

Letter from Scotland

Scotland has an official “housing emergency”. The Scottish Parliament declared this to be so on Wednesday, as if it were a surprise.

We now have to add this to the “climate emergency” and the “drugs emergency” and you can see we are living in dangerous times.

Average house prices are rising five times faster than in the UK as a whole at 1.1 per cent a year, and by over 10 per cent in leafy hotspots. The average house price is now £194,000. Rents are up 11 per cent. We have 30,000 people on housing waiting lists, 16,000 of them in temporary accommodation. 1,500 people are sleeping rough on the streets of our cities. The number of new homes being build is down 13 per cent and the number of social houses being built by housing associations is at its lowest level for 30 years.



No place to call home. The housing crisis.

I wonder how useful these emergency declarations are. Yes, they raise awareness of the problem for a few weeks but then we seem to fall down exhausted when we realise what has to be done. The climate emergency resulted in us simply abandoning the carbon reduction targets for 2030. The drug emergency has resulted in drug deaths rising by 13 per cent in the last year. No doubt we will have more “emergencies” – for the NHS, for schools, for prisons, for council services. And the more emergencies there are, the more used to them we will become and the less we will do about them.

To be fair, the SNP government has been reluctant to declare the housing emergency – it voted against the idea last November when the Labour Party suggested it. But now the SNP are in a minority, they are in a more collegiate mood and willing to go along with other parties’ ideas. Of course, Labour only used the magic word “emergency” to show how

neglectful the SNP government have been over the housing crisis. They cut the budget for social housing by £200m or 26 per cent in the last budget.

The SNP say that's because of a 9 per cent cut in their capital budget imposed by the Westminster and they've challenged the opposition parties to say where the money to build more homes should come from. As usual, the challenge has gone unanswered.

It's worth comparing our faltering politicians with the post-war governments, both Labour and Conservative, who had the courage and vision to build whole new towns, Garden Cities, as part of the re-construction of Britain after 5 weary and expensive years of war. I live in one of these ambitious garden suburbs, the Inch Estate on the south side of Edinburgh. Over 700 homes were built in just four years, complete with shops, a doctor's surgery, a school and a third of the land reserved for parks and greenspace. After the cramped and unwholesome tenements in the city centre, this was luxury. And the estate is still in good condition today.



“The Inch” garden suburb

The same was happening all over Britain. 1.2 million homes were built between 1946 and 1951. The latest housing plan from the Scottish government envisages 100,000 affordable homes being built over the next 20 years, at a cost of £33bn.

But targets, as we have discovered, can be postponed or abandoned. And the obstacles are substantial – government austerity, high interest rates, planning regulations and the rising cost of living.

It’s deeply annoying that house building is so slow and so expensive, because it is fundamental to tackling so many other problems...unemployment, family break-downs, child poverty, poor school attainment, drug and alcohol abuse. It is also easier to cut the public housing budget than virtually everything else because it’s a long-term project. The Scottish government has chosen to spend its money on solving immediate problems instead – heading off strikes in the NHS, schools and local

councils.

It must be tempting for governments to give up trying to solve the housing crisis and leave it all to the private sector. This was Mrs Thatcher's approach, selling off council houses and loosening regulations. But then we also give up on the public advantages that come with affordable housing. The poor will be left on the streets. Housing association tenants will face higher rents, to pay for new house-building. And young people will see the price of houses outstrip their ability to sustain a mortgage.

As always, there are innovative solutions. "Co-housing" for instance, in which a group of people share the communal spaces and services of a larger building but still have their own private apartments. Large retail stores and offices in the city centres that are no longer required because of changes in our shopping and working habits, could be bought at knock-down prices and converted into flats, either by private companies or co-operatives. But these need brave individuals, entrepreneurial banks and helpful governments to make them work.

In short, we need someone to take "the emergency" seriously. I'm so lucky that, back in the tough times of the 1950s, Edinburgh Council found the courage and the inspiration to build my garden village.