

**The myth of area improvement**

# **HOUSING ACTION?**

**CDP<sub>PEC</sub>**

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**Angela Birtill & Steven Taylor**

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We dedicate this book to the people of Kilburn, especially those tenants who were involved in the campaign for better housing and living conditions in the HAA's. The following lists those people who were active in the campaign as well as those who have attended public meetings or supported the tenants campaign in any way. We apologise to all those people we may have omitted. The tenants who provided us with the quotations are indicated by italics and we thank them for their time and patience. Finally we hope that this book is helpful to tenants associations and activists throughout the country.

Yours in solidarity

Angela Birtill and Steven Taylor.

Frank Alexander, Lisa Alexander, Mr Ademyieve, *Tony Arku-Dadson*, Radi Ayub, Mr Jack Booker, Mrs Booker, Ana Bowman, Frances Britten, Phoebe Buck, Ms Butler, Duncan Cage, *Norman Cage*, *Joan Cage*, A. Callaghan, Mrs Callaghan, Jenny Colin, Mr & Mrs Courtney, Ms F. Cohen, Allah Dad-Khan, Brian Day, Grace Day, Mr Day, Jenny Diski, Mary Donoghue, Mr Donoghue, Pat Dolan, Mr Donovan, Ms Donovan, Ms Doolan, *Margaret Douglas*, Ms Drury, Mr Fawcett, *Helen Fenty*, Mary Ferguson, Ms Fitzpatrick, M. Forlin, Emanuel Galea, Elsie Giles, Tom Giles, Mr Glasheen, Mrs Glasheen, Mr Gleeson, Mrs Gleeson, *Mr Ghiszoneck*, Rose Gordon, Ted Gray, Ms Harris-White, Vera Harding, Mark Harvey, B. Hughes, Alice Helm, *Eddie Hennessey*, Bridie Hennessey, Thomas Hennessey, *Kathleen Hill*, Tom Hill, *Heather Johnson*, Susan Johnson, Mr Kelly, Mrs Kelly, *Gardner Kumalo*, Ms Khumalo, *Wellington Kumalo*, Mr Leech, Ms Leech, E. Linton, *John Lynn*, *Sheila Lynn*, Mrs Lipop, T. Maygawk, Margaret Mackie, Dianne Marshall, *Estella McEntire*, *Sheila McCormack*, *Eileen McGrath*, John McLaughlin, Peter McLaughlin, Vincent Miller, C. Moran, Hilda Murphy, Michael Murphy, Brigid Murphy, *Mr Murphy*, John Mackin, *Mrs Murphy*, Mr Madden, Stephen Nathan, *Tabi Ndiweni*, *Sithabile Ndiweni*, Kathleen Nolan, P. O'Brien, Mr O'Brien, Ms O'Brien, *Bridgit O'Connor*, Mr O'Shea, Mrs O'Shea, Mr O'Sullivan, Mrs O'Sullivan, Mr O'Connell, Mrs O'Neill, Frank Osei-Banson, *Kay Parnell*, Mrs Pinner, K. Parsons, Ms Riordan, Mr Riordan, *Karen Rathbone*, Jeremy Rathbone, *Mimi Renwick*, Michael Rickard, Irene Roberts, Lynne Robinson, Ms Rutler, A. Resuk, Peggy Shanahan, Michael Shanahan, *Mick Shanahan*, Hilda Shanahan, *Dan Sheehan*, *Lee Siwela*, B. Smith, Ian Storey, Ms Sullivan, Mrs L. Simmons, Susan Stewart, H. Shearsey, *Ann Thomas*, Lesley Thomas, Robert Thomas, Terrance Thomas, Muriel Thomas, Mary Tobin, *Geoff Walker*, *Jean Walker*, Philip Wolmouth, Mr Walsh, Mrs B. Walsh, Dave Weiland, Alan Williamson, Mr & Mrs Williams, Carmen Wilson, A. Newton.

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# 1

## FOREWORD

by CDPPEC Editorial Group

IN 1975 the Community Development Project workers published one of their first inter-project reports. Titled *The Poverty of the Improvement Programme*, the Report documented the failure of the housing improvement programmes of successive governments, since improvement work first began to supplant new build as the main focus of local authority housing expenditure (following the 1964 Housing Act). Within two years of the publication of the report, the housing situation had deteriorated so much further that, following the refusal of the Home Office (the major sponsor of CDP) to provide funds for a reprint of the report, project workers, organised as the Community Development Project Political Economy Collective, undertook the publication of a revised, expanded and up-dated version of that report. The major argument of the report, strengthened by the two years further experience of local project workers, was that, "*With the current economic situation and the increasingly savage cuts being imposed on local authority housing programmes, residents in unimproved working class areas have little reason to expect any rapid advance in their fight for better housing conditions.*"

*Housing Action?* is, in a strong sense, a successor to *The Poverty of the Improvement Programme*. It

examines the experience of tenants and residents in two Housing Action Areas in the London Borough of Camden up to 1982 — that is, eight years after the 1974 Housing Act which brought the concept of HAAs into being. This Housing Act, described as "Old Policies in New Clothing" in the CDPPEC report of 1977, reinforced the Government's belief that the problem of bad housing had almost been dealt with and that the most effective way to deal with the remaining rump of sub-standard housing was by an area-based improvement programme which would concentrate resources in a few specified areas.

*The Poverty of the Improvement Programme* challenged both this view of the housing problem and the Government's prescription for action. The experience of Kilburn's tenants and residents underline this challenge most emphatically. Area improvement policies — like area-based poverty programmes (including the CDP itself) are a sham. Bad housing — like poverty — is not to be found neatly concentrated in a few small areas in the 'inner city'. It is the product of market forces dominated by the interests of private capital. If the housing improvement policies of successive governments have not themselves been transparent enough, the savage public expenditure cuts of the last few years have revealed them for what

they are: an attempt to prop up Britain's declining housing stock by the injection of laughably small amounts of money.

*Housing Action?* shows in clear detail how the housing crisis is still with us, indeed has never disappeared despite the rhetoric of housing surpluses and of a "property-owning democracy". For working class people, whether or not they live in Housing Action Areas, the prospect of decent secure housing is receding. The tenants and residents of Kilburn found that this was just as true for them — in an 'enlightened' area such as Camden — as it was for those living in more openly hostile local authorities. Kilburn's tenants fought back — but only with limited success, and the report attempts to indicate the extent to which area-based community action can be effective as a political strategy against the State.

In our next report, we will be returning to the issue of industrial decline, with an examination of the working of Enterprise Zones. This pamphlet will be published in 1983 and will draw on case study material from many of the EZs in the UK.

Individuals or groups with material suitable for publication are encouraged to contact the CDPPEC Editorial Board, c/o Brookside, Seaton Burn, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE13 6EY ■



# ...THE PEOPLE



*Some of the KHAACC members*

# 2

## INTRODUCTION: HOUSING IN KILBURN

KILBURN is situated in north-west London, about three miles north of Marble Arch. It is bisected by the High Road, which acts as the boundary between the London Boroughs of Camden and Brent. The High Road, which is one of the main thoroughfares of London, is lined with shops, department stores, cafes and pubs. There are market stalls and a new shopping precinct, banks and building societies. There is still a theatre and a dance hall.

The Housing Action Areas (HAAs) are at the northern end of the High Road, where its name changes to Shoot-Up Hill. They are located on the Camden side of the High Road, in what was once the old Borough of Hampstead. They were designated HAAs by Camden Council in 1976 and 1977 respectively and consist of nine adjoining roads, which take the form of a rough triangle. There are 394 houses in the HAAs and a resident population of approximately 1,700 people. This population is mixed in origin, but almost entirely working class in composition. There are Cockneys, North Londoners, West Indians, Asians and Irish. A high proportion of these people exist on extremely low incomes, and include large numbers of pensioners, single parents and unemployed women and men.

There is no focal centre to the HAAs. The streets are usually

choked with parked cars, belonging to the people who work on the High Road and in the workshops which operate underneath the railway arches. The entire area is factored and fragmented by railway lines. There are very few shops, and the houses are austere and uninspiring. But it is not an unfriendly neighbourhood.

