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Ideology, statecraft and the ‘double shuffle’ of Conservative planning reform in England

This article explores the political implications of conflicts over new housebuilding for Conservative-led governments in England since 2010. Revisiting debates about the tensions between neoliberal and more collectivist traditions within the political ideology of the Conservative Party, we argue that rather than blocking change this internal conflict should be seen as a dynamic part of the politics of planning. This leads us to propose that Conservative planning reforms have been characterised by a distinctive ‘double shuffle’ through which the party has sought to progress neoliberalising reforms whilst managing these tensions and seeking to maintain their hold on power through statecraft.

Keywords: politics, ideology, housebuilding, planning reform, England

Introduction

The increasingly politicised context of the ‘housing crisis’ over the last decade has meant that debates about housing and planning have taken on additional significance, becoming pivotal to the politics of planning in England (Lund, 2016; Watson, 2020). The perceived failure of the planning system to facilitate the delivery of a sufficient supply of new homes has seen it repeatedly blamed as the root cause of the housing crisis, leading to a succession of reforms aimed at improving its ‘efficiency’ and responsiveness to market pressures (Sykes and Sturzaker, 2023). Anxiety about the potential impact of an increase in the delivery of new homes that might be the consequence of such reforms has, however, been the focus of concerted political opposition (Kahn, 2020). Housebuilding has therefore become a particular focal point for conflict that has at times been considered a threat to the electoral success of the ruling Conservative Party, requiring a succession of pragmatic moves and political fixes to suture divisions and contain potentially destructive political contestation.

This reflects the fact that housing has economic, ideological and political significance beyond the practical provision of bricks and mortar. The embeddedness of house prices in the wider political economy under financialised neoliberal capitalism

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has made housing a significant political issue, increasing the sensitivity of the electoral fortunes of governments to changes in house prices and mortgage rates. This is particularly acutely felt by Conservatives, in power since 2010, who have long placed home ownership close to the centre of their ideological project yet have seen homeowner occupation rates decline from 66 per cent to 64.3 per cent from 2010–2011 to 2021–2022 as affordability has worsened (DLUHC, Ministry of Housing and CLG, 2023).

Existing scholarship, much of which was developed to understand another period of Conservative electoral dominance in the 1980s and 1990s, has highlighted how conflict over housebuilding exposes fault lines within the traditional coalition of Conservative Party supporters. On the one hand, neoliberal think tanks and developer interests argue for the deregulation of planning controls to free markets to respond to housing demand. On the other hand, conservative homeowners oppose new housebuilding they see as a threat to their quality of life in precisely the affluent, southern shire county locations where development pressures are most intense (Elson, 1986; Bishop, 1998).

As we shall explore below, this undoubtedly provides a useful guide for thinking about Conservative governments' highly contested attempts to reshape the planning system in England. Programmes of reform have often followed a pattern whereby promises of radical change aimed at freeing the land market and liberalising the development process have met significant political resistance (Moore, 2021; Bramley and Lambert, 1998).

In this article, however, we seek to develop this analysis further by questioning the idea that this internal Conservative conflict works mainly to stymie or block reform. Instead, we will argue that the dialectic between these two opposing forces should be understood as dynamic, reflecting a shifting balance of ideological and political forces within English Conservatism that the party has struggled to manage via statecraft strategy. The pressures this generates have acted as a motor of reform, producing a series of pragmatic fixes as the Party's leadership has sought to manage the tensions that emerge without damaging their hold on power. This leads us to conclude that the 'double shuffle' (Hall, 2005) of Conservative Party planning reform/resistance should be understood as an attempt to balance the pursuit of neoliberal reforms with the reproduction of the Conservative hegemonic project, displacing conflict in order to secure the party's dominance electorally, economically and ideologically.

The article starts by tracing contestation over planning reforms back to broader understandings of Conservative Party politics in England, and its characteristically flexible political ideology. In doing so, we develop a conceptual framework for understanding both the role of ideology within hegemonic projects and the forms of pragmatic political work, which we term statecraft, through which Conservative administrations have attempted to manage the political pressures they have faced.

In the main body of the article, we then consider three empirical examples which illustrate the dialectic of reform/ resistance and some of the key forms of statecraft through which resultant conflicts have been politically managed. The first is the introduction of the initial National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (2012) and the priority it gave to development interests via the so-called 'tilted balance' in favour of sustainable development. The second focuses on nominally technical assessments of housing need and the subsequent politicisation of the ways this is calculated, including debates set in train by a highly controversial white paper in 2020 that proposed radical reform to increase housing development (MHCLG, 2020). Both of these moments vividly illustrate the dynamic and generative nature of political conflicts over planning reform and the (more and less successful) forms of statecraft deployed to secure the legitimacy of revised proposals. The third empirical example we draw upon is the government's expansion of permitted development rights, which enables some changes of use and development without the need to apply to the local authority for planning permission. We explore this move as representative of a form of statecraft that has delivered deregulation whilst effectively bypassing the reform/ resistance dialectic, thereby displacing political contestation around planning reform and housebuilding.

Ideology, hegemony and statecraft: understanding Conservative rule

Whilst conservatives frequently claim to be driven by pragmatic rather than ideological concerns, political scholarship has explored the various ideological factions that make up British conservatism. Debate has tended to focus on the 'shapeshifting' flexibility of the ideology of the Conservative Party whilst stressing that it has at least a 'dual nature'. This involves a complex and changeable combination of collectivist and liberal impulses, ranging across a spectrum from 'patrician' to 'free-market' conservatives, comprising different perspectives regarding the proper relationships between the individual, community, market and state (e.g. Greenleaf, 1983; Eccleshall, 2000; Seawright, 2010).

