# Capturing the castle: tenant governance in social housing companies

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## Abstract

In the contemporary landscape of social housing in Britain, the role of tenants on the governing boards of housing companies continues to be seen as deeply problematic. While tenant directors are recruited to bring a market-like influence to social housing governance, they appear to be approaching their positions as directors in a way that is contrary to the drive towards management efficiency. This paper adopts a social constructionist approach to recast the institutions of housing governance as contested articulations of ideology and the 'problem' of tenant board members as a hegemonic clash between discourses of governance (Mouffe & Laclau 1998). It concludes that tenant directors act as a significant dynamic in the political construction of social housing today.

## Keywords

## Introduction

Tenants have been recruited as active participants in a process of experimentation in the governance of social housing in Britain that has privatisation and the creation of quasi-markets as its main themes (Malpass 2008). In a changed landscape of public services, alongside councillors, business people and professionals, tenants have become the new governors.

Deployed to bring consumer values and a sense of legitimacy to a restructured social housing sector; key to a range of neo-liberal strategies for the structural transformation of the welfare state (Pierson 1994), tenants are nevertheless the heirs to a strong mutualist tradition that champions ideas of self-management and citizen control (Birchall & Simmons 2004) and, perhaps as a consequence, their role as directors of social housing organisations is ambiguous and contested. This paper sets out to identify the causes of this unease and to analyse the influence tenants bring to housing governance. In doing so, it seeks to reclaim the agency of tenant directors to act as a significant dynamic in the political debate over the future of social housing.

As the "*wobbly pillar of the welfare state*" (Somerville & Chan 2001: 12), housing has provided both Conservative and New Labour governments with an uncontested territory in which to trial a new mode of regulation to replace the ethos of the Keynesian welfare state (Williams 1994). Since the launch of this programme of restructuring in 1980, half of all local authority homes have been transferred to registered social landlords or sold under Right to Buy and half of the remaining council homes, removed to arms-length management (ODPM 2004).

Tenant involvement in governance has been seen by both Conservative and New Labour strategists as integral to this new landscape of housing organisations. But recurring confrontation has dogged the rise of tenants to board level and their position on management committees is at once

encouraged and disparaged by Government, the housing profession and the housing market. Empirical research into the role of tenants on management boards has identified this problem either as one of a failure of tenants to conform to the demands of strategic governance (Audit Commission 2004a) or as one of resistance by the management and directors of housing organisations to the presence of tenants on board (Cairncross & Pearl 2003; Platt 1987).

In the tradition of housing research as depicted by Jacobs and Manzi (2000a), these studies have taken a positivist paradigm that treats the contemporary shape of housing governance as an objective reality and prioritises a search for solutions that would enable tenant board members to be integrated into the unchallenged structure of housing governance. Their recommendations for action have been variously that tenant board members should be selected by interview, rather than election, to ensure their compliance with the requirements of governance (Audit Commission 2004b); that housing organisations should dispense with tenant directors altogether to enable the efficient business operation of social housing companies (Appleyard 2006); that tenants should serve as directors only on organisations engaged in direct service delivery rather than those at a strategic level (Elton 2006); or that housing organisations should be forced through government regulation to accept and increase the number of tenants on their management boards (Housing Corporation 2006).

The lack of a consistent approach to resolving this problem highlights the need to reconsider the research paradigm. A social constructionist approach could view housing organisations as institutions being actively constructed through individual experience rather than existing as fixed and given structures to which individuals must adapt. This viewpoint would position tenant directors as contributors to the construction of meaning in housing organisations, rather than as problematic individuals who have failed to slot into their defined roles.

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To pursue this new paradigm, this paper begins by setting tenant involvement in governance within the context of demands for involvement in decision-making and considers the position of tenants in relation to housing power structures. The next section charts the rise of tenants as directors and the subsequent construction of their role as problematic. A constructionist framework based on Foucault (1980; 1990) is then introduced to view housing organisations as structures of discourse under contention by interest groups and the concept of hegemony developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1998) is adopted to depict the construction of meaning within organisations as a process of power from which rival discourses can be excluded. A methodology based on Fairclough's (1995) application of critical discourse analysis is then applied to research with tenant board members to examine the discourse they bring to governance and the paper concludes with an assessment of the influence of tenant board members and an appraisal of the problems or challenges associated with their role.

## Tenant involvement on housing boards

Tenants now make up over 18 per cent of the directors on the governing boards of social housing organisations, and they hold one third of directorships in the new stock-transfer companies and arms-length management organisations (Cairncross & Pearl 2003). The following section charts the rise of social housing tenants to these positions of authority. It situates board membership within a tradition of tenant demands for involvement in decision-making and reflects on the treatment of issues of power in the literature of tenant participation.