Most of the houses were built over 100 years ago, as a speculative venture by two Land Companies. The bulk of them were built by the British Land Company in the 1860s and 1870s, and the remainder by the Cotton-Powell Estate (a wealthy Kent land-owning family) in the 1880s and 1890s. The houses in the area comprised the first estate to be established in Hampstead. Companies bought the land, laid the roads and sewers, and then sold off the building plots on mortgages which were provided by building societies. This arrangement was typical throughout England at the time, the middle and upper class Victorians believing that property was a sound investment which would provide steady profit. It was intended that the houses would attract business people, and they were built in three or four stories with servants quarters in the basements.

However, the growth of the railway system across London, and its passage through the area did little to attract the people who the

Land Companies and building societies had originally envisaged. Large numbers of the terraced houses were bought by lower middle and skilled working class people. It was reported in 1885 that Kilburn's residents included "*skilled craftsmen, professional people, workers in the building trades and the like*". Those people who did well in business, used the area as a stepping stone before moving up the hill to the leafier suburbs of Hampstead. Of those who remained, a number who had over-committed themselves financially, were forced to sub-let their property and take in lodgers. This trend continued and by the turn of the century the number of sub-tenants and lodgers was on the increase. Kilburn was rapidly becoming a district which the more affluent parts of the Borough preferred to ignore. As one contemporary remarked, the area needed "*to be visited only by those in search of Victorian churches. The houses and streets require no notice*".<sup>1</sup>

From the turn of the century there was a steady increase in the number of properties that were being sub-let by their owners, and in a few isolated cases, entire houses became tenanted. But there

1. Details of names for quotations and information will be found under the appropriate reference number in Appendix 2.



*The North London line, one of the rail lines that dominate the area*

were still maids and servants being employed in some houses in the area as late as the 1930s.

The area had also attracted several small businesses. There were numerous shops and minor commercial enterprises. The baker, the coal merchant, and the chimney sweep were all established local entrepreneurs. As a result of the economic crises during the inter-war years a number of the original inhabitants of the area were financially ruined. Their economic hold on Kilburn collapsed. Unable to meet their debts, owner-occupiers left in their hundreds, not to the elegant houses of Hampstead village, but to the traditional working class areas of the city. Their houses were claimed or bought by property companies,

who divided them into apartments and flats, and rented them out to people who could not afford to buy their own homes.

The depression of the 1930s had increased the importance of the larger property companies. The increase in demand for accommodation after the First World War, placed them in a virtually unassailable position. They were able to lease out their properties to landlords, or they were able to rent it out themselves; in Kilburn, they did both.

*"I remember one landlady buying two houses in Iverson Road for £300 each. They were in a shocking state. She divided them into flats, and then rented them out at 16s (80p) a week."*<sup>2</sup>

With the increasing demand for

homes, the price of property also increased. The only people who could afford to buy were the property companies, speculators and landlords. Some of the dispossessed owner-occupiers of Kilburn now returned to the area, but only as tenants. Of course the landlords had no personal interest in the condition either of the property or the area. The vast majority of them lived far from the deteriorating streets and houses of Kilburn. The tenants were expected to carry out all minor and major repairs on the landlord's property, and as demand for accommodation increased, so did the rents they were asked to pay.

However, the post-war Labour Government recognised that the demand for homes could not be

satisfied by the private sector alone and embarked on a massive programme of council house-building. For this to be achieved, labour was needed, and this prompted the arrival of the first immigrants to Kilburn on a large scale.

*"Contracts were signed at the Labour Exchange in Eire, and when the Irish arrived at Holyhead they were taken directly to Paddington, without ever being allowed to get off the train. When they arrived in Paddington, they wore coloured labels, the colour depending on the job that they had been assigned to. They were met at the station by Agents, who took them to their bedsitter and lodging houses in Kilburn. Other areas of London were used as well, but Kilburn seemed most popular. Once they had settled in and started work, they had to register at the Police Station at regular intervals. If they didn't register, then the Police vans would be waiting for them outside the church after Mass on Sunday mornings."*<sup>3</sup>

This process started during the Second World War, and continued afterwards on an even larger scale. The Irish were paid low wages and charged exorbitant rents. Flats and apartments in the area were broken down into bedsitters and lodging houses, where the tenants were forced to share a single bathroom and toilet.

In the 1950s and 60s, the second wave of immigrants arrived in Kilburn, this time from the West Indies. The Cricklewood Bus Company, which was based a mile north of Kilburn, went out to the West Indies and recruited large numbers of people to do jobs that the indigenous population refused. Like the Irish, many of these people had families and children they were forced to leave behind, and who had to be provided with financial support if they were to survive. Bedsitters and lodging houses were fast becoming a hallmark of Kilburn's housing.

*"They (the West Indians) worked long hours for low pay, and then they were charged high rents for living in overcrowded slums. Everything was done to*

*make it cheap for the employer and the landlord, and expensive for the worker and the tenant."*<sup>4</sup>

This trend continued. In the 1960s, Asians arrived, desperate for somewhere to live and totally dependent upon the private landlords and property companies to provide it. The demand was such that the various landlords competed against one another to buy houses in the area whenever they became available. This pushed the price of housing up still further beyond the reach of working class people, and tightened the landlords' stranglehold on the property market. Immediately properties were acquired, the owner would break them down into as many units as possible, and then let them at high rents to people who had no choice but to accept these conditions. Repairs were minimal, if they were carried out at all, and the overall condition of the houses in the area began to deteriorate rapidly.

The landlords and property companies were further aided by the Conservative's 1957 Rent Act. This Act removed many of the protective clauses which had shielded tenants from the most unscrupulous landlords, and *Rachmanism* had its impact in Kilburn as elsewhere.

*"We had just finished decorating our unfurnished flat when we were given four weeks notice to quit . . . We went to a local solicitor and were told to save up our pennies until we could afford to buy our own house. We had to pay the solicitor for that piece of advice. She must have been a Tory as well."*<sup>4</sup>

When the Labour Government passed the 1965 Rent Act, with its 'fair rents' and increased security for tenants, there was, however, no overall improvement for the people living in the area. The fixing of rents meant that the landlords made less profit on their houses, and this served as a blanket excuse for not doing repairs and maintenance work. The tenants may have become more secure, but the condition of their homes had not. However, the relative affluence of the late 1960s did

herald the return of the owner-occupier to Kilburn. This was on a very limited scale and, as the 19th Century, the area was used as a stepping stone to more affluent areas. The owner-occupiers were invariable middle class, who had little in common with the working class tenants who surrounded them, except occasionally to complain about the cracked paving stones or the shortage of trees in the area.

By the mid-1970s, Camden Council officially recognised the serious housing and environmental problem in the area and initiated a survey, the results of which were startling. The survey showed that in February 1976, well over 70 per cent of the houses in the private sector were in a state of disrepair. All types of property, whether council, housing association or owner-occupied were found to have been neglected. Kilburn HAA No. 1 was declared later that year. It consisted of 197 properties, 31 of which were council houses, 49 owner-occupied and 117 rented. Of the total number of properties in the private sector (166), 71 per cent were found to be in need of some repair, while an additional 20 per cent were considered to be unfit for human habitation. More than three-quarters of the properties were occupied by more than one family or person, and 78 per cent of them either had no bath, shower, or hot and cold water, or had to share them.

Kilburn HAA No. 2 was declared in 1977. It consisted of 35 council houses, and 150 which were in private ownership. The large majority of the latter (90 per cent) were rented. More than half of the properties were multi-occupied, and well over 50 per cent were either unfit for human habitation or in need of substantial repair. These figures almost certainly under-estimated the severity of the housing conditions in the area as the council only inspected part of both areas before declaring them HAAs. Access was either refused or not gained to a number of properties and the survey itself concentrated only on the more



*Shoot-Up Hill: "... woken up by the drilling at 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning."*

obvious aspects of neglect and disrepair.

The area suffered not only from the blatant neglect of the housing stock by the landlords and property companies, but also from environmental decline. The railways which crossed the area had been a constant problem for the residents. The passage of years had not improved things. The bridges and archways had been poorly maintained and restricted light to the houses nearby. The noise and dirt caused by the trains was a source of constant complaint by the entire neighbourhood. Pigeons had roosted in the arches, and car repair workshops roosted beneath them. The car repair companies, who operated from the garages beneath the archways used the area

as a dumping ground for their wrecked and broken down vehicles.

People working in the shops and offices on the High Road, used the area as a free car park or for taking short cuts across the Borough. Many of the shops viewed the area as a rubbish dump. The paving stones were broken and cracked by dumped vehicles and the heavy lorries that used the area. Rats and mice flourished amongst the piles of rubbish. The trains rattled on throughout the night.

