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The changing image of the UK private landlord with the buy to let revolution

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Abstract

There has been a long-standing negative image associated with private landlords. Private rented housing in the UK expanded dramatically after the millennium with the wide availability of buy-to-let mortgages. New types of people were attracted to private landlordism. It was arguably an opportunity to turn the page on historic negativity. However, these landlords were often seen as ‘get-rich-quick’ speculators. Our study combines historical analysis of media items, a review of legislation and an interview survey of landlords. It addresses to what extent the image of landlords has changed, discusses the response of government regulation to the BTL revolution and how it has been conditioned by perceptions about landlords. The study finds that the buy-to-let revolution has not fundamentally changed public perceptions of landlords, and the media still portray landlords with the ‘rogue’ epithet, a seemingly inevitable part of the headline. It has coloured public and political perspectives. Interviews with landlords reveal a resignation and sanguinity about their public image, which they see as belying their contribution to society. The negative perceptions have contributed to public policy bringing a string of consumer rights for tenants and attacking speculation by increasing taxation on landlords. In addition, there is a continuing narrative of ‘rogue landlords’ that has obliged the government to take specific measures to address this perceived problem. However, the landlords’ responses suggest that perceptions alone are unlikely to deter current or future landlords. Despite the recent policy changes private landlordism is a profitable activity.

Keywords Buy-to-let · Private landlords · Public perceptions

1 Introduction

There are several groups in British society which have at various times united the majority and had negative labels attached to them. Trends come and go; since the global financial crisis, bankers have been a common target, other times estate agents, most of the time politicians, but there has also been a long-standing negative image associated with private landlords. This is a view that can be traced back at least to the Glasgow rent strikes of

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1915 during World War I when landlords sought to take advantage of war-time shortages. The words 'rogue' and 'greedy' are synonymous with landlords in popular perception and media portrayals.

The primary aim of this paper is to examine if, and how, the image of private landlords has changed as the sector has expanded since the millennium in the UK through the rise of the buy-to-let (BTL) landlord. It considers how they have been depicted over time in the media, and whether recent growth has changed perceptions of landlords. This issue is important as it impinges on the social acceptability of being a landlord and government policy toward the private rented sector (PRS). The paper also considers the implications of these attitudes for investment by private residential landlords. It further discusses the response of government regulation to the BTL revolution and how it has been conditioned by perceptions about landlords.

The research is based on a selection of media items that are illustrative but also incorporate the most influential stories/depictions of landlords. Reports have also been selected to address specific points. We also consider how the landlords themselves view public perceptions through a survey of 17 landlords conducted in Edinburgh in 2016. In this way, the paper also provides insights into the role of a newly revived PRS. It considers the implications for investment in the sector and contributes to an understanding of policy changes since the millennium.

The paper begins by explaining the context to the re-emergence of the PRS in the UK, looking back over a century of change. It then examines historic depictions of private landlords followed by reviewing definitions of BTL landlords. The next section considers perceptions of BTL landlords drawing on media and published reports, and asking what has changed with the growth of the PRS since the millennium. The paper then reports on how landlords see their public image and why. Finally, the paper draws conclusions on the changing image of private landlords and considers the implications.

2 Context

At the beginning of the twentieth century, nine in ten houses in Britain were privately rented. Yet the PRS then went into apparently terminal decline. The turning point was the introduction of rent controls during World War I following riots in Glasgow (Wilson, 2017). The subsequent regulation of the sector lasted most of the twentieth century, taking a number of guises under a series of laws that encompassed both security of tenure and rent control. Policies directed toward the sector varied with the political party in control of the government, meaning that there was no long-term consistency of regulation. It created uncertainty, and so investment suffered, exacerbated by subsidies to other tenures and a relatively poor tax treatment compared to other types of investments. The history and consequences are detailed in Nevitt (1970) and Kemp (2004). By the 1970s, the PRS seemed moribund, accounting for less than 10% of the housing stock (Crook & Kemp, 2011).

This position was transformed by the 1988 Housing Act of the then Conservative government that removed rent regulation and weakened security of tenure for tenants. With the election of a Labour government in 1997 that confirmed this legislation, there was now a stable political consensus on the PRS for the first time in almost a century. The enhanced financial attractiveness of the PRS brought about by deregulation was also supported by the phasing out and ultimate abolition of subsidies via tax relief on mortgages to owner-occupiers by the Labour government (Ball, 2006; Jones, 2007).

At this point in the mid-1990s, less than half of landlords who engaged in private renting saw their activity in terms of commercial investment (Crook et al., 1995; Kemp & Rhodes, 1997). However, the policy changes laid a platform for a revival of the PRS that saw the development of the BTL phenomenon stimulated from late 1996 by access to mortgage finance for landlords at low interest rates. It was initiated by a joint venture between letting agents and mortgage lenders to enable private individuals to invest in property to let without being penalised by high mortgage surcharges. The scheme was set up by the Association of Residential Letting Agents (ARLA) and four lenders as a marketing tool. The BTL market expanded dramatically, extending beyond the initial lenders to become a generic term. Highly geared BTL landlords flourished, making very high returns in the housing boom of the 2000s, and weathered the downturn following the global financial crisis. By the end of 2007, the top of the boom, the PRS in England represented 12.7% of all households, a growth of 39% from the mid-1990s, and it continued to increase to 19% in 2014 (Jones, 2016). In doing so, it transformed the business and characteristics of private landlords.

