

Defend secure tenancies – No means test

“In what kind of Victorian nightmare world, would tenants be forced to move house if you got a job or promotion, or if someone dies? What new ‘poor law guardians’ would vet our income and family life? ‘Existing and past council tenants have paid many times over for our homes. Tenants and those on the waiting list, like millions more in Britain, cannot afford exorbitant mortgages or private rents. We need a new generation of first class public housing to create homes and jobs.” **Eileen Short, Chair of Defend Council Housing**

Prime Minister David Cameron has thrown out a threat to the security of council tenants. Cameron said he wanted to time-limit all new council and housing association tenancies to as little as five years: ‘maybe in five or 10 years you will be doing a different job and be better paid and you won’t need that home, you will be able to go into the private sector.’ David Cameron (3 Aug 2010)

This makes a lie of the Prime Minister’s pre-election promises that he would respect tenants’ rights. It follows savage cuts to Housing Benefit announced in the June budget, and threats to slash spending on public services.

Even if unscripted, this new threat steps up what is an ideological attack on a fundamental principle of council housing as a pillar of Britain’s welfare state. It is the latest in a long line of such attacks on tenants’ rights (see over).

It hits at the principles underpinning the post war consensus millions of people support. Will he also say people who can ‘afford’ the private market will be forced to pay for their health care or kids education?

We need publicly-owned, secure and affordable council housing as an alternative to the high costs, risks and insecurity of buying or private renting.

A home, not an asset

Council tenants need and have the same right to a ‘home’ as anyone else – not just a temporary place to put their head down until they find something better. Good quality council housing is vital to ensure that whatever we earn everyone – and our children, and parents – has a home that’s secure and affordable.

The principle that needs defending is that council housing should be a mainstream tenure of choice, available to all who want to rent as an alternative to the private market.

The solution to a shortage of decent, affordable, secure and accountable council housing is to build more! That would also have the benefit of creating jobs and opening up council housing allocation policies to the wide range of people who used to live on council estates re-establishing mixed and sustainable communities

No transit camps of poverty

Means testing council tenants, to force out anyone who gets above the bread line, would destroy communities. It would turn council estates into transit camps, undermining any kind of social cohesion. If anyone whose income rises above the breadline is forced out or threatened with rent rises, it would reduce the mixture of incomes on estates and increase the concentration of deprivation.

Means-testing would intensify the poverty trap. And differing rent levels is a crude step to bring market forces into council housing.

Poverty trap

The threat of losing a secure tenancy or having to pay higher rents would increase the poverty trap and be a strong disincentive to finding (better paid) work.

It is wrong to force someone out of their home and into the private sector because you judge they can afford it – they could be out of work tomorrow. Short term work and fluctuating incomes are a major cause of mortgage arrears.

Means-tested benefits are already a major problem for millions in short-term or low-paid work or running small businesses, giving little alternative to flexible or part time ‘informal’ (undeclared) – and non-trade union organised – work.

More privatisation

These attacks on tenants’ rights and council housing are part of the push for further deregulation and privatisation. Private developers and landlords want to get their hands on councils’ publicly-owned land, replace it with more high cost private housing, and drive out those who can’t afford it.

The right to a secure tenancy was won by tenants’ determined campaigning. This forced the Labour government to include ‘security of tenure’ in the 1979 Housing Bill, which was then included in the Conservatives’ Housing Act 1980. Those who are opposed in principle to high quality public services available to all and who want everyone forced into the hands of the private >>>

Lobby of parliament – Tell MPs: Hands off our tenancies!
House of Commons, Monday 11th October, 12-3pm,
Committee room 7

“Introducing ‘fixed term’ tenancies will be counter-productive and is not the answer to the housing crisis. The threat of losing your home is going to be a major disincentive to getting a job and trying to improve your lot. It will turn council estates into areas of high deprivation, where only the very poorest can live. The answer is not to restrict access to council housing but to increase the supply. Provide genuinely affordable homes with secure tenancies where tenants know they can stay as long as they need; this encourages tenants to look after and invest their community, environment and their own future.” **Patricia Rowe, Taunton Deane tenant**

>>> market are determined to undermine and weaken the position of council tenants. Stigmatising council housing as ‘housing of last resort’ is one method. Trying to take away our ‘secure’ tenancies or impose means testing or time limits is another.