*"We've got a lot to complain about, even if you exclude the housing. You can take your pick. If you live in Shoot-Up Hill or Maygrove Road, you can be woken up by the drilling at 8 o'clock on a Sunday morning, or if you prefer*

*to get up earlier, you can live in Medley Road and be woken by the milk lorries going into the factory.*

*If you prefer a more dangerous existence, you can stroll through the area and break your leg by tripping over the loose or cracked paving stones. And while you're waiting for the ambulance to get through the dumped cars, you can crawl under the railway bridges and let the pigeons shit on you."*<sup>5</sup>

When the HAAs were declared, the tenants and residents who were living in the areas began to believe they had something to hope for. They were under no illusions about the size of the task that confronted the Council, but perhaps the years of decay and neglect were at an end ■

# 3

## THE TALE OF HOUSING ACTION AREAS

HOUSING Action Areas were introduced by the Conservative Government as part of the 1974 Housing Act. They were maintained with modifications, by the incoming Labour Government in April 1974. Essentially, HAAs were seen as a cost-saving expedient.

There had already been moves by central government in the 1960s, to shift housing policy away from the massive post-war redevelopment programmes, and towards the improvement of older, private housing. The increase in public sector housing had worried successive Conservative Governments: it was, after all, contrary to their own policy of a 'house-owning democracy'. The Labour Government also recognised that the enormous slum clearance programmes of the previous decades had destroyed many local communities. Redevelopment also was expensive, and forced local authorities to borrow money on the Financial Markets at high rates of interest. HAAs, like the General Improvement Areas and Improvement Areas which preceded them were intended to reduce costs by emphasising the rehabilitation of houses rather than rebuilding programmes. They were also meant to concentrate scarce resources in those geographical areas which were considered to be in greatest need.

The belief that bad housing, like poverty, was confined to specific areas was by no means new. It had formed the theoretical basis of both the 1964 and 1969 Housing Acts, and the practical basis of all the poverty programmes in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the economic climate of 1974, when the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were virtually running the country's economy, both Labour and Conservative Governments were in favour of treating housing problems in this simplified way. They even claimed that HAAs formed part of a policy of positive discrimination towards the poor and badly housed.

HAAs were popular because they confined the problems of poverty and poor housing to small pockets of deprivation. The 'problem' seen from this perspective became manageable. HAAs also gave much support, by way of grants, to owner-occupiers, who were favoured by both Conservative and Labour Administrations. In addition, they gave increased power to housing associations, which had always been seen as the private sector's response to the need for cheap housing. Housing associations had only played a minor role in housing provision prior to 1974, but the belief that they were a viable alternative to building council houses had persisted. The 1974 Housing Act ensured that

henceforth, they would play a key part in housing strategy.

The 1974 Housing Act passed through its various stages in 15 days at a time when the Labour Government did not have a clear majority in the House of Commons. The Act was supported by all sections of Parliament.

### The Theory

The 1974 Housing Act allowed local authorities to declare HAAs in an area where bad physical and social conditions interacted to produce poor living conditions. The areas chosen were meant to be mainly composed of private sector housing, where the problems could be speedily dealt with 'without prejudicing the interests of the residents'.

This general policy indicated that when declaring HAAs, councils should aim to secure, within a five-year period:

1. The improvement of housing accommodation in the area as a whole.
2. The well-being of persons for the time being resident in the area.
3. The proper and effective management and use of accommodation.

Local authorities were given new powers and incentives to achieve these objectives. Larger renovation grants were offered to encourage voluntary improvement in the



*One or the many empty properties.*

private sector, and the level of financial assistance for conversion and improvements was increased. There were also 'repair only' grants available to HAA house owners, and financial assistance for certain environmental works that the council wished to undertake. To discourage gentrification of the areas, conditions were attached to all these grants, so that the benefit of improvements should also be for the benefit of the local residents. Flats and houses, where the owner had received a grant, had to be let under Rent Act provisions and a Fair Rent established. If these conditions were broken, the grant that the owner had received had to be repaid.

In order to ensure that improvements were carried out, the local authority was given stronger powers to acquire the properties, either by agreement or compulsion. Section 43 of the Housing Act empowered local authorities to gain a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) on the property for a wide range of social reasons, not least of which was "for the purpose of

*securing the objectives for which the HAAs had been declared"*. The failure of landlords to respond to the Council's persuasion would only be one justification for a CPO in a HAA. The Department of the Environment (DoE) Circular 14/75 listed other situations which would warrant the immediate use of CPOs in HAAs. These included: where houses were in disrepair and lacking amenities, and the owners wouldn't or couldn't rehabilitate them; where multi-occupied houses were unsatisfactorily managed; where houses were kept empty without justifiable reason; and where tenants were subject to harassment by their landlord.

To back up these new powers, local authorities were given stronger controls over the private market in the HAAs. Section 47 of the Act made it obligatory for owner-occupiers and landlords to inform the council if they wanted to sell their property, serve a Notice to Quit on a tenant, or if any tenancy had expired. Finally, Compulsory Improvement Orders were strengthened and accelerated under Section 85 of the Act, and

local authorities were instructed to 'make full and co-ordinated use' of the powers already existing under Housing and Public Health legislation.

The powers and incentives listed in Part IV of the 1974 Housing Act were much stronger than those previously available to local authorities. HAAs were intended to be the major instrument for the success of central government's clearance programme. Government advice to local authorities, contained in circulars and subsequent publications, suggested that HAAs could and should be successful, provided that the provisions of the 1974 Act came into force immediately upon their declaration, and that a 'period of intense activity' followed.

Local authorities were free to choose which areas were designated as HAAs. They were also left to decide what policies they then pursued, but central government laid down certain guidelines which councils were intended to follow. Local authorities were intended to take into account the various social conditions in an area, such as overcrowding, as well as the physical conditions of the properties. They were warned that expenditure would be reduced in future years, and that adequate resources must be put aside for HAAs. It was especially necessary for local authorities to ensure that adequate staff and money was made available to carry out the Action Programme, and that enough resources existed to secure the prompt rehabilitation of newly-acquired properties.

Councils were expected to draw up an Action Programme, and to begin implementing this Programme as soon as HAAs had been declared. This Action Programme was "the key to a successful HAA", and would only succeed if the resources of several council departments, Housing, Environmental Health, Planning, and so on, were well co-ordinated and capable of carrying it through. The creation of Area Teams, based within the HAAs, was suggested as a useful method of implementing the Action Programme.

Both the 1974 Act and subsequent DoE Circulars required that housing association activity should be encouraged in HAAs, and that these associations assist the council in the acquisition, modernisation and management of properties.

In addition to these guidelines, central government stated that one of the fundamental principles of HAAs was the involvement of the areas' residents. There was a need for involvement not only in the formative stages of the Action Programme, but throughout the life of the HAAs. Local authorities were reminded in DoE Circular 14/75, that one of the three stated aims of HAAs was to "secure the well-being of the persons for the time being resident in the area". This Circular went on to say that the people living in the HAAs "in whose interests problems are being tackled, who suffer most directly from them, and who are most concerned with the ways they are to be dealt with — can and should influence the Action Programme."

The 1974 Act provided "for public information both on declaration and throughout the period of the HAA . . . A successful HAA Programme called for regular exchanges between the (local) authority and residents . . . Experience with other area policies (showed that) unless the support of the people in the area was secured it was unlikely that the Programme could be carried out effectively . . . One of the most effective means whereby an authority could involve the residents of an HAA would be to establish a local presence" It went on to suggest that the Area Team be accommodated in an Area Office, and that Residents' Liaison/Consultative Committees be "set up to ensure a regular flow of information about progress and problems that might be encountered".

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## The Practice

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In theory, HAAs might appear to be a radical innovation, directed against the poverty and deprivation of Inner Urban Areas. It is certainly a fact that the powers

granted to local authorities went further than any they had previously possessed. It must be remembered however, that HAAs were not envisaged as an addition to central government's response to poor housing and living conditions. HAAs were not an 'extra resource' that could be used to supplement existing resources. They were, in reality, intended as a substitute for central government's previous initiatives in the area of housing stress.