It is never easy to determine the part played by particular interest groups in the process of housing change, as Pickvance (1976) once observed. The restructuring of housing governance carried out since 1980 would not have been successful had it not been supported by large numbers of tenants who

were frustrated with their housing conditions and the housing management they experienced (Clapham & Kintrea 1992).

Tenant ambitions for greater representation in housing decision-making have been depicted, not without criticism, as the campaigns of an urban social movement on issues of 'collective consumption' or of a 'tenants movement' (Castells 1978; Cockburn 1977; Healey 1982; Grayson 1997; but see Saunders 1979 and a recanted Castells 1983 for criticisms). Contemporary resident participation initiatives owe their origins, at least in part, to a series of tenant campaigns from 1968-1973 which led to calls for tenant representation on council housing committees (Hague 1990).

Birchall (1991) interprets attempts to legislate for tenant representation on housing committees during the early 1970s as evidence of tenant demands for involvement in management. Initially only four London boroughs allowed tenants to take part in council decision-making in this way, granting full voting rights to tenants co-opted onto housing committees. The initiative spread in the late 1980s as part of a decentralisation experiment among Labour Left councils that won strong tenant support and saw the devolution of maintenance budgets to estates administered by tenant sub-committees (Pilkington & Kendrick 1988). Although seen by Sklair (1975) as an attempt to incorporate tenant activists and by others as a fairly tokenistic attempt at involvement, co-option onto council committees did give tenants the only involvement in decision-making open to them outside of the intensive commitment required by tenant management organisations (Hambleton & Hoggett 1988).

Tenant management of estates was an initiative promoted by the Conservative government through Section 16 of the Housing and Planning Act 1986 and evangelised by agencies such as TPAS and the Priority Estates Project (PEP) using Sherry Arnstein's highly-charged model of a 'Ladder of Citizen Participation' (Arnstein 1969). Steeped in the frustration of the US Civil Rights Movement, Arnstein's ladder conflated participation practices with the achievement of power. It placed citizen control at its final rung with the

suggestion that tenants who settled for anything less were destined to be ignored or patronised (Cooper & Hawtin 1998). Mobilized tenants organisations inflamed by the threat of the Conservative's Housing Action Trust proposals, were a receptive audience for the advocacy of tenant management and demand grew (Karn 1993). By 2002, there were 202 tenant management organisations in England and another 81 in development (Caincross 2002).

Aspirations for tenant ownership emerged out of resistance to the inner-city regeneration plans of the late 1960s and the communal living and collective decision-making experiments of the squatting movement (Platt 1980). Housing co-operatives, championing the principles of 'community self-management', were established by squatters from 1974 (Wood 1980) while new-build housing co-operatives were set up in the late 1970s, notably in the Weller Streets, Liverpool, where the idea of community ownership and control developed from a campaign against council demolition plans (McDonald 1986). The re-birth of the co-operative housing movement and ideas of tenant ownership appeared to run parallel for a time to government strategies; by 1988 however, it was clear that tenant ownership no longer commanded government support as a strategy for restructuring housing governance (Clapham & Kintrea 1992). When 75 tenants organisations used the Conservative's Tenants Choice policy to express an interest in becoming approved landlords and taking over ownership of their own estates, the government vetoed the move. Tenants Choice had been intended to create free market competition in social housing by enabling tenants to switch allegiances to private sector or housing association landlords. The Conservatives had not anticipated that tenants might want to become their own landlords and were unprepared for the interest in community control shown by tenants organisations (Lusk 1997). The financial implications of publicly funding tenant control in areas with high investment needs made these applications unpopular. The tenants of Walterton and Elgin, in Westminster, carried out one of the only three tenant-led transfers to go ahead. By the end of 1991, the government had resolved to accept no more

applications from tenants to become a Tenants Choice landlord and the legislation itself was repealed in 1996.

Arnold & Cole (1988) have argued that Conservative and New Labour governments only supported restructuring strategies that did not interfere with the business management model of housing governance.  Tenant co-option onto decision-making Council committees was killed off by the Conservative government in the 1990 Local Government Regulations Act (Zitron 1995), the victim of a public management strategy that aimed to establish clear lines of demarcation between operational decision-making and political direction (Rhodes 1997).  The repeal of Tenants Choice legislation made it impossible for any new stock transfer organisation or housing association receiving Housing Corporation support to be run solely by tenants.  In Scotland, tenant controlled community housing associations or Community Ownership schemes continued to be encouraged as a pragmatic demunicipalisation strategy (Clapham & Kintrea 2000), but in England and Wales, by the mid 1990s, the opportunities for tenant ownership and tenant decision-making had been severely restricted and tenants organisations who thirsted for an involvement in housing governance were channelled towards only two options:  the tenant management organisation or the emerging option of board membership.