The 'Thatcherite' political project of the 1980s is useful to exemplify these debates. The liberal, free-market emphasis of the so-called New Right generated significant debate, with some considering its radicalism incompatible with more patrician and community-orientated conservative traditions. John Gray (1997, 21), for example, argued that Thatcherism represented the 'undoing of conservatism' due to the 'fundamental truth that ... rapid and continuous market-driven economic change is inimical to settled community', which is supposed to be valued by traditional conservatives. However, others sought to place Thatcherism within a broader definition, arguing, 'there had always been a strong free market element in conservatism, going right

back to Edmund Burke himself’ and noting that Thatcher’s ideological programme also recognised ‘there was more to life than free markets – the ties of history, community and nationhood’ (Willets, 1992, 47). For Andrew Gamble (1994), this New Right amalgam represented a potentially contradictory combination of the ‘free economy and the strong state’, articulated together as a means of securing popular consent or hegemony.

Hegemonic political projects like Thatcherism (whether successful or not) involve stitching together potentially contradictory coalitions of ideas, actors and interests in order to secure power. Following Stuart Hall, we see ideology as playing a key role in securing hegemony, not through its philosophical consistency but precisely through its capacity to articulate ideas that link and hold contradictory social forces together. As a result, for Hall (2017, 213), ‘Ideology is always contradictory. There is no single, integrated “ruling ideology” ... Ideology works best by suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments ... Contradiction is its metier’.

Hall’s critique of the ‘double shuffle’ that characterised New Labour governments in power in the UK from 1997–2010, for example, highlighted how their hegemonic strategy sought to combine a ‘dominant’ neoliberal economic agenda inherited from the New Right with ‘subordinate’ elements of social democratic commitment to public services and redistribution:

It is authentically a ‘hegemonic’ strategy ... It aims to win enough consent as it goes, and to build subordinate demands back into its dominant logic. Forging a plausible or pragmatic pathway from left to right, carrying a proportion of its old supporters with it on particular points, dividing and confusing the oppositions, and winning a measure of consent for the project. (Hall, 2017, 311)

Whilst Hall tended to discuss hegemony at the level of an entire social formation or historical conjuncture, Gamble (1994, 9) framed his analysis of Thatcherism by identifying four dimensions to hegemony: electoral, ideological, economic and state. By this he meant that the Thatcherite hegemonic project sought to ‘rebuild the political leadership of the Conservatives’ (1994, 10) by building a coalition of supportive voters and interest groups (electoral), projecting and securing consent for a new conception of the ideal social and political order (ideological/economic) while developing a policy programme that spoke to the fears and demands of the new electoral base (ideological/electoral) and which also dealt with the challenges of government (state). Gamble argued that a successful hegemonic project entails the exercise of leadership across these four dimensions and could only be achieved with the consent of a sufficiently large coalition spanning political and civil society. However, such domination by consent is, in practice, rarely achieved and is always an ongoing and contested process. It is for this reason that Gamble (1994, 226–56) talks of different degrees of Conservative hegemony across the electoral, ideological, economic and state dimensions.

Viewing political stability and change through the analytical lens offered by the concept of hegemony, therefore, does not necessarily privilege any one of these four dimensions. Instead, it prompts an analysis that is sensitive to the interaction of the ideological, economic and electoral dimensions and how these forces are managed to adjust or maintain the form and extent of power that is wielded by political parties through the state. It is, therefore, an approach that highlights the continuous ideological and political work involved in the (re)production of any hegemonic project within a given historical conjuncture.

When the unit of analysis is a political party that is home to several ideological traditions, there will be various ideological convictions that mould the party and its political support. This can result in policy programmes that are shaped and reshaped by different and sometimes contradictory ideological preferences, depending on the economic and electoral context that prevails at the time. However, there are likely to be some principles over which a party leadership (rather than the party as a whole) will not be prepared to compromise. This, for Hall (2005, 322) is the hallmark of pragmatism: 'Pragmatism requires modestly shifting the emphases to catch the current political wind, saying what will keep traditional "heartland" supporters happy ... whilst always returning to an inflexible ideological baseline'.

Alongside analysis of the ways in which the UK Conservative Party has sought to shape or consolidate Conservative hegemony, political analysis has often therefore stressed the pragmatic arts of statecraft through which Conservative rule has been secured and managed. Jim Bulpitt developed the concept of statecraft to analyse what he called the 'strategy to reconstruct a Conservative governing competence' (1986, 34) under the first Thatcher administration. For Bulpitt (1986, 39), the 'art of statecraft is to understand and work with the limitations placed on elite activity by the many changing structural constraints arising from within and without the polity'. He argued that it was the Conservative approach to party management, electoral strategy, political argument and governing competency, rather than ideology or policy programme, that furnished the Thatcher government with consistency and purpose. In Gamble's formulation (to which Bulpitt's theory of statecraft was in part a rejoinder), Bulpitt's theory emphasises the electoral and state dimensions and downplays the role of ideology.