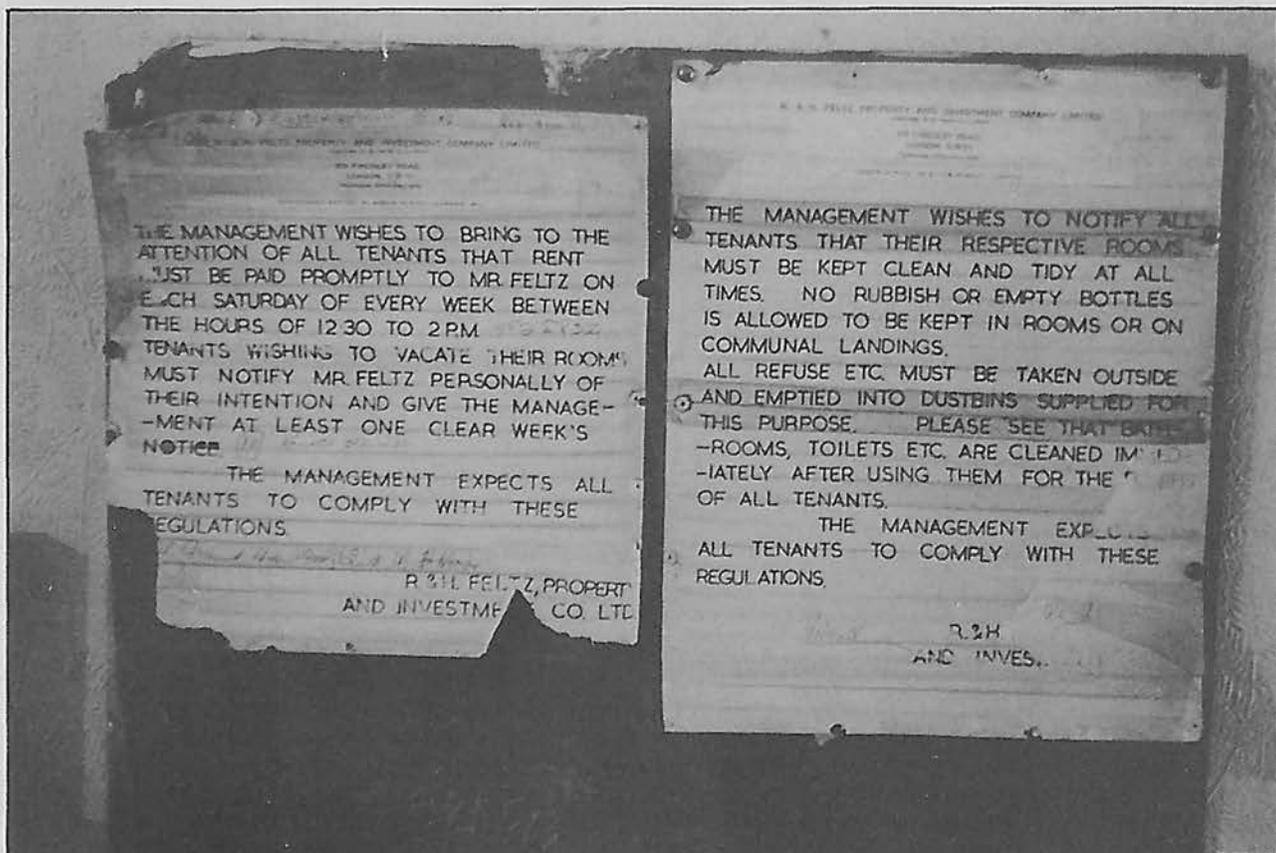
The 1974 Housing Act became law at a time when the private housing sector was undergoing a crisis. In large part it simply reflected the problems of the general economic depression. The 1974 Act was effectively concerned merely with the redistribution of housing resources amongst the working class. It did not seek to increase those resources and indeed, it hinted that the overall level of financial provision would be decreased in subsequent years. This has since happened, and on a larger scale than had been anticipated at the time. Since 1974, not only the amount of money made available by central government to local authorities has decreased. The number of council houses being built has declined substantially; the number of people employed in providing direct services within local authorities has decreased; the number of houses being built by the private sector has decreased and the ability of local authorities to borrow money from the Financial market has decreased, mainly as a result of high interest rates and government constraints.

Against this background of acute strain within the economy the number of declared HAAs has actually increased. The very concept of HAAs embodies the belief that housing and environmental deprivation is limited to small, geographical areas. It seeks to deny that these problems exist beyond the physical perimeter of the HAAs. In other words, the vast majority of working class people do not have housing or environmental problems because they do not live

in HAAs. Thus the need to concentrate resources by a local authority (if HAAs are to be successful) effectively denies those resources to the rest of the people who live in the Borough. Even those people lucky enough to be living in HAAs are dependent on the local authority to make good use of the resources it has made available. The local authority is dependent upon central government for those resources. Essentially, HAAs cannot be successful unless central government provides the local authority with financial and legislative support.

A progress report on HAAs was published by the DoE in 1977, after being suppressed for over a year. The report stated that local authorities were not receiving the necessary support from central government for HAAs to be properly effective. Local authorities from all over the country complained that the 'high grants' contained in the 1974 provisions, were completely inadequate. They had not been increased to take into account either inflation, or the rising costs of building and improvement works. This was especially apparent in London, where the privately-controlled shortage of housing and land was most acute. It was also admitted that central government was reluctant to make 'repairs only' grants more widely available, and that the strengthened Compulsory Improvement procedures in practice, were 'lengthy, cumbersome and time-consuming'.

These admissions were made less than two years after HAAs came into existence. But a more important effect on the success or failure of the HAA programme, was the decreasing amount of financial support that local authorities were receiving from central government. As the economic crisis deepened, there was a steady decrease in the amount of Rate Support Grant (RSG) made available by central government. The election of a Conservative Government in 1979, and the worsening of the economic



Landlords notice in a hallway on Shoot-Up Hill.

situation heralded a period of rapid reductions in RSG. The reduction in RSG left local authorities with two options. They could either cut services in line with the reduction in RSG, or they could attempt to compensate for this reduction by increasing the rates.

Both options, provoked by central government's actions were an attack on the standard of living of local people. A cut in services had a greater impact on working class people because they were more dependent upon these services. An increase in rates had a greater impact on working class people because they were less able to afford it. Most local authorities opted for a compromise, combining the elements from both unsavoury options, though Labour-controlled authorities tended more to increase the rates and Conservative and Liberal/SDP-controlled authorities tended to cut services.

In addition to this, the Conservative Government also severely restricted the legislative

powers available to local authorities, both inside HAAs and outside them. The 1980 Housing Act was popularly referred to as a landlord's Charter. It undercut virtually all local authorities' attempts to either control or regulate the operation of the private sector in housing.

### **The Camden Experience**

The Borough of Camden is situated in the north and north-west of Inner London. It stretches south to include sizeable portions of the commercial West End, and then eastwards to the boundary of the City of London itself. It includes the area around Euston and King's Cross Railway Stations, a symmetrical horror of high-rise office blocks and commercial land at the southern extreme, and the upper and middle class residential areas of Hampstead, Swiss Cottage and St. John's Wood in the centre and north. The rest of the Borough is essentially working class. The London Borough of Camden is the

wealthiest Labour-controlled local authority in the country. A massive 70 per cent of its rates come from the private sector. This wealth has earned Camden Council the reputation of being a caring and progressive local authority. It has won international awards for the council houses and estates that it has designed. There are a large number of Citizen's Advice Bureaux, Housing Aid Centres, and Community Law Centres in the Borough. Camden considers itself to be in the forefront of local authorities in the provision of nurseries, old people's homes, disabled centres and so on, and advertises itself as a Borough which supports equality of opportunity and employment.

The financial crisis of 1974/75 and the subsequent decline in the economy, did not have an immediate and startling effect on Camden. The cuts imposed on local authorities by central government were equally transferred onto the rates, and relatively speaking, cuts in services

were minimised. It was felt by the political leadership of Camden Council, that the 70 per cent rate bill which was met by the private sector, would mitigate any possible financial hardship imposed on the working class residents.

Housing Action Areas were seen by Camden to be a welcome addition to the overall level of resources that it made available in the area of housing. The existence of HAAs would also provide Camden with a powerful argument in the struggle to win more resources from central government. Further, the restrictions imposed by central government on local authority powers to acquire privately owned properties, did not then apply to HAAs. Until the election of the Conservative Government in 1979, and within certain financial restraints, local authorities were free to buy property direct from the private sector in HAAs. There was also statutory provision for stronger use of CPOs in HAAs. Both these enhanced powers provided a progressive Borough like Camden, which was committed to increasing the number of council houses in the Borough, with a strong incentive for declaring HAAs.