Tenant participation has been seen as offering the potential for empowerment (Somerville 1998), but Governments and social landlords have often been concerned to limit the possibilities of tenant power and their promotion of tenant involvement has been to attain their own aims. Cooper & Hawtin (1998: 15) argue that tenant participation has been used as a tool to '*effectively reinforce and perpetuate structural inequalities and social exclusion*'.  Just as landlords have been determined to retain control over participation processes and have confined tenant involvement in decision-making to minor management issues (Cairncross et al 1994; Hickman 2006), government support for tenant involvement in governance has served to underpin a market strategy for social housing and to 'incorporate' tenants into their responsibilities as active citizens (Flint 2004; McKee 2007).

Tenant directorships in social housing organisations have been presented as offering transformational change in tenant involvement; they are portrayed as the rationale for the break-up of council housing monopolies and the creation of market-sensitive housing companies. While social landlords proffer a menu of involvement options including satisfaction surveys, focus groups and customer panels directed primarily at improving the business efficiency of housing organisations (Audit Commission 2004), tenant directorships appear to offer the possibilities of control.

Tenants who take up this opportunity must balance the gain in empowerment with the restrictions imposed on them as members of a management board with a legal duty to promote the well-being of an organisation that is bound by Government regulation and hamstrung by financial imperatives (McKee & Cooper 2007).

## Ambiguities of the role of tenant director

Prior to 1989 only 25 per cent of traditional housing associations had tenants on their boards of management, usually co-opted as lone individuals (Platt et al 1987). In the process of restructuring unleashed by the Conservative government in that year, the new stock-transfer companies and the short-lived Housing Action Trusts all offered one third of the places on their boards of directors to tenants. New Labour embraced the project to restructure the governance of social housing and took it into a new dimension with the invention of arms-length management and the extension of stock transfer into the most resistant urban authorities.. Social housing tenants stood for election to these new boards, and often the tenants most involved in the negotiations on the transfer process or on the re-packaging of council stock as ALMOs, became the new board members (Malpass & Mullins 2002). By taking a role as governors of these housing organisations, particularly the arms-length management organisations and transfer associations identified with local communities, tenants helped to root the new and fragmented

housing organisations in a defined sense of place (Flint 2003). But the need to legitimise new structures of housing governance that would otherwise appear unaccountable created an ambiguity around the role of the tenant board member. This section explores that ambiguity and charts the origins of the controversy over representation that has clouded tenant involvement in governance.

As housing associations replaced elected local government as the main providers of social housing, critics of the restructuring focused on a lack of accountability in their governance. The absence of election was for Skelcher (1998) the most glaring sign of a democratic deficit in these bodies and Hirst (1995) recommended that boards of directors should be elected, and that consumers should be involved on management boards to bring accountability to the quangos. The Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life (1996) considered Housing Associations in its second report on local public spending bodies and the Hancock Inquiry, set up by the National Federation of Housing Associations (NFHA) in response to this probing, created a platform for a debate on the role of tenants on management boards (Kearns 1997). A constituency model, with guaranteed places for tenants alongside councillors and independents, was adopted for Housing Action Trusts (Karn 1993) and stock transfer organisations (Mullins et al 1995) and, partly to win tenant support for stock transfer, the new tenant directors on these companies were elected to the board by a constituency of tenants (Malpass & Mullins 2002). This created an impression of electoral accountability around the new tenant directors and implied that they served in a representative role, an interpretation that clashed with company law. The legitimisation of housing governance through the election of tenant board members was to create a deep-seated tension with the model of housing organisations led by professional, experienced and qualified directors.

The project of citizen governance in Britain's restructured public services is acknowledged to have caused friction between the processes of representation and those of strategic leadership (Simmons et al 2007). The

most problematic aspect of the role of tenant board members is their alleged tendency to act as representatives and to concern themselves with operational housing issues instead of taking a strategic view of the interests of the housing organisation as a whole.  Audit Commission research records the exasperation of housing association chief executives with tenant board members who insist on bringing up '*estate-level issues'* at committee meetings. It argues for tenants to act as '*strategists not lobbyists'* (Audit Commission 2004a: 43-44). Platt (1987) noted that board members and senior officers discouraged tenant directors from taking an advocacy role at meetings, and were particularly concerned to prevent them raising specific cases or bringing unresolved complaints to the notice of the board. In some community-based housing associations in Scotland, Clapham found that staff had forbidden tenant board members from taking complaints from residents. Perhaps as a result, some tenant directors then avoided all contact with ordinary residents (Clapham & Kintrea 2000: 547).

The Housing Corporation's regulatory code on governance and the National Housing Federation's guidance state unequivocally that tenant board members should act as individuals and that their responsibility is solely to the organisation.