3 Historic depictions of the private Landlord

Despite their high numbers, there is little information about these new private landlords (Scanlon & Whitehead, 2016). This is echoed by the remark made by Martin Taylor, external member of the Bank of England's Financial Policy Committee, who told a House of Commons Select Committee that, '*We note that [buy to let] has different characteristics from owner-occupied. We do not understand its characteristics quite so well, because it has not been going so long. We do not have historical data*' (Taylor cited in Scanlon & Whitehead, 2016, p.9). Similarly, housing charity Shelter introduced their 2016 survey stating '*... landlords play a crucial role in providing homes, both now, and in the future, yet very little is actually known about them*' (Shelter, 2016, p.3).

Given this vacuum, this paper considers whether the BTL revolution has also transformed traditional negative perspectives about landlords.

Understanding the negative labels attached to private landlords is important to any consideration of the development of the PRS. These labels have included being exploitative, money-grabbing, likely to retain deposits, slow to carry out repairs, likely to evict illegally, generally operating outside the law and likely to enter the property without permission (Adjei & Davidson, 2006). Labelling, together with the creation of folk devils, influences policy and has paved the way for legislation unfavourable to all landlords. Crook and Kemp (2011) highlight the role that myths and stereotypes played in shaping policy until the 1980s, meaning that the intense political debates of the 1960s and 1970s were not founded in evidence but based on assumptions that may well have been inaccurate.

The Rent Act 1957 was one of the most controversial and widely criticised pieces of legislation of the twentieth century. Rather than advancing the role of the PRS as it was intended to do, it almost brought about its downfall through unintended consequences and its association with the name that would besmirch the private landlord for decades. Its enactment would play a role in the continuance of the decline in the percentage of housing stock in the PRS sector. The private landlord became a politically toxic figure. The Act created an incentive for unscrupulous landlords to eject sitting tenants and insert new ones whose rent would not be controlled by legislation. That such practices received so much public attention was down to one London landlord, Peter Rachman; or more specifically

down to his choice of mistress—Christine Keeler, the woman at the centre of a political scandal centring on a government minister, John Profumo. It led to his resignation and contributed ultimately to the government's defeat at the next general election.

It was because of this brief relationship that Rachman was to posthumously become one of the most notorious villains of the twentieth century whose name lives on as a by-word for housing exploitation. A BBC Panorama programme exposed the methods Rachman and his associates used in their attempts to convert controlled tenancies into uncontrolled ones by removing sitting tenants. The matter rose to the top of the political agenda, and the parliamentary opposition party Labour leader Harold Wilson summarised the activity that had been labelled Rachmanism as,

‘... to buy controlled properties at low prices and to use every means, legal or illegal, blackmail, or physical violence, to bring about evictions which, under the Rent Act 1957, have the effect of decontrolling the property so that it can then either be sold to business associates or independent property speculators, or can be let at high rents to people in acute housing need, or still higher rents to prostitutes, because the Rachman property empire was a vice empire, too.’ (Hansard, 1963).

In 1983, Nelken published perhaps the most insightful work on the post-Rachman years. The study examines the process through which the moral panic that followed the breaking of the Rachman scandal was converted into political policy and ultimately into legislation in the form of the Rent Act 1965. As a consequence, the landlord of the 1960s and 1970s was caught between the local authority who could force them to improve their property and a tenant who had the right to pass on their tenancy through two successions. At the same time, rent officers and rent assessment committees could insist upon rents which could leave the landlord ‘out of pocket’ (Blundell, 1980).

By the 1970s, there was a broad consensus among politicians, reading the public mood, which saw the demise of private landlordism as nothing to grieve over and the end of something that belonged in the nineteenth century rather than in modern welfare state Britain (Cowan & Marsh, 2001). Indeed a Conservative Party pamphlet noted,

‘... the accelerating decline of the privately-rented sector is quite irreversible. The private landlord, as he exists now and has existed, will, within a generation, be almost as extinct as the dinosaur’ (Patten et al., 1974, p13).

The image of the private landlord ranged from brutal Rachmanism on the one hand to the television comedy character Rigsby on the other (Crook & Kemp, 2011). Blundell (1980) referred to the private landlord as having, ‘*the worst press that any group of entrepreneurs could wish for.*’ (p.1).