At the time of financial restraint, at least money would be made available (it was hoped) for HAAs. It was for this reason that many local authorities were quick to take advantage of the 1974 Housing Act provisions from the outset. Camden was slower to respond initially than other Boroughs, but by 1976 the first HAAs were being designated and declared.

### **Housing Action Areas in Kilburn**

Not surprisingly, the reports discussed by Camden Council's Housing Committee, prior to the declaration of Kilburn's HAAs, reflected much of the optimism of the 1974 Housing Act. Kilburn HAA No. 1 was included in a package of three HAAs to be declared by Camden in 1976. This declaration followed an inspection of the area by the Council's

Environmental Health Officers (EHOs). It was later decided to add adjoining streets to those already inspected, and Kilburn HAA No. 2 was declared in October 1977.

Each declaration was made after discussions with the DoE, which had to be satisfied that the HAAs could be effectively improved within a five-year period. The Director of Housing's general statements which were submitted to central government upon declaration of each of Kilburn's HAAs, indicated that Camden Council proposed to "secure the provision of amenities or the conversion into self-contained units of as many (housing) units as possible". The statement talked of improving the living conditions of "large numbers of private tenants" by carrying out repairs and providing amenities. "If necessary (these would) be enforced by Improvement and Repair Notices". The Council and housing associations would buy properties direct from private landlords where this proved to be "the only possible means of progress".

Promises were also made to fully consult with residents about the progress being made in the HAAs, and the statement claimed that these discussions had already begun to take place "by the time that HAA No. 2 was established".

The Director of Housing stated that resources "were available to make a substantial impact on the HAAs within the five-year period." The Council had approved costs for acquisition and rehabilitation, and improvement grants (which) would be made available to owner-occupiers and landlords." There was "adequate staff in the Environmental Health and House Improvements Departments" and although building labour "to carry out rehabilitation work was never easy to find in Central London" the situation was "much easier than usual at present."<sup>6</sup> The only difficulty likely to be encountered in the "Areas was the shortage of rehousing and decanting space". But even this problem, could be overcome by the "large number of redevelopment schemes that were

to become available" over the next few years.

Tenants who attended a public meeting in 1976, upon the declaration of the first HAA in Kilburn, were exuberant about the future that was being promised them. Council officers showed them the plans for the area, and explained how the improvements would be carried out.

*"It was terrific. We could hardly believe what was going to happen and then shortly afterwards, we were visited at home by council officers. They told us that the landlord would have to make repairs to our home, now that we were living in a HAA."*<sup>2</sup>

Ominously, the first HAAs Information Sheet was not distributed throughout the areas until 1978, but it did list the actions which the Council intended to take. "As far as practicable (all houses in the HAAs) would be properly repaired." All families would have access to their own amenities and "stress due to overcrowding would be eliminated". In addition, minor environmental works would be carried out "to make the area more pleasing". However, the practice did not match up to the intentions.

*"If we lit a fire in the bedroom, woodworms would come up from the floorboards and crawl around the carpet. When we mentioned this to a visiting council officer, he gave us the Latin name for woodworm and told us that they only came up for two months of the year. It was nice to know their proper names, because they'd been living with us for eleven years."*<sup>2</sup>

No Area Team was established, either inside or outside the HAAs. The areas were simply included in the general brief of the Council's Environmental Health Department. No extra resources were made available for work that was to be done in the HAAs. Staff were neither recruited nor diverted to deal with the areas. The various departments within the Council remained separate and the programme unco-ordinated. There was no priority given to work arising from the HAAs, no Action Programme for the HAAs, no Lettings or Allocations policy, no



Iverson and Maygrove Roads, the two main streets of the HAAs.

Legal Policy and no CPO Policy. There were no guidelines for council officers to follow when they worked in the HAAs and the areas were not given any priority within the Council's overall Housing Policy and Strategy.

The Environmental Health Officer (EHO) who had specific responsibility for the HAAs, and who carried out the original survey prior to declaration left the Council and was not replaced until 1979. The Chief Environmental Health Officer, who had overall responsibility for the Department, had also left the Council. He was not replaced for almost two years. A report from the Local Government Ombudsman in 1980, gives a characteristic view of this situation. "The HAA was declared with effect from 21 June 1976 and shortly afterwards Mr and Mrs K were sent a standard letter telling them of the Council's intended action:

*'The Council intends to see that property in poor repair is improved, and to assist residents who are living in bad conditions or would be disrupted by work carried out on the property . . .*

*'A team of council officers will start visiting properties over the next few weeks and decide with each family the best way in which their circumstances can be*

*improved and what help the Council can give to meet their wishes'*

*'In November 1977 Officer F served a notice under the relevant provisions of the Housing Act 1957 to enable him to inspect the house. It is not clear from the Council's files what did take place at that time but no statutory action was taken. The next item of the Environmental Health Department's file is an undated, unsigned, hand-written schedule of disrepair, apparently for the service of a notice under Section 9 of the Housing Act 1957. No repairs or improvements were made to that flat. The complainant has said that she was in contact with the Council's Housing Aid Centre about this time and they too were aware of the conditions in which she and her husband were living'.*

The complete lack of either policy, strategy or resources, meant that council officers had neither guidelines nor reason to believe that this area of work had any more priority than any other. It meant that councillors, the elected representatives of the community, had no way of gauging either the success or failure of the HAAs. They were also in many respects dependent upon council officers for information and advice. Thus, any work carried out in the HAAs

was both random and uncoordinated, virtually accidental. There was no one person, team or Department, who had to accept responsibility for what happened, or more importantly didn't happen, in the HAAs. Given this state of affairs, it is hardly surprising that nothing did happen during the following years. There were virtually no notices served on landlords and owners which would have legally required them to have carried out repairs. The strengthened 1974 legislation was simply not used. There were no CPOs, and there was no strategy for acquiring properties direct from the private sector.

If repair notices were served at all, they were 'Informal Notices'. These notices simply listed the defects accrued to the property and were then despatched to the landlord. 'Informal Notices' have no legal status, and they do not require that the landlord undertake the repairs. Occasionally, these 'Informal Notices' would be accompanied by information about the grants that the landlord would be eligible for if he undertook repair work. This information was also distributed to landlords and property companies separately. Again, there was no legal compulsion for the owner to make use of the grants.

Few of the landlords had any incentive to either comply with the 'Informal Notices' or accept the readily available grants. There was no financial reason for them to invest in properties where they would obtain no financial return. The multi-occupied dwellings, the bedsitters and lodging houses of Kilburn, did not need to be required to be occupied, and the rehabilitation of a property, undertaken by a landlord with the financial assistance of the Council, would not increase the rents enough to show a clear profit. The cost of living accommodation had already reached an optimum level, and this would be reduced if the houses and flats were provided with basic amenities. A bedsitter the size of a bathroom is a good investment, but a bathroom the size of a bedsitter does not automatically make a profit.

While the Council attempted to persuade landlords and property companies to make use of the available grants, property speculation was rife. The decrease in council house building and the increase in unemployment (which brought people into the area in search of jobs), meant that the demand for accommodation was enormous. This increased the freedom of landlords to increase rents and to allow properties to deteriorate. Houses continually changed hands and the property companies competed with one another; evictions took place where existing tenants found that they could no longer afford to pay the exorbitant rents.

Throughout this period, however, no prosecutions took place under Section 47 of the 1974 Housing Act. This Section required landlords and owners to inform the Council when there was either a change of ownership or eviction in the HAAs. The Council not only ignored the tenants who were at the mercy of the private sector, it also succeeded in ignoring its own tenants in the HAAs. Over the years, the Council had occasionally acquired properties in the HAAs, and the Labour Council at the time that the HAAs were declared stated



A dumped car sprayed during the residents' campaign

that it was "totally committed to a policy of municipalisation of private housing stock"! The properties that the council acquired in the HAAs were invariably in a poor or derelict state of repair, and while the tenants were extremely glad to get out of the private sector, in many cases, their living conditions did not improve once the Council had taken over their homes.