Unemployment, on council estates as elsewhere, is the result of increasingly low-paid and insecure work. The problem of homelessness, overcrowding and long waiting lists are not caused by security of tenure, but by lack of investment and failure to build new homes. There are two million less council and RSL (housing association) homes now than 30 years ago, due to privatisation and failure to replace homes sold off. That’s why we have two million households on waiting lists.

Many on the waiting list are not judged in ‘priority need’ – they are the butchers, bakers, teachers and nurses who want a first class council home with lower rents, secure tenancies and a democratically accountable landlord. Investment in council housing is central to meeting this need.

Robbed – not subsidised

Government is robbing council tenants (not subsidising us) to the tune of £1.5 billion a year –while over the last twenty years billions of pounds of public subsidy has been poured into RSLs, and taxation has favoured homeowners and more recently buy to let landlords. The bank bailout is the biggest home ownership subsidy of all time.

Hands off our homes, our rents and our rights. Build more council homes

Cameron admitted in Birmingham that “not everyone will support this and there will be quite a big argument”. Simon Hughes MP and others have already warned the Government not to pursue this policy, mindful of the anger earlier attacks on secure tenure have provoked.

Tenants have fought determined campaigns against privatisation and to defend our homes and rights. This attack will provoke fury among council and housing association tenants. With the cuts in housing benefit, the Government is declaring war on tenants.

We will broaden and strengthen our united campaign. Together tenants, trade unions, councillors, MPs and campaigners have fought off previous attacks on council housing, and now the voice of protest needs to ring loud in the ear of every councillor and MP.

History of attacks we have seen off

June 2006 Smith Institute Report ‘Rethinking social housing’ calls for an end to secure tenancies

Feb 2007 Hills Report rejects pressure from Minister Ruth Kelly and others to attack security of tenure

Nov 2007 Ministers forced to retract proposed means-testing clause in Housing and Regeneration Bill

October 2008 Chartered Institute of Housing ‘Rethinking Housing’ report calls for tenancy reviews and moving better off tenants into private sector or to market rents. In response to angry opposition, CIH issue an ‘open letter’ claiming they were misrepresented, and later retract the proposals.

October 2008 New Local Government Network recommend market rents, end of secure tenancies, forcing older tenants to move from family homes.

Nov 2008 Smith Institute report wants to abolish housing benefit, sell off more council housing, ‘flexible’ tenancies with annual reviews

Dec 2008 Iain Duncan Smith’s Centre for Social Justice argues for end of any obligation to provide council housing, to encourage private landlordism

April 2009 Localis report Principles for Social Housing Reform, co-authored by Councillor Stephen Greenhalgh, recommends councils should “exploit [the] huge reserve of capital value” in their houses and the land by selling it off and charging “market terms”

June 2009 Tenant Services Authority published draft standards trying to water down security of tenure; after protests it backed off these threats – saying that landlords “must offer and issue the most secure form of tenure” and deleting the offending line (Nov 2009)

April 2010 David Cameron promised before the election: “We support social housing, we will protect it, and we respect social tenants’ rights.” A spokesperson for the Conservatives said the party had “no policy to change the current or future security of tenure of tenants in social housing”.

● **Organise a local meeting – contact DCH for speakers**

● **Pass a motion at your union, tenants group, Labour Party or other organisation: oppose attacks on secure tenancies, means testing and cuts, and demand investment in existing and new council housing**

● **Lobby Conservative Party conference 12 noon, 3 October in Birmingham,**

● **Lobby parliament 11 October to say: Join the Lobby 12-3pm at House of Commons committee room 7. Contact your MP and see them in Parliament or locally.**