

Looking Back - and Ahead

by Harold Campbell

For some time before I left England to take up residence in Portugal both the National Federation of Housing Associations and the Housing Corporation were urging the thousands of Associations to encourage tenant participation in their affairs, at all levels, including representation on their boards of management. The government was kicking them, too. There was much scepticism on the part of some, and concern on the part of many. There was a reluctance even to experiment, a tendency to prevaricate even by those not willing to reject the call. There was the usual conservative reaction by established institutions, and, in particular, by the older "trusts" - partly through inertia and partly because of a genuine fear that a long established and highly successful tradition of management would be disrupted and their paternalistic care of tenants perhaps impaired. I believe there has been some improvement in attitudes since then, with encouraging results.

Tenant Involvement - and Crime Prevention

Stephen Platt sent me a copy of a report by HART (Housing Association Research and Training Ltd) on 'Tenant Involvement in Housing Associations' ¹ and it has also some relevance to Co-operative housing which is the ultimate in tenant involvement.

The report refers to a series of crime prevention initiatives in run-down residential areas in many different parts of the country initiated by NACRO (the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders), and in particular to a recent (1986) report entitled 'Neighbourhood Approaches to Crime Prevention' I quote the conclusion drawn:

"The problems of run down residential areas are not just physical or social but, rather, reflect a destructive relationship between the two . . . NACRO's neighbourhood approach to crime prevention, with its emphasis on the meaningful participation of residents in decision making and the response and co-ordinated delivery of services, provides a framework in which crime prevention problems can be tackled and the decline of run down areas can be reversed".

An Example from Canada

I can confirm this finding from the experience of a formerly fearsome estate (still architecturally hideous) I visited in Toronto some years back,

at the instance of the Housing Corporation of Canada. Before a tenants' association (tenants' union) took over, the crime rate was terrifying, rent arrears impossibly high, the consequences of social deprivation in juvenile delinquency alone frightening and the distracted housing officials at County Hall at their wits' end. Only after a long and bitterly opposed fight by the association officers to get the Housing Committee to agree an experiment in tenant management was the point conceded. In the space of a couple of years the situation had been turned round. I met a transformed tenancy and a convinced city Housing Department team. But, most encouraging, the tenants' own cynicism had been overcome.

The HART report argues:

'By involving residents in decision-making directed to improve the physical and social environment massive improvements can be made in morale which then affect all areas of life including crime prevention'.

Early Advocacies for Housing Co-operatives

More than a generation ago I began making the case for housing Co-ops; I, and a very few others in Britain - notably H.L. Score of the Co-operative Permanent Building Society, and Harry Moncrieff, Chief Architect of Co-operative Planning Ltd whose contribution in those early days was outstanding. I was personally arraigned at conferences which I was invited to address (at a later date by such distinguished bodies as the Institute of Housing) as an impractical dreamer. I am privileged to have been described by Dick Crossman, who was at the time the Minister of Housing and was addressing a meeting at Caxton Hall, Westminster, called by his Ministry to announce some new government policy, as "that Co-operative fanatic".

Co-operative housing was then 'not on the agenda' as they now say, of any political party except of course, the Co-operative Party. No one (or a minute few) took it seriously, despite its evident successes abroad. More than once my arguments from these successes, which I had read, and then seen and heard about at first-hand, were dismissed by our 'Little Englanders' as irrelevant to conditions at home, without lessons for any of us in the indigent housing movement. As the problems on municipal and other tenanted estates grew, a few more people in positions of responsibility began to give half an ear to our case. I was once called to the offices of the National Federation of Housing Societies (as it was called, then) and asked by its Chief Officer: "What exactly is Co-op housing?"

Wide Acceptance Now

Now it has become eminently respectable - a plank in every party platform, supported by establishment figures. It has received episcopal

favour; this Government commends it; the N.F.H.A. has its own Co-operative housing officer; the Housing Corporation allocates a modest part of its funds for the purpose of assisting the promotion of housing Co-ops; and even Royalty advocates it - Prince Charles has become (as one newspaper describes him) the 'Co-operative Prince'.

It was high time I retired from the scene! A new generation of energetic enthusiasts and practitioners have taken over and much splendid work is now being done.

And the Argument of Exclusiveness?

One of the many criticisms in the abstract made against my arguments as I stumped the country trying to arouse a spark of interest, was that housing Co-ops - where management and control rest with a democracy of all the tenants on an estate or in a community - were bound to become elitist, an exclusive and excluding seat, offering tenancies as they arise only to the acceptable, discriminating against disadvantaged groups and even racist. Once or twice I was hooted at when I suggested this need not be so.

Today those antics have their answer in 'Who Lives in Housing Co-ops?'² based on a detailed and well documented study, - the findings from 54% of all Co-ops receiving Housing Association grant (that is, where-ownership rests collectively with the tenants) and of all management Co-ops (where ownership of the estate remains with the municipality or non-Co-op housing association who employ the Co-op as estate managers). Simon Underwood and his colleagues found that 'Co-ops are housing a wide variety of types of household which would have difficulty finding housing or are known to have difficulty in coping with poor conditions'.

This first ever national survey of housing Co-operatives was reviewed fully in Journal 59 and its details are worth re-visiting there. Its general conclusion is encouragingly positive:-

"We are convinced that this survey has demonstrated that continued public investment in Co-operative housing is fully justified".

References

- 1 'Heard and Ignored: Tenant Involvement in Housing Associations' by Stephen Platt, Rita Piepe and Judith Smyth. Published 1987 by HART Ltd, 18c Lennox Road South, Portsmouth PO5 2HR.
- 2 'Who Lives in Housing Co-ops?' The Report of a National Survey of Housing Co-operatives and their Tenant Members by Simon

Underwood, Steve Ross and Charlie Legg. Published November 1986 by Solon Co-operative Housing Services Ltd and the National Federation of Housing Associations.

The Author

HAROLD CAMPBELL was Secretary of the Co-operative Party until his retirement. He was also active in many other spheres of Co-operative development and is particularly and warmly noted for his leadership in the promotion of housing Co-operatives.