> 'When acting as directors, board members of a Local Housing Company, or any other body, owe a primary duty of care to the interests of that organisation. Even though board members may have been nominated or elected by an organisation or constituency, they cannot be mandated to act against the interest of the company on whose board they sit. Thus Local Housing Company board members are not delegates from their organisation or constituencies. They are individuals acting in a similar role to that of a director of a company' (Zitron 1995 : 43*)*

Opposition to the inclusion of tenants on the management boards of housing organisations has centred on these concerns. In March 2006, it appears that Government Ministers seriously considered removing tenants from the

management boards of social housing organisations as part of a review into the regulation of housing associations launched by the Housing Corporation and headed by Sir Les Elton (Morgan 2006). The larger housing associations, those that match the turnover, and may increasingly share the values, of large PLCs had argued that there should be no place for tenants on their boards (Appleyard 2006). Although holding back from that conclusion, Elton argued that tenants would have a more valuable contribution to make on housing organisations with direct service delivery functions, rather than on strategic boards like the parent organisations of group structures (Elton 2006).

Self (1993) argues that the managerial model adopted in Conservative and New Labour restructuring strategies was derived from big business corporations.  The hallmark of this model, dubbed by Rhodes (1997) the 'new public management', is a clear divide between a centrally imposed policy framework and the professional hands-on managers who are accountable for performance.   This model poses questions over the role of the board of directors who have little influence on policy and no role in operational decisions.  What is left for the board members is to set strategy and to position their housing organisation within networks in the local and regional market (Greer & Hoggett 1997: 225), what Stoker calls '*networked community governance*' (2004:15). Tenant board members have a role in promoting the housing organisation to other residents but they may have little to offer the development of the public and private sector partnerships that have become increasingly important to organisational survival (Reid 1999). The professional, well-qualified, male directors who dominate the boards of the larger housing associations are the key players in cementing these networks through their experience on the boards of private corporations and their contacts across organisations (Cairncross & Pearl 2003:11).  Tenants who challenge the distinction between strategy and operational issues, and who cannot contribute to the 'old boy networks' of housing governance, may be seen as a challenge to the new public management of a restructured social housing.

It could be argued, however, that the boundary between strategic and operational issues on housing boards is by no means a clear divide and that it should not automatically be seen as an indicator of poor governance for tenant board members to raise operational issues (Greer and Hoggett 1997). Platt and colleagues maintain that it is the duty of directors to pursue specific issues which have implications for policy and to take complaints through normal channels, including in the last resort to the board, and that tenants should not be disbarred from raising particular cases of general relevance. Their 1987 research showed that most housing associations had recruited tenants on the understanding that they would act as representatives (Platt et al 1987). A good practice guide for the National Federation of Housing Associations published in 1990, insisted, despite most interpretations of company law, that tenant board members should be nominated by tenants associations as representatives, and be resourced and enabled to report back to those defined constituencies (Platt et al 1990).

The appointment of tenants to the position of director is conceived in this literature as furthering the promotion of tenant involvement in housing governance in order to bring standards of democracy and accountability to the working of housing organisations. The concept of tenant participation that sees tenant directorships as the pinnacle of a ladder of participation opportunities – as decision-making, rather than consultation (Platt 1987: 7) – still finds reflection in the polices of social landlords and in government strategies for the sector. Audit Commission research found that tenants were encouraged to vote for large-scale voluntary transfer or the creation of arms length management organisations by being promised more influence over decision-making through access to a seat on the governing body, as if tenant directors could act as their representatives (Audit Commission 2004a: 45). In December 2006 the Housing Corporation instructed housing associations to facilitate the election of at least one tenant to their board of directors as part of an 'involvement culture' (Housing Corporation 2006: 20).

A discourse of democracy and accountability has been introduced into the language of governance through the creation of tenant directors. Concepts of empowerment, and of the conferring of power through citizen control, have become embedded in a discourse of managerialism while the representative processes of democracy have been associated with the obligations of company directors.   The promotion of tenant directorships as tenant participation has ensnarled an institution of governance with what Birchall (1992: 178) called the *'accountability strategy'* of tenant representation in housing decision-making.  Tenant directors have become the bearers of an alternative tradition of housing democracy and carry ideas of representation and accountability into housing discourse.

## Researching a tenant discourse

Social constructionism is an approach to understanding '*how the institutions and organisations that comprise a society are changed or sustained as a result of interpersonal interaction*', according to Jim Kemeny (2002: 140). As a perspective in housing research, constructionism has contributed a keen reflexivity that has questioned 'common sense' approaches to housing issues (Jacobs & Manzi 2000a). It has been applied successfully to understanding how certain issues become identified as 'problems' and has been a particularly useful tool in discerning the exercise of power within organisations and the structuring of power through discourse (Jacobs et al 2003).

Michel Foucault has been a towering influence on constructionist theories; his writings have contributed to the view of organisations as discursive formations and emphasised the regulation of behaviour that takes place within institutions as a consequence of the construction of a dominant discourse (Foucault 1980; 1990).  He portrays organisations as structured around an order of discourse that defines the common sense of the institution and sets out its

rules and systems: a discursive network of power that serves to constrain the actions of the individuals within its field.