The concept of statecraft underwent a revival in the early 2010s, partly due to its application to analyses of the Conservative Party under David Cameron (Gamble, 2014; Hayton, 2014; 2021). The concept seemed applicable to the Cameronite strategy of strategically repositioning the Conservative Party so that it could pose a realistic challenge to New Labour who had secured political power and dominance of the policy agenda since 1997. However, in a rejoinder to such analyses, Simon Griffiths (2016) critiqued what he called 'statecraft theory' (i.e. the theoretical approach of Bulpitt and his followers) on the basis that it reduces politics to the strategy and management

necessary for a party to secure and maintain power as an end in itself. For Griffiths, although he does not deny the importance of ‘strategic electoral thinking’ in politics, statecraft theory ‘narrows debate’ by downplaying the role of ideology, and framing it as subservient to electoral success, rather than ‘something that provides frameworks within which politicians operate’ (Griffiths, 2016, 738).

We broadly agree with Griffiths’s critique. We therefore use the term ‘statecraft’ to analyse the role of proactive and reactive strategy, tactics and damage control deployed by the Conservative Party in order to maintain power. We view this as operating within the context of ideology as a framework for action, a framework that is riven with contradictions and political ruptures. In this sense, our conception of statecraft encompasses what Hall (2005) saw as the pragmatic shifting of emphasis between different ideological positions that characterises political projects in their ongoing pursuit of hegemony. Gamble (1994, 6), for example, acknowledged that while the Thatcherite project ‘had principles that it was not prepared to compromise’, it also ‘had enough political grasp to realise that short-term tactical retreats and compromises were often necessary’. The success of the Thatcherite project was not, therefore, the product of an inflexible ideological monolith crushing all dissent, but rather a hard-fought and uneasy victory that was the product of pragmatic adjustments through the exercise of statecraft across the electoral, ideological, economic and state dimensions.

Debates about the ideological, electoral and economic character of Conservative rule, the relative emphasis that should be put on any one of these factors in understanding its successes or failings as a hegemonic project, and the forms of statecraft through which this has been sustained provide a useful framework for thinking about ongoing processes of contestation over planning reform. However, planning reforms cannot be straightforwardly read from broader accounts of hegemonic struggle and statecraft. Instead, it is important to develop analysis attuned to the particular ways in which these broader struggles coalesce in debates around the role of the state in managing the use and development of land, particularly in relation to housebuilding. In the next section we will therefore briefly review the history of contestation over Conservative planning reforms since the 1980s, the ideological influences driving them, their relationship to the maintenance of Conservative hegemony, and the forms of statecraft through which they have been managed. This will help us then make sense of the period of Conservative rule marked by ‘planning reform ... on a near permanent basis’ from 2010 onwards (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2015, 29).

A selective history of (Conservative) planning for housing

As described above, the political challenges Conservative governments face in relation to planning for housing have taken on a particular configuration since neoliberalism emerged as the ‘inflexible ideological baseline’ of its hegemonic project in the 1980s.

The neoliberal orientation towards housing and planning can be understood to rest on ideological, economic and political grounds, producing a distinctive orientation towards the role of the state in regulating the use and development of land (see e.g. Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013). Ideologically, neoliberal think tanks have long considered planning regulation to constrain the effective operation of competitive markets, leading them to argue for planning reform that is aimed at enabling greater elasticity of supply in the land market so that the planning system is reduced to an institution primarily oriented towards the efficient release of development land (or changes of use in land) in response to market-determined demand (rather than socially defined need). As factions of capital, developers and landowners have long held significant influence as donors to the Conservative Party whilst housebuilding has long been viewed as important to national economic growth and efficient labour mobility (intensifying as a result of the financialisation of housing following deregulation in the 1980s). The figure of the 'homeowner' too has long played a key cultural and ideological role as a symbol of attainable aspiration and affluence within British society and Conservative thought. With 'homeowners' considered more likely to vote Tory, increasing private ownership has long been a Conservative political strategy. As Gamble (1994, 219) argued, 'Thatcher wanted to see one nation as much as any Tory ever had, but it was to be a nation in which everyone had become a property owner and a consumer'.

However, the development required to drive economic growth and create new homeowners can conflict with the preferences of local communities and existing homeowners. Their power to express their displeasure in local and general elections creates obvious contradictions. Similar challenges are widely recognised in international debates around NIMBY-ism (e.g. Lake, 1993). Conservative governments are not unique in facing such challenges in the UK either. New Labour in power from 1997–2010 also had to contend with significant opposition to housing development as demonstrated by 'a rural backlash' to early proposed reforms in 1997 (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones 2000, 1397) and, a decade later, 'a wave of nimbyism' from local residents near proposed eco-towns (Arnold, 2009). New Labour sought to contain the political risk posed by housing development by initially adopting a 'brownfield first' policy via national planning guidance, focusing development into existing settlements whilst simultaneously seeking to protect culturally significant greenfield sites which are often a focus of conflict. However, its subsequent re-introduction of the requirement to maintain a rolling five-year land supply of deliverable sites via changes to national policy, combined with the 2004 introduction of statutory regional plans which had the task of allocating and distributing housing numbers to local areas, contributed to significant discontent in places facing development pressure and sowed the seeds for the Coalition government's programme of planning reform post-2010.

Although New Labour had to contend with political challenges arising from planning for housing delivery, these are contradictions that are particularly acutely felt within the Conservative hegemonic project given the ideological, economic and political tensions within the party's base and the geographical concentration of their electoral support in many of the urban fringe and/or south (eastern) parts of the country where demand for housing land is highest. The neoliberalisation of planning and the attendant articulation of state power and regulation to enable private-sector-led housing delivery has therefore exacerbated latent tensions with the ideological communitarian tradition in the Conservative Party that values local traditional identities and landscapes that are perceived to be threatened by new development (Tait and Inch, 2016). As a result, ever since the various Thatcher governments sought to liberalise the planning system to facilitate new development, they have encountered significant resistance.