There were several reasons for this. To begin with, as Camden acknowledged in its submission to the DoE, there was an acute

shortage of property available for the decanting of tenants. The enforced cuts in council house-building, and the increased demand for such accommodation, were bound to make it difficult for Camden to find suitable homes for their newly acquired tenants. However, Camden never examined the possibility of creating a rolling programme of acquisition, decanting, rehabilitation and letting. It would only have needed a small initial pool of houses for this to have been successful in the HAAs, and once the programme



An unfit property in the HAAs.

had started, the momentum would ensure decent housing for each 'new' group of tenants.

Also, where rehabilitation work was carried out on newly-acquired properties, it was invariably contracted out to the private sector. The Fordwych/Maygrove contract was introduced "as a concession to the spirit of the 1974 Housing Act" according to council officers. Private contractors were allowed to do the work. The houses were not rehabilitated for years, and the delays were monumental, primarily because two of the

'successful' building companies went bankrupt.

Even where companies were able to finish the repair and rehabilitation work, it was to an incredibly low standard. The main incentive to the private contractor was to finish the work as quickly and cheaply as possible. This led to shoddy workmanship, cheap building materials, inadequate safety precautions, low wages to the workers themselves, and the failure to do all the work that was required under the terms of the contract. Nevertheless, Camden

did not, and has not, prosecuted one building company or private contractor throughout the life span of the HAAs.

### The Need to Know

Although the Council declared HAAs, they failed completely to "establish a local presence". There was no Area Team established and no genuine system of liaison between the Council and HAA residents. The Council were uninformed as to what was happening in the area and many of the residents were simply unaware of the fact that they were actually living in HAAs. This latter fact is the more surprising, especially when it is realised that the Council had established a Residents Consultative Committee.

It was agreed in January 1978 by Camden's Housing Committee, that a Residents Consultative Committee should be set up in the HAAs. This Committee was to consist of the three Kilburn Ward councillors, two councillors nominated by the Housing Committee, and five HAA residents. The residents were to be selected from a Residents Association, the Fordwych and Iverson Roads Residents Association, or FIRARA, as it called itself which had been established for several years. It was a small and inactive Residents Association, primarily composed of owner-occupiers. It was more adept at organising Christmas 'Bazaars' and Coffee Mornings than a housing campaign. Moreover it only represented one of the roads (Iverson Road) in the HAA.

The Council's policy stated that this Consultative Committee was designed to give residents (of the HAAs) the greatest say in the meetings. This was patently false. The HAA residents did not even know of the existence of the Consultative Committee, and their 'representatives' were drawn from outside the area. In addition to this, the overall membership of the Consultative Committee was divided equally between the Council and the Association. This

was meant to give a 'fair balance' between the interests of the residents and the Council. In effect, it deprived the 'residents' of a voice in the area. The councillors and council officers who attended the meetings decided which residents comments should be forwarded to the relevant council committees and how they should be dealt with. The Secretary of the Committee was an employee of a housing association, and the son of one of the worst landlords in the area was also a voting member of the Committee.

The first meeting of the Committee was not held until September 1978, and it was called 'to elect and welcome Councillor Livingstone as Joint Chairman (sic) and to hear the Council's Progress Report'. The meeting was held in the absence of both Councillor Livingstone and the Progress Report. The meeting did, however, discuss the shortage of trees and shrubs in the HAAs.

Local residents were not informed of subsequent meetings. The councillors ignored the committee, which meant that no serious discussion could take place on strategy or policy as "no decisions could be taken in the absence of elected councillors". Only one Progress Report was received throughout the life span of this Committee, and that was ignored in preference for another discussion about the shortage of shrubs and trees in the HAAs. This Progress Report pointed out that 139 of the 224 substandard properties in the HAAs were in an unsatisfactory condition, whilst well over half of all properties investigated were in need of either repair or improvement. The Progress Report was by no means exhaustive and numerous unfit properties had not been considered. However, this was academic as the Consultative Committee completely ignored the findings. The 'Residents' Representatives' were all living in either their own homes or good housing conditions. They had neither the knowledge nor the inclination to acquaint themselves with local residents who were living

in bad housing conditions. The concern with the shortage of shrubs and trees in the area reflected both their lifestyle and their politics.

The Council did begin to realise, however, that things were not progressing as they should be. The Progress Report spoke of difficulties not only in Kilburn's HAAs, but in the other HAAs that Camden had declared. In April 1979 it was decided that an EHO should be appointed with specific responsibility for the HAAs. This was three years after their declaration. At the same time, plans were circulated explaining how owner-occupiers and landlords could apply for grants to improve the garden walls in front of their properties. (There were still no proposals to increase the numbers of trees and shrubs in the HAAs).

### Three Lost Years

The housing and living conditions of local people in the HAAs had been deteriorating for years since the declaration of the HAAs (between 1976-79). The three years of inaction merely served to accelerate this decline. It could not be said, however, that the Council was unaware of the decline of the area.

● "Our house was visited by the council's Environmental Health Officers immediately after the HAAs had been declared. It was reported as being 'unfit for human habitation'. Nothing happened. In October 1978, the Council placed a Dangerous Structures Notice on the house because we had told them that the walls were moving. By April 1979, the Notice had not been enforced and the property had changed hands. We were forced to move out of the living room because the rain poured through the giant cracks in the wall. Occasionally, the Council would send someone round to measure the cracks. Nothing happened, though the cracks got wider."<sup>2</sup>

● "The entire house, not just our flat, was declared unfit in June 1974, and it was five years before the Council served a Compulsory Purchase Order on the owner.

*During those five years, the bathroom ceiling had become so dangerous that we were too frightened to have a bath, and the outside toilet was broken. We kept complaining to the landlady, and to the Council, but they just weren't interested."*<sup>2</sup>

● "When we moved into the flat, we were told that it was just temporary accommodation. We were still there four years later, and nothing had been done about the walls or the damp."<sup>2</sup>

● "If we sat in our chairs for too long, we would end up wringing wet. The dampness was that bad. The Council knew about it because they had inspected the flat. All our possessions either had mildew or rust."<sup>2</sup>

● "There was a hole in the bathroom wall, and when you were sitting in the bath, you could see the people outside. The landlord sent someone in to repair the sink once, and they just ripped it off the wall. He told us that the Council would do something about our housing problems."<sup>2</sup>

It was a familiar story. If tenants complained to their landlord, he would invariably tell them that the Council were doing something about it. If the tenant complained to the Council, they would explain that the landlord had been asked to do repairs. The tenants were just caught in the middle, confused by an elaborate display of promises, excuses, half-truths and downright lies.

It was not unreasonable for tenants to expect repairs to be done if the Council had inspected their properties and declared them 'unfit'. However, the tenants were not informed that the Council were serving only 'Informal Repair Notices' on landlords. Neither were they informed that the Council didn't have enough staff or resources to follow up inspections and Notices. This confusion only applied to tenants who were vaguely aware that the Council 'should be doing something' in their area. The vast majority of tenants were not confused: they were simply unaware of the existence of the HAAs and the Council promises■

# 4

## THE RESIDENTS' CAMPAIGN

*"IN RETROSPECT it was a strange meeting. There were about 40 of us crowded into a room. We had our class, our poor housing conditions, and our anger in common, but apart from that we were very uncertain about what we should do. Most of us weren't even aware that we were living in Housing Action Areas, never mind the powers that were available to the Council to improve our living conditions. Two people had heard that a Consultative Committee had been set up, but none of us took that very seriously. We spent the first hour just describing our housing conditions to each other. No matter how bad your housing conditions were, you could bet that someone was living in worse."*<sup>2</sup>

In early February 1979, after complaints from residents, the local Law Centre leafletted houses in the HAAs which seemed to them to be in a particularly bad state of repair. The leaflet explained that the residents were living in HAAs and that the Council were under an obligation to see that their housing and living conditions were improved. The response to the leaflet was the meeting described above. This resulted in the setting up of an Action Committee. There was no shortage of volunteers to join the Committee, and there was no difficulty in drawing up a catalogue of some of the worst cases of neglect and deprivation in the HAAs.

*"It took us about a month to assemble all the information, and the results of this initial survey horrified us. We have previously thought that we were one of a small number of people living in slums, but it soon became obvious that almost everyone in the HAAs was in the same plight."*<sup>2</sup>

Armed with this information, a group of about 20 tenants attended the Housing Committee of Camden Council in March 1979. It was their intention to explain to the Council what their housing and living conditions were like, and to ask the Council to take immediate action to remedy the situation.