Foucault also identified the opportunities for rival discourses to develop within institutions and noted their ability to influence or transform the construction of power:

*'Discourses can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy' (Foucault 1990: 100).*

The concept of hegemony advanced by Laclau and Mouffe (1998) provides a framework for analysing this process of negotiation and conflict in organisations. Drawing on Gramsci's definition of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe identify the process by which social classes or groups seek to establish dominance as a project of discursive construction. In their view, hegemonic groups do not simply impose their version of reality on others. Instead they co-opt, adapt and are changed by alternative discourses from less powerful or contesting groups. Hegemony is developed through a process of articulation by which elements of discourse are drawn into a new formation, which subtly modifies them to create a collective identity or a shared 'common sense'.

Hegemony, for Chantal Mouffe is:

*'the creation of a unified coherent ideological discourse which will be the product of the articulation to its value system of the ideological elements existing within a determinate historical conjuncture of the society in question.' (Mouffe 1979:195)*

Laclau and Mouffe agree with Foucault that institutions are articulations of ideologies that are contested by interest groups competing to prioritise their way of seeing the world. However, this contest or process of negotiation takes place in a '*terrain of power and resistance*' (Torfing 1999: 101) and while some discourses acquire influence, others are excluded. Power, for Laclau and Mouffe, is associated with the construction of social identity by means of exclusion and when a collective identity is created through hegemony, alternative meanings and options are rejected and the social groups identified with those meanings are configured as problems; a process that gives rise to social antagonism and the development of rival identities.

The work of Laclau and Mouffe contributes themes of power, identity and social antagonism to previous constructionist research in housing.  The presence of conflicting interest groups in housing organisations has been noted in studies that have drawn on the concept of a 'negotiated order' (Strauss 1978), the theory that organisational behaviour is the outcome of a process of bargaining between various factions or social groups. Applying this focus, Darcy & Manzi (2004: 145) have described housing management as '*a contested practise*' while Clapham and colleagues (2000: 80) point to contradictions in values and '*shifting and ambiguous*' definitions of roles.  It is clear from these studies that the ability of interest groups to affect the construction of meaning within housing organisations is relative to their power and their ability to dominate the discursive space (Jacobs et al 2003: 442). Interest groups which lack power, and social housing tenants are a clear example, may embed traces of alternative meanings in the dominant discourse while being largely excluded from defining the rules and systems of the organisation (Jacobs & Manzi 1996.

Darcy and Manzi (2004) may have uncovered traces of these alternative meanings when they claim to have identified three significant trends in the order of discourse in contemporary British housing management: discourses of technology, commodity and democracy.  While the discourses around technology and commodification speak of the introduction of market

mechanisms into the social housing sector, the assertion of centralised control and the growth of managerialism within housing governance, the discourse of democracy combines social welfare concerns and the intentions of social control with genuine endeavours to empower tenants and to transform social housing into a more democratically organised institution.

Norman Fairclough (1995; 2001) posits that this order of discourse can be investigated using a process of critical discourse analysis, a methodology that situates social interaction within a structural context and acknowledges its relations to power.  Fairclough theorises that the belief systems or 'ways of seeing' of groups or institutions are developed and embedded as common sense through particular ways of talking. He argues that an analysis of words or texts can identify these discursive practices and conventions and uncover how they construct a representation of society and the position of social groups within it. Critical discourse analysis has been applied increasingly to housing research studies in recent years (Clapham 2000). Taylor (1999) used Fairclough's framework to uncover bias in stock transfer publicity and the same approach was used by Saugeres (1999) to reveal the subjective nature of housing management lettings policies.  Discourse methodologies have been applied by Haworth and Manzi (1999) to link the growth of underclass rhetoric to the introduction of more coercive housing policy, by Clapham et al (2000) to analyse the construction of housing management and by Jacobs and Manzi (2000b) to identify organisational resistance to performance management regimes.

This paper sets out to investigate the articulation of a tenant identity in the discourse of housing governance.  It presents the findings of a critical discourse analysis of the narratives of tenant board members, based on interviews with ten tenant directors from six housing organisations in a sub-region of the North of England.  The tenant board members were all members of local, and in some cases, regional and national tenants organisations and were, in this way, representative of the majority of tenant directors on new housing organisations set up since 1991 (Malpass & Mullins 2002).   The selected housing organisations were arms-length management and local

housing companies and were indicative of the models of governance introduced to a restructured social housing sector by both Conservative and New Labour strategists.  In the new landscape of social housing, these companies apply the 'constituency model' of housing governance where tenants serve as directors alongside councillors, business people and other professionals, making up one third of the board (Zitron 1995 : 48). The individual interviews were supported by four group discussions conducted with 45 tenant board members and activists in order to further identify the key framing devices of a tenant-led discourse.  The discussion groups were held at a national tenants conference and at two regional conferences attended by over a thousand tenants. The names of the interviewees were coded, although their gender identity was protected, and the identity of each housing organisation removed. This was to protect the anonymity of the tenant board members to enable them to talk openly about their experiences. Directors are bound by a code of collective responsibility for board decisions and tenant directors have been dismissed from their boards for uttering public criticism. Two of the tenant directors interviewed sought permission from the Chief Executives of their companies before consenting to take part in this research, in order to protect themselves from any potential disciplinary action.