An early example of this was an attempt in 1983 by Patrick Jenkin, the minister responsible for planning, to loosen greenbelt boundaries (Ward, 2004, 227). The greenbelt is arguably a manifestation of the sort of state intervention that was anathema to the Thatcher governments – introduced by ministerial edict in 1953, and remaining largely unchanged since (Sturzaker and Mell, 2016). However, greenbelts have gained significant popular support, so it is perhaps unsurprising that opposition from campaign groups such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and 'urban-fringe Tory [Conservative] MPs' (Ward, 2004, 227) led to the amending of the draft national policy.

A similar case occurred later in the 1980s, with the successor to Patrick Jenkin, Nicholas Ridley, approving more applications through the appeal system – the process by which developers can appeal to the minister (usually via the semi-independent planning inspectorate) if their planning applications are refused by local authorities. The higher rate of appeal success enjoyed by developers in the Nicholas Ridley period led to more (housing) development in high-demand areas of the south of England, apparently demonstrating the 'success' of the Thatcherite neoliberal approach. However, in time, this led to conflict between residents of those areas and their political representatives. This local disquiet was duly crystallized via protest votes in the 1989 European elections in which the Green Party took an unprecedented 25 per cent share, generating significant anxiety within the Conservative Party regarding the electoral damage local opposition to housebuilding might cause. Ridley was pragmatically replaced by the more environmentally minded Chris Patten in 1989, who swiftly reversed his predecessor's most controversial decisions, including the approval of a privately planned new settlement (Ward, 2005).

Within the planning literature, Andy Thornley (1998, 213–14) argued that despite tensions and resistances, the ideological baseline of Thatcherism had significantly reshaped planning:

the message emanating from these tensions in the ideology is that some variation might be expected as the tensions are resolved in different ways but this does not mean that the overriding principles of the ideology are sacrificed.

However, Allmendinger and Thomas (1998), and many of the other contributors to their review of *Urban Planning and the British New Right*, concluded that resistance to reform, including that from within the Conservative Party, suggested continuity with what had gone before rather than 'radical change or the sidelining of planning' (Bramley and Lambert, 1998, 87).

This conclusion is understandable from the vantage point of the mid-1990s. The policy U-turns described above had shown the power of grassroots resistance to force the government to pull back from neoliberal deregulation. Beyond planning, the ideological zeal of Thatcherism had been replaced by the apparently more moderate leadership of John Major and, amidst economic turbulence and persistent scandals, Conservative hegemony was clearly faltering in the run up to a heavy defeat in the general election of 1997. There was arguably little to suggest that the 'double shuffle' on planning reform should be considered part of a dynamic repertoire through which Conservative dominance could be reproduced (although the Labour Party's contemporary embrace of neoliberalism did clearly show the depth of the New Right's impact on British politics and society). Our aim in the rest of the article is, however, to revisit the terms of these debates by exploring the complex ways economic, political and ideological dynamics have intersected in three key moments of Conservative planning reform introduced in the very different conjunctural contexts that have prevailed since 2010.

The NPPF, housing numbers and the 'tilted balance'

After the long period of political dominance by New Labour, a Conservative-led coalition government was elected in 2010 on a platform dominated by the need for austerity measures to restore an economy still reeling from the 2008 financial crisis. The coalition promptly started to introduce reforms to the planning system that the Conservatives had previously signalled in a number of green papers prepared while in opposition and which promised to significantly increase local control over development (Conservative Party, 2009a; 2009b; 2010). One key development was the publication of a draft NPPF in 2011. This 58-page document was intended to replace the thousands of pages of national planning policy and guidance that had proliferated during the New Labour period. This draft included controversial wording that was widely believed to have been inserted by the Treasury, as it so closely resembled language that was used in their *Plan for Growth* (HM Treasury and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011, 18). The offending wording in the draft NPPF was: 'decision takers at every level should assume that the default answer to development proposals is "yes"' (DCLG, 2011, 5). This, combined with the general tone of the

document and its ‘presumption in favour of sustainable development’ was perceived by many to overly emphasise economic growth at the expense of the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development and the promise of increased local control that was, seemingly paradoxically, being pursued through the introduction of new powers for communities to produce neighbourhood plans under the Localism Act 2011. This prompted a widespread political backlash against the government’s proposals. The public campaign was led by a coalition including the Conservative supporting *Telegraph* newspaper, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the National Trust (a heritage charity). The key objections were that the draft NPPF, if it became policy, would enable under-regulated development on England’s ‘green and pleasant land’ at great cost to visual amenity and the environment.

The story of the politics of the NPPF publication process has been told elsewhere (see Shepherd, 2021; Slade, 2018), but, in summary, the government was seemingly unprepared for the strength of public opposition from its supporters. The political battle was conducted through public channels in terms that were, at times, highly adversarial. Things risked getting so out of control politically that the then prime minister David Cameron took the highly unusual step of personally intervening. He wrote an open letter to the National Trust that was published in the *Telegraph* newspaper on 20 September 2011 (Winnett, 2011). This struck an emollient tone and sought to defuse the situation by acknowledging the need for balance in the planning system. There then followed internal meetings between the government and the NPPF objectors to seek a compromise. This resulted in revisions to the final version of the NPPF published in March 2012.