Rigsby was the central character of the comedy series *Rising Damp* that was very popular in the UK in the 1970s. Rigsby was a rather seedy resident private landlord who had three tenants in his rundown house, which was cold, grimy and had a view of the local abattoir. The term ‘Rigsby landlord’ is still used today, particularly in news reports describing unscrupulous landlords or those who permit their tenants to live in substandard accommodation (Hosking, 2015).

Landlord associations have been exasperated by the negative stereotyping applied to landlords, the vast majority of which, according to many studies, conduct perfectly satisfactory tenancies. Martin Moyland, chairman of the Residential Landlord Association, said in 2001 that,

‘From Rigsby to Rachman, our industry, residential property investment and management, has been plagued by bad press. We are always referred to as ‘bad’, ‘rogue’ or ‘slum’

landlords. Commentators, in moments of generosity, often acknowledge that there are ‘some good landlords’, implying that they are as rare as slates on a thatched roof’ (Moylan cited in Residential Property Investor, 2001, para 2).

Moylan viewed the use of negative images as being politically motivated by those with an interest in public housing provision and those seeking political advantage,

‘To get billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money into subsidised housing, it was necessary to have a scapegoat. The scapegoat was the private landlord. By constantly pointing to a demonised private landlord, it is easy to raid the public purse continually’ (Moylan cited in Residential Property Investor, 2001, para 5).

There is no doubt that historically landlords have had a negative image, but a new type of landlord had now entered the public consciousness – the BTL landlord and the private sector has since risen to almost 20% of total housing, as noted earlier. The question is whether this has also been associated with a rise in public acceptability of private landlordism.

4 Defining new ‘buy-to-let’ landlords

In addressing this issue, there is a fundamental query of what is correctly defined as a ‘buy-to-let landlord’. This is important in the context of this study that considers whether the BTL phenomenon has moved the public psyche. There is no legal reference which distinguishes a BTL landlord from a landlord who came to the sector via another route. Hence, we must look elsewhere for evidence of a working definition.

It has already been established that the term was first widely used when it became a marketing tag for new mortgage products launched in September 1996. It has continued to be used in this context ever since. The same is true of the increasing number of insurance products on the market, yet at this point, there is evidence that the value of the term in defining a distinct group of landlords is waning. Major insurers Direct Line, part of the Royal Bank of Scotland, claims, ‘*Our insurance is designed specifically for landlords, buy-to-let owners and management companies*’ (Direct Line, 2017, para 1), retaining the distinction as does another example—Internet Insurance Services UK Limited (2013)—who refer to their long-standing experience in the field of landlords’ insurance and BTL insurance. This company chooses to treat the two products differently to a point yet asks the same questions for both when requesting a quote, suggesting that while the term ‘buy-to-let landlord’ seems to retain a degree of marketing value or recognition, the enterprise of a BTL landlord has become indistinguishable from other landlords. Similarly, supermarket giant Tesco provides acknowledgement that distinguishing between ‘landlord’ and ‘buy-to-let’ insurance is of diminishing importance asking customers to, ‘*Check out the partners below for a selection of landlord insurance (also known as Buy-to-let insurance)*’ (Tesco plc, 2013).

The most significant definitions in legal terms are not of the landlord but of the financial product they are using, this in effect defines them. The Mortgage Credit Directive Order 2015 creates two classes of BTL landlords—professional and consumer. Professionals are deemed to be carrying on a business while the consumer BTL landlord is one who has used a consumer BTL mortgage product which is defined in Article 4 of the Directive as: ‘a buy-to-let mortgage contract which is not entered into by the borrower wholly or predominantly for the purposes of a business carried on, or intended to be carried on, by the borrower’ (National Archives, 2015). These ‘consumer’ mortgages are now regulated (by the

FCA) while the professional ones are not. Under this definition, a distinction can be drawn between the ‘buy-to-let’ they describe and landlords with different motivations or intentions. One example would be ‘accidental landlords’ such as those who inherit a property or who move their main home and decide not to sell their original property, perhaps due to unfavourable market conditions. Elsewhere, the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia (n.d.) describes the term ‘buy-to-let’ as, ‘*a British phrase referring to the purchase of a property specifically to let out. A BTL mortgage is a mortgage specifically designed for this purpose.*’

Dictionary definitions of BTL are also somewhat vague and indistinguishable from general landlordism. For example, it is defined in one as: ‘of or relating to the practice of buying a property to let to tenants rather than to live in oneself’ (Free Dictionary, n.d.). And similarly, Cambridge Dictionaries (n.d.) define it as: ‘*relating to the practice of buying a house or apartment in order to rent it to someone else, to a person that does this, or to the house or apartment that is bought.*’ These further definitions from popular websites also do nothing to clarify the difference between being a landlord and being a BTL landlord. Although the term does communicate a sense of purpose as opposed to those ‘accidental’ landlords who may have inherited the property.

We can conclude from this that while BTL has become a recognised term (mainly through media coverage and its being tagged to financial products) in practical, legal and academic terms maintaining a separate category of private sector landlord as being a BTL landlord is questionable, though for the purposes of regulating financial products and analysing mortgage lending, classifying the product has become necessary. This separation offers a means of differentiation from ‘accidental’ landlords or landlords who let a property or properties for non-financial reasons or reasons that are incidental, such as those letting them to an employee.

