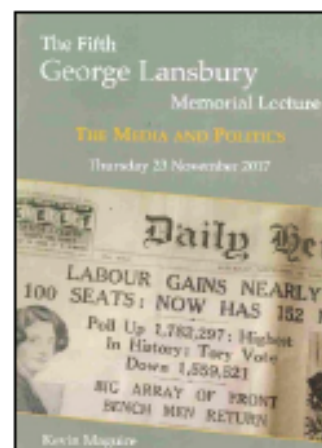
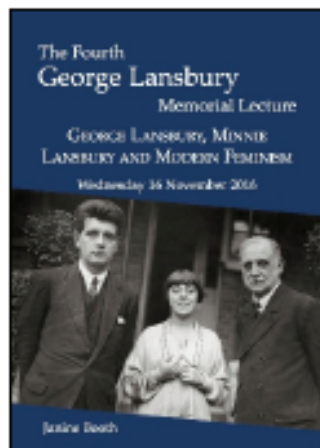
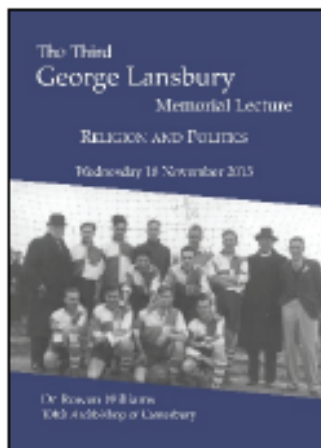
In order to keep the memory of George Lansbury alive we must fight for the changes I have outlined, otherwise his achievements for the people of Poplar would have all been in vain.



Mike Tyrrell comes from a long line of East Enders and has spent his career working in the housing sector in East London. He was Chief Executive of Tower Hamlets community housing 2000-2016 and is currently the interim director of the Ledbury Estate in Southwark.



The George Lansbury Memorial Trust was founded in 2012 to commemorate the life, work and legacy of George Lansbury MP (1859-1940). A pioneering campaigner for peace, women's rights, local democracy and improvements in labour conditions, Lansbury was an adopted East Ender who made a great contribution to local as well as national life. For over 40 years he was a member of Bow Church, and his funeral was held there. George Lansbury was one of the distinguished Christian Socialists in British history, whose campaigning politics sought to apply his faith in public life.



Further copies of this booklet and of the four previous George Lansbury Memorial Trust Lectures may be obtained for a cost of £2.50 each, including postage to a UK address. Contact pippacatterall@gmail.com. Cheques should be made payable to 'The George Lansbury Memorial Trust'.

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- 2018 lecture. Rachel Reeves on The Women's movement and the politics of everyday life.

