



FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Intergenerational fairness, housing and planning policy

Halina Ward, October 2011

New think-tank the [Intergenerational Foundation](#) (IF) landed with a big splash today as they launched their new report [Hoarding of Housing](#). The big headline is that there are now 25 million unoccupied bedrooms in British homes.

Meanwhile, the government is proposing a [radical shake-up to the English planning system](#), to get the country back to growth by making development easier whilst tackling the housing crisis. So extreme is the government's prescription for housing sickness, however, that even The Telegraph has been moved to [campaign against the possible loss of greenness in our pleasant land](#).

IF's report argues that *“while younger families are increasingly squeezed into small flats and under-sized houses, older people are often rattling around in big houses with many bedrooms standing empty, often for years”*. The solution they advocate is to find ways to make it easier for older people to move to smaller homes; not forcing them out, but *nudging* them (to use a vogueish word) through changes in tax incentives.

At a launch event for IF this afternoon at the House of Commons (hosted by Tessa Jowell), a group of [Alliance for Future Generations](#) members and IF friends mused that we need more intergenerational *solidarity*, linked to a concerted effort to head off the risk of intragenerational *sniping* between generations already living today (thanks to Colin Hines for 'solidarity not sniping').

So less of the [‘oldsters hoarding bedrooms’](#) that attracted some parts of the media; more of the [‘working together to secure adequate housing for present and future generations’](#).

Amen to that.

One significant problem is that there's no consistency in how the government invokes the needs of 'future generations'. My observation, based on some quick and dirty google searches (the results of which now languish in a lengthy Word document), is that when they do so, it's almost always in justification of taking cherished things, or landscapes,

away from present generations: access to reasonably priced higher education, for example.

Planning Minister Greg Clark has argued that the (awful) proposed (English) **National Planning Policy Framework**, with its presumption in favour of developers - sorry, development (mis-titled 'sustainable development' in the document, though it's no such thing) - is designed to ensure adequate housing for future generations whilst stimulating economic growth.

IF, invoking what amounts to *intragenerational* fairness (between generations already alive) rather than *intergenerational* fairness, point to another option: finding ways to enable more people to benefit from the existing housing stock, in ways that might just help older people to meet their own needs whilst meeting the needs of younger people too. Not that that offers an easy way out either.

Still, Mr Clark, please take note: IF has offered up an important contribution to the debate about planning reform in England.

Choices and trade-offs about intergenerational fairness (for trade-offs there are, though solidarity there must be) demand proper government strategy and policy frameworks anchored to solid institutional settings. A Commissioner for Future Generations perhaps; a Select Committee on Future Generations; intergenerational impact assessments; government *and parliament* equipped to deliver on a long-term vision.

Much much more, in other words, than rhetorical appeals alone to undefined 'future' generations as public spending cuts widen unfairness in the present and sow the seeds of greater intergenerational injustice in the future.