For our purposes, the paper defines a BTL landlord as one who has bought a property with a mortgage to let out, but it is also recognised that public perceptions do not distinguish between types of landlords. We can further conclude that the BTL landlords of recent times differ only from the investor landlords of the early part of the twentieth century in terms of their source of finance. Whereas the earlier landlords are likely to have financed their property purchases through businessmen and other acquaintances who became bondholders (Elliot & McCrone, 1975), their recent counterparts overwhelmingly use mortgage finance.

4.1 Changing perspectives on landlords and the PRS

Whatever the current relevance of the term, the BTL landlord became a cultural icon in some quarters between 1997 and 2007, in a period that could be likened to a gold rush. Dedicated magazines and websites heralded the achievements of investors who had rapidly built up their property portfolios (Leyshon & French, 2009). Stories emphasised how not only those who already had substantial capital could make their fortune and secure their retirement but also those wily determined entrepreneurs starting from a very low base. They were perhaps the modern version of the barrow-boy turned retail giant of earlier decades. It became trendy to discuss your BTL investments, so much so that the term ‘dinner party landlords’ was coined (Williams, 2018). From professional footballers with cash to invest to car sales managers holding down a full-time job to maths teachers turning their arithmetic abilities to the calculation of rental and capital returns, this was the new incarnation of peoples’ capitalism.

It was a mindset of the kind Margaret Thatcher had invoked in the 1980s in support of her government's privatisation programme (Leyshon & French, 2009). With the dot.com stock market crisis undermining confidence in shares, and high-profile pension scandals introducing doubt in previously sacrosanct investments, property came to be seen as the ultimate source of financial security. At the same time, the breadth of profile of BTL landlords added a far greater degree to its social acceptability, as did the clear evidence that the changing nature of the workforce with its far greater mobility meant that few now doubted the contribution the PRS could and indeed needed to make.

Yet the rapid growth of BTL landlords also brought potential downsides stemming from the ease of entry to the market. This is demonstrated by the Wilsons, Fergus and his wife Judith, who were both maths teachers. Starting with just £10,000 in cash to invest, they amassed a property portfolio of 900 properties (Morley, 2015). Reflecting on this process Fergus Wilson was reported as saying that during the boom '*as long as you could spell your name, you would get a mortgage*' (Dunkley, 2016, para 3).

The ready availability of mortgage funds that stimulated the explosion of BTL landlords also meant that there was a potential for lack of professionalism and a reputation for providing poor quality housing and dealing unfairly with tenants. One in eight tenancies ended with the tenant feeling that the landlord had unfairly withheld all or part of their deposit (ODPM, 2003). Carlton et al. (2004) studied the private renting experiences of elderly tenants on behalf of Help the Aged highlighting the incidence of harassment and abuse and a lack of effective protection and effective legal recourse. Lister (2004) also detected that young people may be reluctant to exercise their legal rights and may simply wait to the end of a six-month assured shorthold tenancy to switch accommodation as a means of conflict resolution. This small sample qualitative study showed a range of levels of satisfaction with the tenant-landlord relationship and highlighted the lack of consensus on mutual obligations held.

Often BTL landlords turned to letting agents to address their lack of expertise or ease their management time responsibilities. A panel survey conducted in 2019 by the National Landlords Association reported that 57% of landlords use a letting agent (Da Silva, 2020). However, the status of the PRS has also been undermined by the activities of some letting agencies. Many of these were inexperienced and had only just been set up to cater for this new market. The Property Ombudsman (TPO) has, since 2009, been responsible for dispute resolution between both tenants and landlords and letting agents. It stated in its annual report for 2019 that there were 2516 resolved complaints against letting agents with 50% of these made by landlords and 48% by tenants (TPO, 2020).

Nevertheless, deregulation appears not to have unleashed a second wave of Rachmanism though relatively isolated cases of poor or illegal landlordism can still be seen in the press and online. The ghost of Rachman was raised by a Channel 4 documentary broadcast on 4th July 2011 entitled 'Landlords from Hell', which depicted landlords housing tenants in illegal sheds in parts of London, leading to questions being asked in the House of Commons. The same year the housing charity Shelter launched an 'Evict Rogue Landlords' campaign. It published an independent opinion poll with apparently shocking headline findings such as 7.5 million Britons having issues with their landlord in the previous 10 years, and that two-thirds of British people wanted stronger and clearer rules to protect tenants (Shelter, 2011).

Since 2011 there have been some reforms improving the rights of tenants (see below). Even so, in the 2019 UK General Election, the Labour Party campaign included a policy element on reforming the PRS. On 23 November, 2019, Jeremy Corbyn, its then leader, said,

'Labour will be on the side of tenants and take on dodgy landlords who have been given free rein for too long. Real change means taking on those who exploit the housing crisis to charge eye-watering rents for substandard accommodation.' (Syal, 2019).