In the final version of the NPPF, the offending wording regarding ‘the default answer to development proposals is “yes”’ was removed and there was, instead, a broader definition of sustainable development. This was framed as a success by the campaigners who felt they had succeeded in scaling back the most problematic elements in the draft NPPF (Hope, 2012a; 2012b). However, the presumption in favour of sustainable development remained, as did a policy requirement for local authorities to assess their own housing need and ensure that there was a five-year supply of deliverable land in their areas to meet it. When combined with the new presumption in favour of sustainable development, this created a so-called ‘tilted balance’ in favour of housing development in circumstances where local authorities could not demonstrate a sufficient supply of housing land to meet need (Abbott, 2022). Meanwhile, high-profile promises to empower local communities to set their own housing targets were quietly set aside, with neighbourhood plans obliged to accept the housing requirements set by local authorities.

We can read the experience of the original NPPF as representing an example of Conservative statecraft in managing contradictions across the ideological, economic and electoral dimensions of planning reform. The initial publication was overly

skewed to a neoliberal economic agenda and this created significant ruptures across the ideological and electoral dimensions. However, despite the tactical ineptitude of the initial framing of the reforms, the eventual reaction via the coordinative management of the various sectoral interests and their incorporation into the policymaking process succeeded in defusing, or at least displacing, conflict into future battles over the tilted balance.

The policy design of the final NPPF redirected political risk by requiring local authorities to assess their own housing need and produce a housing land requirement based on their calculations. This was presented as being an improvement on the imposition of 'top-down' housing requirements via statutory regional plans, which had been swiftly abolished by the incoming Conservative-led coalition government due to their unpopularity in some areas subject to significant development pressure. The 'tilted balance' that would take effect in circumstances where local authorities could not demonstrate sufficient housing land supply based on housing need was much more technical, less blunt and adversarial than the language of a 'default answer being "yes"'. However, its effect was not dissimilar. This enabled opponents to perceive a victory, while the government was able to push through national policy reform that, when interpreted in practice, would potentially enable more planning permissions to be granted due to what were, in effect, indirectly applied 'top-down' housing targets. The debates over the introduction of the NPPF therefore illustrate the 'double shuffle' between seeming to cater to ideological preferences that valued local responsibility and self-determination, as well as the top-down push for more private housing delivery. The flexible doctrinal preferences of the Conservative Party were therefore deployed to suture contradictions and secure the institutionalisation of policy advancing underlying neoliberal commitments. However, as we shall see, due to the effects of NPPF policy, the defusing political fix was only temporary. The seeds were sown for political ruptures further down the line, with political risk effectively displaced into the future.

The standard method for calculating housing need

A bewildering array of proposals for further reforms followed over the next decade as planning restrictions on development were persistently positioned as a core cause of a housing crisis that was assuming greater political profile, for example through a series of almost comically named strategies and white papers. 'Laying the Foundations: A Housing Strategy for England' (HM Government, 2011) was followed by 'Fixing the Foundations: Creating a More Prosperous nation' (HM Treasury, 2015), and then by 'Fixing our Broken Housing Market' (DCLG, 2017). The practical aims of these various reforms were, essentially, to increase the number of homes planned for in local planning policies and delivered through approvals of planning applications.

One key area of focus has been the method used to calculate housing need and the consequent housing land requirement – a technical area, but one of significant political importance following the publication of the NPPF. Although the requirement for local authorities to calculate and maintain a five-year supply of housing land had been established via government circular in 1980 (Adams, 2011, 954), the NPPF revived and strengthened the policy. Initially, there was no consistent method, causing much debate in local plan inquiries and planning appeals. The government then introduced a so-called ‘standard method’ in 2018, to level the playing field, ensure a consistent approach and remove flexibility on the part of local authorities in order to increase housing supply where demand for it is highest (Lichfields, n.d). As such, as Raco et al. (2022, 2) argue, technical calculations of housing numbers have come to be used in English planning as ‘epistemic instruments to convert deliberations, especially at the local scale, into narrow discussions of deliverability and house-building’ with the objective of converting ‘the complex messiness of places into carefully managed and de-politicised development spaces’. However, despite the apparent objective to depoliticise via technical calculations of housing need, the reality is that such calculations have formed the focus for increasingly political ruptures that have threatened the electoral fortunes of the Conservative Party.

The standard method put pressure on local authorities to plan for, and then deliver, increased quantities of housing. Many have not found this practically or politically easy, with figures from June 2022 suggesting that 39 per cent of local authorities could not demonstrate that they complied with national policy in demonstrating a five-year supply of ‘deliverable’ housing sites (Eckford, 2022). Reasons for this include a large proportion of land protected from development by designations such as the greenbelt, but it is also clear that local opposition to increased housing supply plays a major role, generating significant political conflict at the local level and placing pressure on elected councillors who are frequently obliged under planning law and policy to approve locally unpopular plans.

Two examples of the latter can be found in Surrey, a wealthy county to the south-west of London. In Guildford Borough, led by the Conservatives for most of the last fifty years, 15 councillors from the Residents for Guildford and Villages (R4GV) party were elected in the May 2019 local elections, leading to the Conservatives losing control of the council. In Elmbridge Borough meanwhile a coalition of the Liberal Democrats and various residents’ associations took power from the Conservative party in 2019. In both instances, national Conservative policy, and the specifics of the standard methodology, was blamed (Watson, 2020). Although the activists successfully changed the political control of local authorities as a way of expressing their opposition to national housebuilding policy, it is open to debate as to whether these changes will have any effect on local policy and housebuilding, as illustrated by the recent experience of South Oxfordshire District Council where

government ministers intervened to force the authority to adopt a local plan against the wishes of an insurgent local political leadership that had been elected specifically to overturn it.