*"We began reading our statement, and the councillors started interrupting us. They wouldn't even let us finish the first paragraph. As soon as it became obvious that we were criticising them, they stopped us from speaking. We were told to address our comments to the Council via the Residents Consultative Committee. We have never heard of this Committee."*<sup>7</sup>

Not only the councillors, but also the council officers, were successful in disrupting this initial deputation to the Town Hall. The anger that had been expressed at the first meeting of the Action Committee was beginning to harden. Later in the week, a deputation of tenants from the Action Committee attended the Advice Surgery of one of the local

Labour Councillors on Kilburn High Road, Ken Livingstone.

*"He was sympathetic, but we were already beginning to have doubts about anything that councillors said to us. We were still stinging from the way that we had been treated at the Town Hall, and Ken Livingstone had been the Chairperson of that meeting."*<sup>7</sup>

The Action Committee were again informed of the existence of the Residents Consultative Committee, and were told that this was the proper channel for voicing their suggestions and complaints about the HAAs. Ken Livingstone agreed that the criticisms of Camden Council were probably justified, but said that these matters were better discussed within the framework of the Consultative Committee.

After that there was some discussion about what the next step of the Action Committee should be. Several tenants believed that it was preferable to ignore the Consultative Committee, and continue the campaign outside the council machinery, but the majority thought that they should at least attempt to use the Residents Committee. A group of 25 tenants attended the next meeting of the Consultative Committee. The meeting was held in the side room of a Church Hall, about a quarter of a mile outside the HAAs, and the tenants only knew about the

# HOUSING ACTION

COMMITTEE  
MEETINGS  
ON  
LOCAL ISSUES  
SEE THIS PAGE

KILBURN HOUSING ACTION AREAS

FEBRUARY 1979

## WHAT IS A HOUSING ACTION AREA ANYWAY?

The purpose of declaring a H.A.A. is to provide special help to a specific area in the form of grants backed up by special powers in order to try to improve the housing and environment of the area, while preserving as far as possible the original community.

## IS MY HOUSE IN THE H.A.A.?

If you get this bulletin we certainly hope so! The H.A.A.'s declared by Camden council cover Maygrove, Loveridge, Ariel and Iverson Roads and parts of Carlinge, Fordwych and Medley Roads

## CAN I HAVE A SAY IN WHAT...

Leaflet published by KHAACC in February 1979 — before the 'take-over'

time and the venue because Ken Livingstone had told them.

*"The Consultative Committee looked really surprised when we started filing into the room, especially when they saw that there were some black faces amongst us, but they weren't half as surprised as we were. The meeting was being chaired by the son of one of the worst landlords in the HAAs."*<sup>18</sup>

There was a heated exchange between the Chairperson and some of the Action Committee, but the tenants were eventually allowed to present a list of resolutions and demands that they wanted forwarding to the Council. The Residents Committee then refused to forward these demands, and another heated exchange ensued. The council officers who were present at the meeting were also shocked by what was happening. They had just produced detailed plans about the number of trees and shrubs in the HAAs, and they had not expected to be confronted by tenants who were furious about their slum housing conditions. The Residents Committee finally agreed to demands to call an Annual General Meeting of the Consultative Committee, but not before it was pointed out that they had never held an AGM despite having been in existence for eighteen months.

The Action Committee was learning fast, and each of their deputations had been accompanied

by reports in the local newspapers. A great deal of anger and frustration was finding expression, but it was not being met by concrete results.

In April 1979, eleven private tenants and one Greater London Council (GLC) tenant, all members of the Action Committee, formally complained to a local Magistrate under Section 157 of the 1957 Housing Act, claiming that their homes were unfit for human habitation. The Magistrate visited each of the houses, and endorsed each of the complaints. She was so shocked at the state of one of the houses, that she had to run out into the street to prevent herself from vomiting. The Magistrate's endorsement of the complaints made the front page of the local press, and the complaints were forwarded to the Council. After some initial delays, each of the houses was visited by an EHO.

The Section 157's were the first serious indication that the Action Committee meant business. Camden Council were used to angry deputations and articles in the local press, the Conservative inspired Ratepayers' Associations were masters at it, but they were not used to the co-ordinated pressure of an entirely working class campaign. The pressure was then exerted on the Annual General Meeting of the Residents Committee, held in May 1979.

The Action Committee leafletted



August 1979. Ken Livingstone addresses a tenants' meeting.

the entire HAAs, informing tenants of the forthcoming AGM and of the fact that they were living in HAAs. A slate of Action Committee candidates was put forward for each of the residents' seats on the Consultative Committee, and an alternative constitution was prepared and circulated.

In response the Residents Association did its best to bring out its membership, calling upon local people to support the existing Committee. The AGM was heated and acrimonious, with the existing Chairperson (the landlords' son had been replaced) doing his best to hold up proceedings and declare the meeting invalid. Eventually elections were held and FIRARA contested the Chairperson's seat, putting up a candidate who had been a right-wing Labour Councillor and later became a member of the SDP. The Action Committee's candidate was successful by 37 votes to 4. None of the other positions were contested by FIRARA, although their ex-Chairperson later wrote to the Council and declared that the meeting had been unconstitutional and that the results should be overruled.

More important than the elections, was the new constitution that was unanimously agreed upon by the meeting. This constitution gave voting rights to all residents in the HAAs, meetings were to be



December 1979. Tenants' 'work-in' outside the house they were refused as an office.

open to all HAA residents, the voting rights of councillors were rescinded (but they were still expected to attend) and all meetings were to be publicised and held on a monthly basis. The new constitution called for the Consultative Committee to have voting rights on the council committee that was responsible for the HAAs, and for the Council to provide the Consultative Committee with resources to employ a full-time worker.

Within three months, the Action Committee had become the Consultative Committee. Everyone who lived in the HAAs was now aware of that fact, and had become enfranchised. Camden Council were being forced to inspect those houses that had been visited by the Magistrate, and the tenants were threatening them with more Section 157's. Reports and resolutions began to flood through to the Council. The local press was up in arms about the housing and living conditions in Kilburn. It was a reasonable beginning to the campaign. The best was yet to come.

### The Consultative Committee

Kilburn Housing Action Area Consultative Committee (KHAACC) was hardly a title to inspire the tenants and residents, but it was one which the Action Committee had appropriated. It

was now important for it to become both well-known and successful.

*"During the first few months, there were about two dozen people who were really active. They could be relied on to come to meetings and to prepare reports, but there were still an enormous number of tenants who weren't aware of what we were doing in the area."*<sup>9</sup>

It was the Consultative Committee's intention to involve as many residents as possible in the campaign to secure better housing and living conditions in the HAAs. They did this by regularly leafletting the areas. The monthly public meetings, which were enshrined in the new constitution, became the focal point of the Committee's activities. The Committee insisted that both council officers and councillors attend these meetings, this ensured that large numbers of residents were also present. The fact that the Consultative Committee was considered to be part of the council machinery, also meant that money was available to pay for the leaflets and the organisation of the Committee.

Members of the Committee took an active role outside meetings, for example, they visited individual properties where the tenants might be living in poor housing conditions. The tenants were encouraged to attend the public meetings and to become involved in

the work of the Committee. Whatever else resulted from these visits, the information obtained from them was to prove invaluable as the months went on.

Information about the HAAs was also demanded from the various council officers and departments responsible for the numerous delays and mistakes that were being made. Officers and departments Heads were asked to attend the public meetings, only to discover that their 'facts' were totally at odds with the reality of the HAAs. Where officers attempted to avoid the public meetings the Consultative Committee would insist that they attend, often using the local councillors as 'extra muscle' to force the officers to leave the confines of the Town Hall.

Individual tenants and residents were actively encouraged to present the facts of their poor housing and living conditions at the public meetings, and this succeeded in both embarrassing the various council departments in front of their councillors, and the councillors in front of their electorate. It soon became obvious that the facts and figures collated by the Town Hall staff were at variance with the reality as experienced by the tenants and residents. Time and again, the failure of Informal Notices to elicit any response from landlords, was brought to the attention of tenants, officers and councillors. The result of this failure, the continuing deterioration of the tenants' homes, was graphically described to the public and the press. Council officers were discovering very quickly what accountability meant in practice.

Whenever officers attempted to avoid questions, or provided misleading answers, there were a plethora of examples from tenants to prove them wrong. The Head of House Improvements, the person in charge of Allocations, and almost every other person in control of a council department, were verbally ripped to shreds at the meetings. It must have been a harrowing experience for them, especially when they were used to

discussing trees and shrubs over a friendly cup of tea and a biscuit. There were not even tea and biscuits at the public meetings.