Following Hostein & Gubrium (1995) active interviewing was used as an interpretive practice and the interviewees were invited to analyse elements of their own narrative and to utilise the ways of talking that relate to tenants.  The resulting narratives were the product of reflection and interpretation by the tenant directors, both as tenants and as board members. An open-ended list of questions was used and the interview questions focused on the tenant directors' perceptions of their role as a board member, their reasons for joining the board and their activities as board members.  They were encouraged to reflect on their relationships with other directors and the management team; and their thoughts on the impact of tenants as board members, both in their own experience and at a wider level.  The responses were coded thematically to plot the development of narratives around the reasons why tenants seek housing directorships, their activities on the board

and their relationships within the organisations and the communities they serve.

Much work has been done in critical discourse analysis on the construction of organisational behaviour through metaphor and symbol (see for instance Grant 1996) and Yanow argues that people rarely speak directly of belief systems, instead they communicate their values and feelings through symbolic objects, acts, and particularly the language of everyday life: the meaningful stories, myths and rituals that unite groups as '*communities of meaning'* (Yanow 2000: 27).  Critical discourse analysis of narratives of identity has pointed to the common use of the pronouns 'we' or 'they', and the application of spatial and temporal references in spoken or written texts that serve to evoke traditions and claims of cultural identities (Hall 1992; Barker 2001).  Accordingly the interview texts were subjected to metaphor, category and narrative analysis to unpick references to identity and belief systems.

It should be pointed out, that while the group discussions were conducted with tenants from across the county, the majority of attributed material is drawn from interviews carried out with tenants from the north of England. That geographical restriction and the size of the sample in this study mean that its chief value should be to stimulate further and quantifiably wider research.

## An opportunity to make a change

The analysis of research with tenant board members presented in this, and the following section sets out their views on the order of discourse within the governance of their social housing organisations. They identify a dominant discourse on housing boards and define their own contribution as tenant board members against it, appearing to present an alternative discourse that addresses the structure of power and knowledge within social housing companies.

All the tenant board members in this study joined the board of their new housing organisation as an extension of their existing involvement in the leadership of local residents organisations. Some of them became directors to achieve particular changes at a neighbourhood level and they have been successful in this. As active members of their local residents associations, they felt that there were barriers preventing them from accessing the necessary knowledge and personnel to bring about the improvements they wanted in their local areas. A directorship gave them the status to talk to housing managers and to initiate change in their relations with local staff teams.

*You've got the personal touch. You know the people you're talking to, you've met the surveyors etc, and they know you. It does help. It does speed things up.*

Admission to the board of directors also presented tenants with the opportunity to begin to reverse a perceived power imbalance and to assert the experience of social housing tenants against the previously dominant views of housing staff. The chance to make a change became their prime motivation in deciding to join the board and tenant directors saw themselves as initiating a transformation in power structures.

*For some staff, tenants were just a nuisance and that needed changing, that persuaded me more than anything and obviously there were people in the ALMO who wanted things to change if I could do my bit.*

These tenants have identified that to achieve change in the culture of housing organisations, tenants must first achieve positions of status. This puts them in a position to encourage the development of responsive estate-level services and to forge relationships of respect between tenants and staff.

'Nick' was encouraged as a new tenant board member to meet the staff at his local housing office and to go to their team meetings. From this point of contact, he encouraged the local housing officer to walk around the estate with him. He then invited the local residents association members to join this regular walk-about and gradually spread this initiative to neighbouring estates. In Nick's assessment of the impact of tenants on the boards of housing organisations, it is this local achievement he stresses. The effectiveness of tenant board membership is experienced through the increased accountability of housing staff at an operational level.

The tenants interviewed became board members of housing organisations at least partly as an extension of their work in residents associations and they were all willing to use their position as directors to act on behalf of tenants in their neighbourhood. Some had no reluctance in defining themselves as representatives, despite the concerns raised by the Audit Commission and others. They believed that since tenants elected them to the board, they had a duty to actively reflect the views of their constituency, and they set out to discover residents' concerns in order to represent them to the housing organisation. They saw it as their responsibility to walk around housing estates and to raise any issues with the local manager. They went to the meetings of other residents associations and took notes of problems raised in order to keep themselves in touch with tenants' experiences. To these tenant board members there was no dichotomy between their sanctioned role in

providing a user perspective and their practice of raising specific issues on behalf of their constituents, and if they could not resolve an issue through their personal contacts, they were not afraid to raise it at a relevant sub-committee.

