



Rising damp and falling expectations

## Playing Housey Housey

**The government claims that its Housing Bill (introduced to the Commons on November 30) will extend choice for tenants and improve the quality and quantity of rented housing. The bill, which is certainly radical and innovative, is also designed to further reduce the housing role of local authorities. In this respect, it will probably succeed.**

In the declining private-rented sector, the aim is to encourage landlords to let by increasing rents and decreasing tenants' security of tenure. While the rights of existing tenants will remain largely unchanged, new tenants will find the power balance decisively tilted in favour of landlords. New types of tenancies will be introduced which will not be subject to the existing fair rent system and rents will generally rise to market levels. It will also be very much easier for landlords to evict tenants, making it more difficult for tenants to complain about disrepair and other problems.

This section of the bill goes

much further than this government's previous attempts to revitalise private renting and represents a marked reversal of policies introduced over the past 30 years to protect tenants. These reforms are also unlikely to achieve their objective. The sector will almost certainly continue to shrink because conditions in the housing market will still make it more profitable for landlords to sell.

In the public sector, the government intends to take further the privatisation begun with the 'right to buy' policy. Indeed, the legislation clearly echoes the government's education policy with its emphasis on schools 'opting out' of council control. Tenants in individual houses will be able to choose either to stay with the council or to pick a new landlord from an approved list (to comprise property companies and housing associations).

On estates, a transfer cannot take place if more than half the tenants object and even if an estate is transferred, individuals can choose to remain council tenants. Once transferred, the tenancies become part of the private sector and have market rents. Opting back into council control will be forbidden

and when tenants leave or die the properties may be sold on the market.

The government believes that council housing is so unpopular that large numbers of tenants will choose to transfer. In fact, many council tenants have been rehoused from poor quality private accommodation and they are unlikely to want to return, particularly when they realise that their rents will be increased. A recent trial ballot in the London borough of Richmond indicated that 70% of tenants would want to stay with the council.

Housing associations have indicated that they will not want to take over properties without the full co-operation of the councils concerned, although this may well be forthcoming from Tory authorities and even from some hard-pressed Labour councils. Few private landlords will want to take over run-down estates, especially if there are complex management problems arising from remaining council tenants.

The final plank of the bill is the formation of Housing Action Trusts (Hats) to take over council housing in specific areas of housing stress. They will operate in much the same way as urban development corporations and be run by an unaccountable board appointed by the environment secretary. Private developers will be heavily involved. The aim will be to improve the housing stock and then privatise it. Initially, the government intends to set up four Hats, with at least one in London.

Hats will have no responsibilities to house the homeless. Indeed, it is the 12,000 families 'temporarily' housed in hotels and those on council waiting lists and living in overcrowded and inadequate conditions who gain nothing from a bill designed to favour private landlords and developers. The government's determination to create a 'property-owning democracy' has again taken precedence over action to meet real housing needs. •

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