Local political discontent over the standard method became nationally significant when the post-Brexit government of Boris Johnson announced radical reforms in a white paper, *Planning for the Future*, published in 2020. The white paper set out proposals for an 'overhaul' of the planning system that the accompanying press release described as outdated, complex, sluggish and a 'barrier to building the homes people need' (MHCLG and Jenrick, 2020). Among the more controversial ideas contained in the white paper was the proposal to designate all land in England as being either for growth, renewal or protection. Permission for development in growth areas would be automatically granted though local plans, 'streamlining' opportunities for public consultation at planning application stage. This was seen by some as a radical departure from the discretionary system that had prevailed in England for decades, and an attempt by government to reduce the influence of local communities over development (Booth et al., 2020). Accompanying consultation documents also proposed a significant 'technical' change to the standard method explicitly aimed at 'boosting supply'.

In the context of the resentment and opposition that had built up in Conservative supporting areas thanks to the unplanned development being consented due to the interaction of NPPF policy and the standard method, the proposal to introduce further changes with the explicit objective of further increasing housing supply was politically toxic. The proposed reforms were opposed by Conservative Party backbenchers (i.e. non-government members of parliament), with the BBC reporting that over ninety had joined a WhatsApp group to share concerns (BBC, 2021) over the standard method which some (inaccurately) decried as a 'mutant algorithm'. In a parliamentary debate on 8 October 2020, Conservative politicians voiced concerns about the government's 'ill-conceived' plans that would result in 'levelling over green fields with concrete' (HC Deb 2020, c.1051 and 1065).

In a significant U-turn, local and back-bencher opposition to the proposals prompted the government to announce that the housing need formula would remain unchanged and that it would instead impose a '35 per cent uplift to the post-cap number generated by the standard method to Greater London and to the local authorities which contain the largest proportion of the other 19 most populated cities and urban centres in England' (MHCLG, 2021). This spatial political fix enabled the government to defuse the political controversy by concentrating increased housing numbers in less politically sensitive parts of the country (i.e. those not under Conservative political control), while at the same time saving political 'face' by at least outwardly retaining its target of building 300,000 new homes a year. However, the political damage was done with opposition to new housebuilding identified as a key factor in the Party's

subsequent loss of the Chesham and Amersham by-election in June 2021, in a seat where they had never previously won less than 50 per cent of the vote (Economist, 2021). Amidst concerns that planning reforms could significantly weaken the party's traditional support base, the so-called 'blue wall' in southern shire counties, many of the white paper proposals were quietly abandoned with the secretary of state responsible, Robert Jenrick, being replaced by Michael Gove, a senior figure who was tasked with managing the political fall-out over planning reform whilst making sense of the Johnson government's nebulous promises to address uneven spatial development through 'levelling up'.

The experience of the standard method proposals demonstrates a similar dynamic to those explored in both the 1980s and in debates around the introduction of the NPPF. The proposed reforms were strongly influenced by leading neoliberal think tanks and were presented by the government as radical and necessary to enable the delivery of more homes and the creation of new homeowners. When they predictably then generated significant resistance, the government once again appeared to be caught by surprise and, on this occasion, seemingly struggled to contain the political backlash.

In political terms, Boris Johnson's parliamentary majority had been partially secured by winning votes from older homeowners in the so-called 'red-wall' constituencies in the north and midlands that had previously been secure Labour party territory (Jennings et al., 2021). Whilst it is possible that the planning reform agenda was therefore a calculated attempt to face down 'blue-wall' Tories whilst they were in an unusually weak position within the Conservative electoral coalition, it looks far more likely that this was a strategic misstep. Despite the size of their majority, the Johnson government was marked by a series of climbdowns on key policy initiatives. Post-Brexit and scandals over the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the parliamentary Conservative Party has also been riven with unusual levels of dissent. Subsequent manoeuvres to defuse the internal political fall-out focused on spatially displacing the problem, despite there being good reasons to believe that the increased allocations given to urban areas would be near impossible to deliver (suggesting a form of policymaking orientated more to political management than increasing housing supply).

Arguably, a key difference to the NPPF experience was the delay in attempts to suture divisions between the neoliberal and localist dimensions within the Conservative ideological amalgam by performing some kind of 'double shuffle'. At the time of writing, however, apparently watered-down reform proposals are passing through parliament whilst Michael Gove, in a series of apparent concessions to the localist, anti-development elements within the Conservative base has promised to reduce the regulatory power of the standard method amidst promises to increase local democratic discretion in the determination of housing land allocations. This move may reflect an

attempt to shore up Conservative electoral support ahead of a general election with the party trailing badly in opinion polls. However, in an economic context where rising interest rates are depressing house prices and the supply of new housing, it seems highly unlikely to prove more than another temporary fix.

Permitted development for changes of use to residential

The government's NPPF and housing need calculation policy reforms have exhibited a combination of bold, strategic moves and tactical retreats, resulting in a series of technical, temporal and spatial political fixes that have sought to displace or defer the internal conflict generated. This pragmatic political work, or statecraft, has entailed successive attempts to shuffle (more and less effectively) between the neoliberal and localist/communitarian emphases within the party's political ideology, whilst generally retaining a baseline ideological orientation towards the former.