Some of the housing organisations included in this study harnessed the zeal of their tenant directors and used it to promote relations between the organisation and its tenants or customers.  At board meetings, the tenant directors were asked to report back what they were hearing on their estates. They were encouraged to phone around residents associations to gather their views on the housing organisation's services and were used as mystery shoppers to test customer services.  In return they acted as ambassadors for their housing organisation, interpreting difficult budgetary decisions to tenants on the estates, explaining processes and delays and dispelling any feelings of 'them and us'.  While they were discouraged from raising operational issues at board meetings, they were actively encouraged to raise individual incidents on the agenda at sub-committees and the board members interviewed all appeared to recognise the need to generalise from specific issues and to use their operational experience to develop policy.

Other organisations imposed a definite boundary between the operational and the strategic, and tenant board members who crossed it, risked being perceived as intruders in the realm of the managers.  Experienced board members took care to differentiate their activities as a director from their work as a tenant representative. But they acknowledged that the division was not a rigid one:

> I am aware that at the board meeting I am not a tenant, I'm a board member. But I don't see why the interests of tenants and the board should be mutually exclusive. When I have my board member's hat on, I will still look at things with half an eye for how the operational side of that policy is going to affect tenants.

## The creation of a tenant identity

The creation of a tenant identity, or a essential set of shared interests and loyalties that are seen as the '*tenants' side'*, appears to be constructed in the discourse of tenant board members through the use of spatial metaphors and personal pronouns.

In the strongest spatial metaphor occurring in the interviews, the process of becoming a director of a housing organisation was represented as 'getting inside'. In these narratives, tenants were characterised as 'out there on the street', and sometimes 'down' there. One tenant director imagined the housing organisation as a fortress or castle, a closed system of knowledge and power where useful data is kept and key problem-solvers can be found. Becoming a board member enabled him to allow tenants 'inside' and 'forward'. He was at once the tenants' guide and their champion:

*They know what they want out there, the tenants. They come to us and we get it for them. People come to me and I take them to the [housing organisation] and it's tenants ideas that are being taken forward instead of being held back*

Tenant directors in this study imagined the management of housing organisations as 'inside' a world of knowledge and power and tenants as 'out there' in reality. Power and social class were also expressed in spatial terms, with tenants referred to as at the bottom or '*on the floor'*, an image carrying a flavour of industrial conflict. More common in the interviews was the use of the personal pronoun 'we' to create an impression of unity and identity between tenants and to define tenants as a separate interest group within housing boards.

This is clearest in narratives that frequently used 'we' to describe tenant board members as a group, while other groups on the board or the organisation's senior officers were defocused by being rendered in passive voice. 'Karen' used a reference to school days to create a lively image of tenant directors as a group of friends. She depicts the tenant board members as having their own codes of behaviour, their own leadership structures and a shared sense of identity on the board. She expects the other tenant board members to always support her in board discussions and sees tenant board members as a block, separate from and sometimes opposed to, to the other directors and officers of the organisation.

*We all encouraged each other. The tenant directors wanted a spokesman and it was me. Some of them were a bit nervous at putting their hands up. They used to pass pieces of paper round to me, 'can you ask this?' – like being in school.*

The tenant board members in this study clearly perceived the existence of a power structure within boards which in the main, they appeared very willing to accept, while maintaining a set of values that they characterised as '*the tenants' side'*. They saw their contribution on the board as injecting an element of lived experience to deflate and undercut what would otherwise be an abstract and technical discourse.

*On the business side, they sometimes forget other people don't understand; you can pull them up and say – you're on about this percentage or that – can you just explain it in lay terms. You've got a layperson's understanding to it and it brings them down a bit. Brings it down to street level.*

But the language of finance clearly undermined the confidence of the tenant directors to challenge views expressed at board meetings and obstructed them when they wanted to pursue their own policies. The tenant directors felt they were listened to at board meetings, but that anything they suggested

would be subjected to rigorous financial appraisal, a complex process in which they felt they did not have the technical skills to participate.

It was clear that some tenant board members internalised these economic values and accepted them as common sense. In this excerpt from one narrative, the tenant board member indicates his acceptance of the 'natural' primacy of financial judgements. He uses the analogy of his weekly supermarket shop to illustrate how housing organisations must work to a budget, and in doing so, distantly echoes Margaret Thatcher's populist articulation of housekeeping as a metaphor for neo-Liberal economic practices (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 170).

> *It's only the same at a far bigger scale. I say to tenants, well look, the [housing organisation] don't go to Harvey Nicks to buy the [kitchen] units. There's a limit to how much you can spend per house. I try to bring the working man's views – the tenants views – to the board but at the same time using commonsense and logic about what we can achieve.*

In this narrative it can be argued that the discourse of the tenant board member has been articulated to a housing governance dominated by the discourse of the 'new public management'. The interviewee has accepted the hegemony of this discourse and adopted it as the framework that guides and limits his actions. Other tenant directors seemed more aware that they were engaged in constructing a compromise between different value systems. They believed that the interests of business and the satisfaction of tenants were mutually compatible but they were aware that at some point these two discourses might diverge. If that divergence occurred, they felt they would be forced to choose between their identity as tenant activist and their position as board member.