There is no longer political consensus on the legislative framework for the PRS. Clearly, landlords continue to receive bad media coverage from time to time though not at the folk-devil level of Rachman. There are limited instances in which the activities of rogue landlords have created news headlines. In recent years perhaps only Nicholas van Hoogstraten, a British property baron with over 2000 properties, would come close to the notoriety Rachman had. Van Hoofstraten publicly referred to his tenants as 'filth' and was jailed for four years for ordering a grenade attack on a business colleague in the 1960s and again in 2002 for manslaughter (subsequently overturned in the Court of Appeal). He was eventually found liable again in a civil court which awarded £6 million in damages to the victim's family (BBC News, 2008).

Many reports contrast the wealth of the landlord with the poor conditions and insecurity in which their tenants live. The Wilsons noted above with their 900 properties worth around £240 m came to public prominence when they decided to no longer accept tenants on housing benefit and announced their intention to evict existing tenants in this position (Morley, 2015). In 2017, the Wilsons added South Asians to their list of banned tenants, a list which already included parents with children under 18, people on zero-hours contracts, single parents, and battered wives. He faced legal action from The Equality and Human Rights Commission for his latest selection criteria (BBC News, 2017).

Oldham (2017) described a millionaire landlord who had used intimidation to evict his tenants and was fined £7000 as a result. Glaze (2016) reported on two affluent doctors who were found to have 35 migrants living in their rented property sleeping on bare mattresses on the ground, 8 to a room. Even this level of overcrowding did not match the 2015 court case in which a landlord had been receiving £12,000 a month for a single terraced house in South London where an estimated 40 residents lived. Interestingly, the 'rogue' landlord concerned was not even the owner of the property but had himself rented it (Dugan, 2015). This has become known as 'rent-to-rent' and has a website dedicated to promoting this form of property business, described as 'the fastest way to making massive passive income in property.' Elsewhere rent-to-rent has been described as a 'legal fiasco' as the actual owners of the property could lose control of their ownership and could also transgress regulations on HMOs (Lunn & Collinson, 2013). Another story led with the claim that £2.5 billion of taxpayer's money was going to 'rogue' landlords in the form of housing allowance from tenants in 'non decent' lettings. It also reported that one-third of PRS homes were substandard (Kentish, 2017). This small sample of relatively recent coverage shows that media interest in 'rogue' landlords has not subsided. The perceptions of private landlords in the public consciousness remain partly negative despite the sheer number of them, and the facts that so many only ever let one property and that perhaps even a quarter unintentionally became landlords.

Another critical perspective on BTL landlords has been based on the effect their activity was having on the housing market, especially during the noughties boom. Descriptions such as 'destabilising', 'opportunistic' and 'speculative' have been widespread. Taylor (2008) concluded that, based on quantitative data from the Council of Mortgage Lenders, the National Housing Federation, HM Treasury and Nationwide Building Society among others, BTL activity had added up to 7.4% to property prices though with major regional differences. The effect was most pronounced in London and the South East. The

result of rising property prices was unaffordability, with first-time buyers depicted as being 'squeezed out' of the market. Jones and Watkins (2009, p.164) identified that '*Over the last decade unaffordability has systematically engulfed most of urban Britain.*' Spriggs (2008) argued that a contribution of BTL in the noughties was to dislocate the link between income and house prices that had helped provide stability to the housing market for decades.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, rather than being rogues or Rigsbys, much of the negativity was restricted to economics, or perhaps even jealousy, as BTL landlords were perceived as making 'easy money'. Nygaard and Gibb's (2005) Glasgow study found that the case for describing BTL as destabilizing was unproven and that it was entirely plausible that this new phenomenon could be sustainable in the long term as part of a structural change in the nature of the PRS. However, this view gained little traction.

Overall, notwithstanding the publicised cases of poor or even illegal landlordism and criticisms of BTL landlords, the perceived pricing of first-time buyers out of the market and distorting the market with their speculation, the image of the private landlord has arguably improved. It prompted Crook and Kemp (2011, p.1) to argue, '*From being almost a pariah in the 1970s, the private landlord has become, if not respected, then at least respectable once again.*'

5 Landlords' perceptions of their image

This more positive view is not borne out by a subsequent study undertaken by YouGov that surveyed the general public asking which words they associated with landlords. The most often selected words were 'Greedy' (50%) 'Difficult' (36%) and 'Wealthy' (35%) (YouGov cited in Houseshop, 2017). In addition, as discussed earlier, over the last century, media portrayals of private landlords have remained overwhelmingly negative. Perhaps sometimes for good reason, but largely from the nature of what is considered newsworthy.

Our survey of Edinburgh landlords in 2016 examines how landlords see their image with the general public and in the media. It considers the position subsequent to the post 'golden period' of BTL and the post-financial crisis, and at a point in time when the sector is arguably reaching maturity.