The conflict generated by these moves can, however, be contrasted with the relative lack of political ruptures around another, more stealthy 'fix' experimented with since 2013: adjustments to permitted development rights that have enabled widespread changes of commercial property to residential uses without the need for regulatory approval. The government's expansion of these rights can therefore be seen as representing a further front of neoliberalising planning reforms, intended to move the system towards a more rules-based format that responds more efficiently to market demand for residential use than the existing discretionary and policy-based system allows.

Permitted development rights were introduced very shortly after the comprehensive planning system was created in England in 1947, in part to 'stop the new system clogging up' (Home 1992, 191), by allowing some buildings and land to change from one use to another without the need for planning permission from the local authority. There have been several iterations since, with a very significant expansion of provisions in January 2013 allowing the conversion of offices and agricultural buildings into residential use. This has significantly expanded the role and scope of permitted development rights which had previously been used to enable minor and relatively uncontroversial development to be consented so as to take the administrative pressure off planning departments (Home, 1992).

These changes were designed in part to enable more efficient elasticity of supply of residential space in response to demand; by removing what are perceived by government as the delays imposed by the need to apply for planning permission for a change of use. These, and subsequent changes, have been the subject of detailed investigation (Clifford et al., 2019) with research highlighting the profoundly negative effect such deregulation has had on the quality of new housing produced under permitted development, including impacts on the health and well-being of those occupying the

new ‘homes’ and on the local planning authorities whose control over the quality of development is bypassed.

A further significant change to the permitted development regime was introduced in 2021 via The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development etc.) (England) (Amendment) Order 2021. This enabled commercial high street premises to be changed to residential uses without the need to obtain specific planning permission from the local authority, potentially posing a risk to the health and vitality of England’s already struggling high streets. Although the changes prompted significant critiques from policy experts (Garton Grimwood and Barton, 2021), it is notable that they were not subject to the same scale of political opposition as the other adjustments to the planning system discussed in this paper. This may reflect the fact that the spatial impact of permitted development changes has focused on the use of already existing buildings, typically within urban areas rather than the greenfield, urban fringe locations that often generate significant political opposition to new development. However, it is also due to permitted development rights being an example of ‘secondary’ legislation which, in contrast to the proposals for major reform discussed in the preceding sections, can be introduced by governments and passed by Parliament with little if any democratic scrutiny.

Given the huge number of changes to the law which are passed each year, the existence of secondary legislation is arguably essential to the functioning of the state. However, its extended use means that significant changes to how the system of planning in England operates can be introduced without being examined by parliamentarians. At least in the case of the 2020 changes regarding high street uses, there is evidence this was a deliberate strategy, as suggested by the following Tweet from former chief of staff to Boris Johnson Dominic Cummings to former Conservative MP David Gauke (emphasis in original): ‘Like most in sw1 [the address of the UK Parliament] you haven’t noticed the important SECONDARY legislation changes pushed thro [*sic*] last year, which we barely discussed publicly so MPs wdn’t [*sic*] get over-excited’ (Cummings, 2021).

Adjustments to the permitted development regime represent a significant deregulation of planning control that has bypassed political contestation, resulting in the creation of much new housing that was ultimately shown to be sub-standard (Clifford et al., 2019). These adjustments might therefore be interpreted as representing a more strategic and proactive form of statecraft, managing the political risk around planning reform by evading political scrutiny and spatially targeting areas where Conservative political opposition is less strong, albeit at the expense of any concern for the quality of the housing created.

Ideology, pragmatism and planning reform in the reproduction of Conservative hegemony

As has long been argued, planning for housing exposes significant fault lines between different factions within the Conservative Party, each with distinctive bases of ideological, political and economic power. Although their respective agendas have not always meshed seamlessly, the perception of the planning system as a barrier to the operation of the free market has been persistently promoted by free market think tanks, ideologically committed to the roll-back of planning regulation, and developer lobbies arguing from more pragmatic and nakedly self-interested positions. Their voices have been influential in initiating neoliberalising reform within a growth model increasingly reliant on financialised speculation in land and property development. However, in a familiar pattern, 'big bang' attempts to reform the system have persistently met significant and powerful resistance amongst core Conservative-voting homeowners, notably in the affluent shire counties of southern England, who are opposed to new housebuilding that they perceive as a threat to their quality of life and who remain strongly committed to planning as an institution for conserving the landscapes they value. As we have seen, this opposition has, on several occasions, been powerful enough to force tactical retreats on plans for more radical or far-reaching reform, leading to the widespread sense that planning reform has become difficult political terrain for Conservative governments. The by-election in Chesham and Amersham and the strong opposition to the proposals in the 2020 planning white paper provide recent corroborating evidence for this interpretation.

In this article, however, we have argued that rather than signifying the recurring and clear-cut 'failure' or stymying of planning reform, this contestation should be understood as part of a dialectical 'double shuffle' in and through which Conservative governments have sought to govern tensions within the party's ideological amalgam, managing the political and electoral risks of pursuing an economic drive for housebuilding whilst invariably returning to the baseline neoliberal imperative within its hegemonic strategy. Rather than concluding that conservative resistance somehow insulates planning institutions from deregulatory reforms, our account therefore suggests the importance of understanding how the Conservative hegemonic project has been sustained in and through these tensions, and how they have operated as a dynamic and generative feature of the variegated and contradictory neoliberalisation of English planning. Since the 1980s, this has been enacted through a dialectic of reform and resistance that has functioned as a powerful motor for the ongoing politicisation and scapegoating of the planning system, generating repeated rounds of contested reform whose cumulative impact has been to fragment and undermine the coherence of the planning system (Allmendinger and Houghton, 2013; Gunder, 2016; TCPA, 2018). Beyond the experimental reforms that have been central to neoliberal

spatial governance in its restless search to limit the state and impose market rule, therefore, lies the less well analysed forms of statecraft through which Conservative governments have attempted to manage conflict and change within the planning system; shuffling (more or less effectively) to mask key contradictions, divide and confuse opposition, defuse tensions and displace conflict between the dual conservative ideological poles of (neo)liberalism and collectivism.