> *If it's going to be bad for tenant satisfaction, it's going to be bad for business. If it got to the point that the two things were clashing to a level where I was uncomfortable, then I would walk away from the board because at the end of the day I'm still a tenant activist first.*

When that clash did occur, its effect was to detach the identity of tenant board members from the interests of the board and to encourage tenant directors to separate themselves conceptually from the dominant discourse in housing governance. Two interviewees identified a significant boardroom incident as the formative moment when they became aware that the interests of social housing tenants were not shared by the other board members...

For 'Karen' this defining moment came when the senior management of her housing organisation recommended the immediate withdrawal of rent collection services from local housing offices.  Although consultation results showed that most tenants were opposed to the withdrawal of cash collection, a majority of the board finally agreed to the proposal and rent collection points were closed at all housing offices, against the wishes of the tenant directors.

> *I feel badly let down by that as a tenant. We were listened to and allowed to put our point of view across but we just felt squashed.*

As a result of this 'coming of age', Karen's evaluation was that tenant influence on housing governance is largely illusory. She believes that tenant directors are manipulated and fooled into thinking they are influencing the debate, when in reality all they can do is '*kick it around'* .  Karen had to accept collective responsibility for an unpopular decision and, as a tenant representative had to pass on the decision of the board, and defend that decision as a board member. She felt forced to betray the trust of the very people she aimed to represent.

Nick's 'coming of age' took place at a board meeting that approved the demolition of 600 homes on the grounds that it was not economic to renovate them. In his narrative the board meeting is graphically imaged as *'eerie and divisive'*; trade unionists protested outside the building while inside tenants

voted against the resolution but again failed to prevent the demolition plans being approved. For Nick this was the moment he lost any belief that tenants could influence housing governance and lead the debate in favour of tenants' interests.

*Certainly that was the end of it for me. Every tenant voted against. It was a business decision pure and simple and what was best for tenants wasn't even an option at the end.*

In both these narratives, the tenant constituency – one third of the board – was defeated by the votes of the other two constituencies who supported the recommendations of the chief officers.  This situation enabled the tenant board members to identify themselves as a united group and to define their interests – retaining a local service and protecting tenants' homes respectively – in opposition to the wishes of the housing organisation's managers. Detached from the dominant discourse, and alienated by their exclusion from the decision-making process, these tenant directors now saw themselves as an oppositional sub-culture within the board, isolated and combative and with their own distinctive agenda for housing governance.

## Conclusions

The tenant directors in this study displayed a burgeoning sense of identity that distinguished them from other board members and from the dominant discourse of their social housing organisations.  Their aim as tenant directors was to bring about improvements to the housing service at an operational level and to raise the status of tenants in the decision-making process. In seeking to achieve these aims, they actively sought out tenants' views in order to inform the board's policy making and, at a neighbourhood level, used their influence to pioneer a participatory approach to decision-making.  They

perceived the existence of more dominant discourses in housing governance and often felt that the needs of tenants were placed in secondary importance to commercial concerns but, in the main, they were willing to accept this discourse, recognising it as 'common sense' while championing a tenant identity at board meetings.  The distinctness of this tenant identity was visible particularly during clashes at board level over operational areas of housing policy. It was clear at these moments that a separate tenant discourse existed, defined in opposition to the views of other board members and to the senior management of the housing organisation.

This research may suggest that tenant board members approach their directorships, in the main, with definite goals, focused on cultural change, in challenging power structures or in achieving more participatory decision-making. In this they appear to mirror the principles of self-management, collective decision-making and participatory democracy that flourished at an earlier stage of the restructuring of housing governance.  Applying the concept of hegemony developed by Laclau and Mouffe, it could be argued that the discourse of new public management has both limited the possibilities for alternative models of governance and won to its cause many of the tenants who hold to those principles.  Board membership has enabled tenants to seize an opportunity to make improvements to their status and to their influence in decision-making at an operational level in housing organisations. To a varying degree housing organisations have welcomed this perspective; however, it is clear that tenant aspirations are not easily assimilated into the current values of social housing organisations. While tenants may well have joined the competing interest groups that Jacobs et al (2003) see as negotiating the definitions of contemporary housing, they are the least powerful and perhaps the easiest to exclude.

The discourse of tenant board members, with its stark awareness of power relationships, and its deeply felt ambitions for participatory governance competes uneasily with the more dominant themes in housing organisations of commodification, technology, social welfare and social control.  While some

tenant board members have been subsumed within this hegemonic discourse, and others are content to take the long view and work within it, there may be those tenants who view the governance of housing organisations as a castle they have yet to capture.

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