A convenience approach was used to sample the landlords because of the lack of a formal sampling frame and the difficulties of recruiting willing respondents. This approach has some limitations but is a practical solution to a difficult research task. Landlords were recruited in three different ways, (1) from lettings advertisements, (2) attendees at a local landlords' association meeting, (3) letting agent clients. A total of 18 interviews were conducted. A brief questionnaire was completed in order to collect some basic information to profile each participant. A semi-structured interview format was used with the researcher preparing an interview schedule in advance but allowing sufficient flexibility for the participants to develop points of interest to the study. The audio-recorded interviews were subsequently transcribed, ready for analysis. This analysis was performed within the NviVo application (version 10) using a memoing and coding process that produced themes to frame the analysis.

The characteristics of each landlord are listed in Table 2 in the Appendix. The average age of the landlords was approximately 53 years. The average length of time spent as a landlord was 7.33 years and the average portfolio size was 3.88 properties. These properties were spread across eight different Edinburgh wards. Seven of the 18

participants (one couple) made some use of letting agencies, but in only two cases was this on a full-service basis. Of those participants who expressed a preference, the most important subgroup was students and hence many landlords had properties that were licensed as houses in multiple occupation (HMOs).

The results presented here relate just to their views on two themes: first, the public perception of landlords, and, second, media portrayals. Both relate to the social acceptability of being a landlord. Landlords' views on how the public see them, and whether there has been any recent rethinking of perceptions, are presented primarily through a series of quotes. The same approach is then applied to views on media stories.

5.1 Public perceptions

Participants were asked to describe what they saw as the current public perception of them as a group. As a follow up, they were prompted to say whether or not they thought they were seen as 'valued in society'. Finally, they were asked whether public perception today had changed from earlier generations of landlords. The names in this analysis have been changed to provide anonymity. Overall, the majority of participants reported views that suggested they were subject to a negative public perception. As **Catherine** exemplifies,

'I don't think we are valued. I think the views of the public of us are as people taking money off people who can't afford to pay.'

The same theme was repeated by **Fred**,

'I think some people would look at landlords and say you are just ripping off tenants.'

Arthur felt the strongest antipathy was held for landlords like him with larger portfolios going as far as to say they were seen as a '*moral evil*'. For **Geoff** the public's views are simply a reflection of media content and is philosophical about it,

Private landlords are doomed to go unloved in my opinion. I don't let it bother me. The public bases their opinion on media stories—I read about a guy who took a standard-sized house and divided it up into nine tiny bedrooms. If I did that one day I would wake up and find my picture in the paper. All my rooms are decent sized. I don't need the hassle.

Continuing the relaxed resignation response to adverse perception **Sanjay** states,

I think it's just the same—you know private landlords always gonna have a certain reputation—like politicians and estate agents ... it's just a stereotype ... but it doesn't really change. I don't see a time when landlords are going to be social heroes, housing the nation, heroes like nurses or something.

Many of the landlords' comments were prefaced with 'some people think ...' which suggested that the negative perceptions of landlords were not seen as universal. **Oliver** comments,

In these times of austerity, there is an increasing sense of envy ... suggests the possibility that attitudes to landlords may fluctuate with the fortunes of those seen as 'have-nots'.

Turning to the question of whether current public perception was better or worse than in earlier generations, there was a range of views expressed with some thinking perceptions are better now than in the past and others seeing reasons for things getting worse. One reason for things improving was that there are now simply so many landlords, and

there may be a realisation among the public that anyone can find themselves fitting the description. **Sarah** puts it this way,

Compared to earlier generations, I think people's opinions today are based more on what they have seen first-hand—I think maybe in the past they were folk devils—based on one or two famous examples, or growing out of the history books.

Perhaps referring to the Glasgow rents strikes, **Winifred** feels that private landlords in Scotland will always carry some kind of negative stereotype that she said went back since well before she was born even. She continues,

Well, so many people are private landlords now, even by accident like me. When it was all buy-to-let boom time, then there was this image of a spiv type character – you know get rich quick types ... but now were all it, aren't we?

Simon adopts a more negative assessment of today's public perception when suggesting that the public now viewed landlords as akin to the idle rich who do nothing but just 'watch the money roll in'. **Simon** offers one reason why things may get worse, namely the fact that more and more people are being drawn into the PRS, and some of these people may lack a basic understanding of what being a landlord entails.

5.2 Media portrayals

Negative or positive publicity could play a role in determining the intention to become a landlord or continue as an investor. Participants were hence asked their views on the media's coverage of stories related to the PRS and private landlords.

Arthur sees journalists as providing one-sided negative coverage of landlords,

... they are always on the look-out for stories about bad landlords – it makes us all look so bad. You never hear anything good.

A similar point is made by **Sanjay** who states that,

... the only time you read about a landlord in the papers is when he has been fined, or arrested or something ... it give a false picture.