The examples of the NPPF, the standard method and permitted development discussed above demonstrate some of the scalar, political, spatial and temporal fixes that have been used to govern planning for housing, illustrating how a series of ostensibly technical devices have enabled selective state rescaling and a marked spatial redistribution of housing allocations to defuse and displace political tensions. In this way we have argued that the ability to contain the conflict generated by planning reforms, in ideological, economic and political terms, has been a central feature of Conservative statecraft that has worked to manage the risk of conflict over planning spilling over to damage the wider Conservative hegemonic project, whilst simultaneously imposing significant constraints on the scope and role of the planning system by fixing the dominant terms of debate around a narrow range of Conservative positions.

It is notable that some of these fixes have been enacted through lower profile, 'shadow' measures, rather than headline-grabbing proposals for fundamental reform. Secondary legislation and the exercise of central governmental reserve powers within the planning system have, for example, proven important in both implementing deregulatory reforms (e.g. permitted development) and enabling the imposition of housing requirements by limiting the discretionary power of local authorities (the standard method) whilst (at least temporarily) bypassing political contestation (see Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2000). Whilst selectively maintaining a strong symbolic defence of protective designations like greenbelt and periodically embracing a language of 'localism', this has enabled Conservative administrations to enact an ongoing and far-reaching reworking of planning control in England. Such displacements are not new and extend longer histories of state management of the land supply for new housing which has often sought mechanisms to impose land allocations by rendering decision-making technical, displacing political blame or channelling development towards sites where political resistance is less marked (Murdoch and Abram, 2002). Our argument is not that this represents a coherent governmental strategy. Rather, we see the search for 'fixes' as a characteristic form of pragmatic Conservative statecraft when faced with (and often seeming to be surprised by) the scale of internal political challenges to neoliberalising planning reform.

The state of near perpetual reform generated by these dynamics has resulted in a fragmentary patchwork of these temporary fixes, arguably making it increasingly hard to trace any overarching logic or consistency to the planning framework in England (TCPA, 2018). Despite some high-profile retreats, the system that now exists has been significantly

reshaped, effectively becoming an improvised product of ideological and political battles waged within the Conservative Party. It is therefore important to try and explain what has driven these changes and to understand their cumulative effects and potential future consequences during a period where the Conservative hegemonic project in England faces profound challenges in a highly uncertain, emerging conjuncture.

In his essay on the 'double shuffle', Stuart Hall parodied Lenin in suggesting that the modernising project of New Labour was, for a time, the 'best political shell' for global capitalism in the UK, extending neoliberal hegemony in the country by forging a new ideological amalgam. However, we make no such claim for the Conservative Party, despite redeploing Hall's metaphor in the current context. Given the increasingly crisis ridden nature of both the neoliberal settlement and Conservative rule in England, which has left some commentators questioning whether the Party can survive its internal divisions (Burton-Cartledge, 2021), any such claim would be outlandish. However, in transposing Hall's analysis to the challenges faced by a different political party in planning for new housebuilding in a very different political-economic conjuncture, our analysis has suggested that Conservatism has remained a workable if tension-ridden political shell for much of the development sector since 2010. With the Labour Party now seeking to regain political power through a project apparently closely modelled on New Labour's double shuffle, it will be interesting to see how that might be set to change. However events unfold, we have illustrated that the 'double shuffle' provides a powerful analytical lens which can be extended to generate a more incisive account of the dynamic, contradictory and contested politics of planning, and the role of political ideology in securing a balance of forces capable of sustaining hegemonic projects in the face of contradiction and tension.

Conclusions

The key objective of this article has been to reframe accounts of Conservative Party planning reform that focus on how apparently opposed forces within the Party and its support frustrate or 'stymie' change. There is no doubt that this opposition exists, and that the conflicts operate across the electoral, ideological and economic dimensions of the Conservative hegemonic project and have resulted in rearticulations of state power in relation to the land and housing market via the planning system. However, our account has sought to draw out that such struggles are not a simple story of attempts at neoliberal planning reform being frustrated by political rupture and opposition. Instead, there have been a combination of successes and short-term tactical retreats and compromises, that have enabled the Conservative Party in government to enact far-reaching reforms during another long period in office since 2010.

In some respects, this is a parochial focus, not least in revealing how a narrow group of actors, ideas and interests have effectively framed the terms of debate about

planning in England. Despite its many peculiarities, as a cutting-edge case study for exploring the neoliberalisation of planning systems and practices, we believe the English experience retains some broader resonance for anyone interested in understanding the messy, politically contested and contradictory processes through which ideological projects of planning reform operate. In particular, we believe that two key wider contributions emerge from our analysis. First, we have stressed the need to move beyond analyses of ideology in planning that focus on any single ruling ideology but to instead track the contradictions through which ideology operates in the context of always contested hegemonic projects. Secondly, we have presented statecraft as an important part of the ongoing flow of pragmatic political and institutional work through which struggles over the role and purpose of planning have been managed, suggesting that this is not an alternative to explanations of change that focus on the role of ideology but rather an intrinsic part the messy and contested reproduction of hegemony.

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