Tabloid newspapers were pandering to widely held misconceptions about landlords, but more balanced coverage could be found in other media, according to **Lewis**,

... the mass selling papers, in my opinion, target the landlords to sell more papers to their readers; however, the papers I read have well-balanced articles.

Derek calls the media's coverage '*appalling*' whereas **Jeremy** is philosophical about the media coverage,

...there is no point worrying or taking it personally, bad news sells. Imagine a headline – 'Tenant and landlord enjoy a pint together' ... compared with anything starting 'Rogue landlord....'

As a supplement to the question on media coverage, participants were also asked to recall a recent media item on private landlords. Unsurprisingly these were overwhelmingly negative. **Brian** recounts a story about overcrowding in a migrant letting and similarly, **Winifred** recalls,

I read about some guy in Ayrshire who had been cheating taxpayers for 20 years – putting benefit claimants in disgusting conditions; they called it ‘houses of horror’ or something like that ...terrible – it was about a year ago.

Not all participants chose to mention stories featuring landlords as villains. **Simon** recalls one of the biggest landlords in the UK planning to sell all his properties because of the new legislation (presumably Fergus Wilson). While **Arthur** mentions a story about a new regulation concerning the immigration status of tenants,

I saw that in England, and maybe in Scotland too, landlords have to check their tenants’ immigration status ... and that if they don’t do this they could get fined £3000 for each tenant. What are we now? The Home Office (government department)?

There may be some positive benefits from the negative stories carried in the media. **Sara** calls them a ‘good thing’ and **Sanjay** recalls how he changed how he went about handling deposits after reading a local story,

I remember when that landlord in Edinburgh got fined £3,500 for not doing his deposits properly. To be honest, I wasn’t doing it right until then. The next day after reading about him I sorted it out. I think those companies doing the deposit schemes had a real boost then.

These perspectives noted by landlords are encapsulated in Table 1. To a degree there is an overlap between public perceptions and media representation. However, there is also a sense that landlords belong to the richer echelons of society while tenants are from the poorer strata. This finding suggests that longstanding attitudes toward landlords persist despite the new BTL era.

In summary, the study finds that the private landlords of Edinburgh feel mostly negatively perceived by the general public and that it has changed little with the growth of BTL. The media is seen as only interested in highlighting negative stories about landlords even if they are very much in the minority. The participants’ views were somewhere between angry and resigned at the media’s coverage of private landlords. However, this does not suggest that they condoned the behaviour of the landlords who came under the media spotlight. There is a strong feeling that the media’s bias towards negative stories frames the public’s anti-private landlord narrative. It may also serve to undermine the contribution they were making to society, and potentially government support for the sector. If, as Crook and Kemp argued in 2011, landlords were respected as well as respectable at that time, then this had yet to filter through to the landlords themselves. On the other hand, these negativities have not deterred their continuing investment in the sector.

6 Policy changes since the millennium

With the growth of the PRS has come more regulation, mainly in the form of ‘consumer rights’ for tenants. These regulations vary across parts of the UK. To take Scotland that has devolved housing powers as an example the following have been introduced:

- HMO regulation in the Civic Government (Scotland) Act 1982 (Licensing of Houses in Multiple Occupation) Order 2000 (as amended in 2002 and 2003)
- Landlord registration required by Part 8 of the Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004

Table 1 Main Negative Elements of Public Perceptions and Media Representations of Private Landlords

Public Perceptions	Exploiting the poor	Envy	Idle rich	Unacceptable treatment of tenants
Media Representation	Focus on bad behaviour	Exploiting immigrants	Overcrowding	Identifying illegal behaviour

- The Repairing Standard provided for by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006
- Tenancy deposits protection under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006
- Electrical safety under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014
- Letting Agent Code of Practice for letting and managing agents in 2018.

All of these new regulations can be seen as improving standards of private landlordism, and were usually in response to perceived publicised failings of landlords or letting agents.

There is a continuing view of landlords exploiting tenants, so it underpins, for example, landlord registration to improve management standards. In England, many local authorities have set up voluntary accreditation schemes for landlords to sign up to (Rugg & Rhodes, 2018).

An alternative, more proactive, approach is to root out ‘rogue’ landlords. In 2016, the UK government provided £5 m to a range of local authorities to tackle rogue landlords. The funding was aimed at increasing property inspections and prosecuting landlords (CLG, 2016). In London there is the ‘Rogue Landlord and Agent Checker’ website that enables tenants to check whether their landlord or letting agent has committed a housing-related offence. In 2018, a national “Rogue Landlord Database” was set up so public agencies can share information (Rugg & Rhodes, 2018).

It is clear that the narrative about rogue landlords influencing policy has grown with the rise of the PRS. What is less clear is what is a rogue landlord. There is a potential spectrum from landlords who simply try to avoid legal responsibilities through to criminal activity in the *Rachman* tradition. Nevertheless, there is a policy acceptance that the behaviour of landlords needs to be regulated as there are instances of significant negative impacts on tenants. This regulation it seems is deemed a necessary requirement to enable the PRS to establish itself and grow further.

At the same time, the UK government appears to be concerned about the over speculative motivations of BTL landlords. There were significant changes to the taxation of landlords in 2016 that seem to be in response to the perception that landlords are making excess profits. The main changes were an increase in transaction tax and the amount of income tax relief landlords receive on residential property finance costs. The tax relief was severely reduced by restricting it to the basic rate of tax from 6 April 2017.

7 Conclusions

This study combined an historical analysis of media items and other sources with interviews with landlords to assess to what extent the image of landlords has changed with the BTL revolution. It also examines how the sector and the government have responded to the media’s portrayal and public’s perceptions of landlords. In this way we contribute further understanding to the development of private landlordism in its current BTL manifestation and government policy. It also offers fresh insight into the responses of landlords to the way society frames their contribution.

BTL rapidly expanded the PRS in the UK, a sector of the housing market that seemed almost on its deathbed in the 1970s. It introduced a new term to the English lexicon. It was relatively easy to join the party, and many new types of people were attracted to private landlordism who would never in the past have done so. It was arguably an opportunity to turn the page on the historic negativity associated with private landlords.

However, the BTL landlords of the 'golden' decade were often seen as 'get-rich-quick' speculators siphoning off housing from would be low-income owner-occupiers who they outbid. Furthermore, some of these new BTL landlords had limited property management knowledge but were attracted by the high returns in the property boom of the noughties. Similarly, fledgling letting agents sprouted up to fill the new management vacuum. Together with the weak legislative framework that now appertained to the PRS this lack of professionalism was a potential recipe for problems for tenants.

What did not change was the media's appetite for stories about rogue landlords. This long tradition of seeking out and highlighting portrayals of negative activities of any landlord misdemeanours has continued. It has coloured public and political perspectives of landlords. Government has apparently responded by tightening regulation of landlords introducing a string of consumer rights for tenants and attacking speculation by increasing taxation on landlords. In addition, there is a continuing narrative of 'rogue landlords' that has obliged the government to take specific measures to address this perceived problem. The interviews with landlords reveal a resignation and sanguinity about the position that they see as belying their contribution to society, but very few seem set to leave the sector.

The focus of the research has been on the impact of perceptions on landlords. Nevertheless, the research is limited in terms of quantifying (changing) public attitudes and understanding the precise motivations of policy makers. Further research is needed on these issues through interviews with government staff and the public as crucial stakeholders. In addition, how the recent development of public policies could affect investment in the sector is important for the future of the sector. A paper by Jones and Mostafa (2022) suggests that the recent tax increases still leave the PRS profitable. More widely it would be useful to consider attitudes towards private landlords in other countries and how they have influenced policy formulation and investment in the PRS.

Notwithstanding recent policy innovations the BTL revolution has not fundamentally changed public perceptions of landlords. The legislative developments during World War I were shown to be triggered by rent rises by exploitative landlords and the rent strikes that came in reaction to them. A century later and landlords in the UK across the news media and are still portrayed as exploitative, with the ever-present 'rogue' epithet a seemingly inevitable part of the headline.

Appendix

See Table TF Tenant find FS Full service

Table 2 Characteristics of Individual Landlords in Survey

Name	Sex	Age	Landlord Since	# of Lettings	Wards	Sub-markets	Agency	Employment Status
Geoff	M	48	2003	6	City centre/Southside	Students (HMO)	TF*	FT Employed
Sanjay	M	42	2011	3	City centre	Students/ Migrants	No	FT Business Owner
Brian	M	65	2014	1	Southside	None	FS	Retired
Jiang	M	30	2013	2	Meadows	Students/ Chinese	No	FT Employed
Winifred	F	74	2013	1	Inverleith	None	FS	Retired
Arthur & Janet	M/F	68 & 64	2006	10	Inverleith	No claimant	No	FT Landlord
Barry	M	33	2013	1	City centre	Students (HMO)	No	Full time Employed
Jeremy	M	48	2012	1	Southside/Newington	None	TF	FT Employed
Sarah	F	37	2011	2	City centre	Students (HMO)	No	PT Employed
Dave	M	52	2010	4	Meadows/Morningside	Students (HMO)	No	FT Business owner
Lewis	M	52	2004	12	Southside/Newington/City centre	Students	No	FT Landlord
Oliver	M	46	2009	3	Southside/Newington	Post grad students or newly graduate employed	No	FT Self Employed
Jack	M	68	2008	8	Meadows/Morningside	None	No	FT landlord
Simon	M	58	1997	6	Not specified	None	TF	FT Employed (property management)
Catherine	F	42	2006	2	City centre/Murrayfield	None	No	FT Employed
Fred	M	46	2006	1	Newington	None	No	FT Employed
Derek	M	66	2008	5	Southside	Students (HMO)	TF	Retired
Graham	M	65	2012	2	Colinton	None	Yes & No	Retired

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