Given these circumstances, it was hardly surprising that the officers began to take more of an interest in the HAAs. Information about staff shortages, bureaucratic inadequacies, and the complete lack of council policy about HAAs, began to filter through to the Consultative Committee. Special meetings were organised to discuss specific areas of concern, at which the Council was forced to admit the various failings of its policies. The Committee responded with reports and resolutions that were forwarded to the relevant council committees. The facts and figures produced in these reports were undeniable because they were usually based on the Council's own assessments.

It became apparent that there was no clear local policy whatsoever governing HAAs in either Kilburn or the rest of Camden. The Council departments were unco-ordinated and ineffective, and the private sector had remained virtually unscathed since the declaration of the HAAs.

Detailed proposals, seeking to remedy these ills, were presented to the Council by the Consultative Committee. It was demanded that the Council serve only Formal Notices (which were legally enforceable) on landlords, a proper survey of the HAAs (which had never been carried out) and the drawing up of an Action Programme were called for, more staff and resources were requested for the HAAs, as well as the establishment of an Area Team and Office. Generally speaking, the resolutions that were passed at the public meetings referred to specific areas of concern, while the Reports, which were also presented and passed, concerned themselves with both the problems and their remedy.

The Consultative Committee did not confine its actions to within the HAAs, and often they went directly to the Town Hall. Deputations of 20 or 30 tenants and residents presented their



*EHOs survey the area.*

critical reports and resolutions directly to the Council's Housing Committee. There were sometimes as many as 20 resolutions a month for the council to consider, but the sheer numbers of tenants involved, prevented the councillors from stopping them from speaking. The Committee was also becoming more adept and confident at dealing with the council machinery.

*"If they tried to stop us from speaking, then we'd just carry on regardless and the rest of the people in the deputation would tell the councillors to shut up until we'd finished. They soon learned that it was easier to let us speak than to try and stop us."*

At one stage, the Committee

displayed in the Town Hall an exhibition of photographs illustrating the housing conditions in the HAAs. It was difficult for even the most dismissive councillors to ignore this evidence. The council officers, alarmed at the embarrassment that the Consultative Committee was generating, began to draw up more reports about their activities in the HAAs, and an Action Programme began to be discussed. The Consultative Committee were able to get hold of these cosmetic reports, and to undercut them with their own interpretation and facts. It was not uncommon for a council officer to conclude his report, only to discover that it was now being torn to pieces by a contrary report from the Consultative Committee. The Council's neglect of the HAAs, and the tenants' intimate knowledge of the areas, usually ensured that the Committee's report was the more detailed and believable.

The councillors were often shocked to discover the reality about the HAAs, and internal enquiries were ordered into a whole range of problems. The CPO procedure, the use of Environmental Health powers, the preparation of evidence for CPO enquiries (though there hadn't been any to date), and the overall staffing levels of the HAAs, were all the subjects of detailed council discussions and reports. It was even suggested by a sympathetic Labour Councillor, that the Consultative Committee should hold a 'teach-in' for the council members, where they could explain the powers that were available to the Council, and how these could be best employed in the HAAs.

The Conservative councillors greeted the initial deputations by the Consultative Committee with glee. Anything that embarrassed Labour-controlled Camden was in itself 'a good thing', and the press publicity that the Committee was generating was enormous.

However, the moment that the Tories began talking of 'Camden Council's profligate socialist spending' they were howled down by the Consultative Committee. It

quickly became obvious that the Committee were asking for more 'socialist' spending, and for a programme of acquisition and attack on the private sector that had previously been unimaginable by Camden Council. They tended to sit through the angry deputations in uncomfortable silence, pleased that Camden Council were being criticised, but aware that the moment that they themselves spoke, the criticisms would be turned on them. Occasionally, a Conservative or a Liberal would forget this rule, and would receive a thorough reminder.

In addition to this, the Consultative Committee had initiated a campaign in the HAAs against Geoffrey Finsberg the Conservative Member of Parliament for Hampstead (which included Kilburn); this campaign is described later in this report.

Throughout this period, the Consultative Committee were gaining in both confidence and support. The public meetings were by now attended by an average of 50 tenants and residents, many of whom had never been to such meetings before. The work that was being generated was enormous, but there were enough people who were actively involved, for it to be shared out fairly evenly.

Nevertheless, the campaign required a high level of commitment from the participants. At one stage, the Committee was able to use the time and energy of someone able to work full-time for five months for the Committee but usually the campaign was based on the tirelessness of Committee members working long hours without pay.

The consultative process, which had not been used at all until the Consultative Committee was appropriated, was now being used to its fullest extent. The number of resolutions, reports and initiatives that were flooding into the Council from the HAAs was enormous. However, given the extent of the demands and the extent of the deprivation and anger, it was inevitable that there would be conflict.

## Conflict with the Council . . .

Given the structure of the campaign, which was working class, open-ended and occasionally anarchic, and the structure of the Council which was middle class, bureaucratic and cumbersome, it was inevitable that conflict would occur. Indeed, the very success of the campaign so far had largely depended on conflict. The central dynamic of the Consultative Committee was anger, motivated by poor housing and living conditions. The anger could not be contained within the existing structures of local government, and the Council were unable to fully accommodate the demands for better housing.

The Council recognised this dilemma when they discussed the Consultative Committee's Constitution in September 1979. The officers expressed the fear that the proposed changes in the Constitution might cause 'friction' with the Council, rather than 'co-operation' which 'they wished to engender'. By September 1979 however, the support that the Consultative Committee could call upon within the HAAs was such that the Council could not afford to ignore it. The Constitution was approved, and the annual grant to the Committee was increased from £500 to £1000.

In addition, the Labour Councillors had attempted to relieve the pressure on the council machinery by '*welcoming the comments and involvement of local residents in the HAAs*'. They '*were (now) delighted that residents were showing an interest in the HAAs*'.<sup>10</sup> It was obviously hoped that such comments would be enough to placate the anger of the residents. When this optimism proved false, both councillors and officers made promises that they were either unable or unwilling to keep. This only succeeded in increasing the anger of the residents. At one of the public meetings, the Chairperson of the council committee which considered the HAAs proposal and resolutions, promised that the

Consultative Committee could be '*granted full membership of all relevant Council Committees*'. He also claimed '*that localised teams of builders, from the Council's Direct Labour Department, would be made available to carry out repair and rehabilitation work in the HAAs.*'<sup>11</sup> He later denied both of these promises, and found that both himself and the Council were being treated to a fresh onslaught from the HAA residents.

Similarly, the Chairpersons and Directors of other council committees also made promises at the public meetings, only to renege on what they had said once they returned to the 'safety' of the Town Hall. This safety proved illusory. The Consultative Committee followed them back, often going right to the heart of the matter. For example, one officer, who had been tardy in carrying out a report that he had promised, found himself surrounded by tenants whilst having his dinner in the staff canteen of the Town Hall. His colleagues were surprised at this intrusion, but he shouldn't have been. The threat of it had elicited the promise in the first place.

Other council officers regretted entering their names and addresses in the public telephone directory. It was not uncommon for the Consultative Committee to 'phone them up at their homes, demanding to know what had happened to this or that report or promise. The Council Officers reacted to this intimidation by a mixture of excuses and action. The excuses were generally threadbare, and the promises half-truths, but it was a fact that there was movement in the bureaucracy.

As the Consultative Committee became more adept at understanding council reports and statistics, and as these reports became more forthcoming, it was more difficult for the councillors to hide behind the information that their officers had given them. In the early stages of the campaign, the councillors had alleviated pressure by commissioning investigations in the HAAs and the various council departments. As

the results of these investigations became public, the facts became impossible to ignore.

The Consultative Committee had done its own Report into the delays in the Legal Department which were creating a massive backlog of Compulsory Purchase Orders. The Committee had drawn up a list of over 20 properties which had been 'recommended for CPO', but on which no further action had been taken. By the time that the council investigation was concluded, this list had mushroomed to 40 properties. The figures could not disguise this fact, despite the accompanying verbiage and excuses. The councillors attempted to disassociate themselves from the investigation's findings, saying that they had no idea about the backlog and subsequent delays. The Consultative Committee had provided each of the Councillors with this very information, months before the official report was published. The councillors' excuses rang hollow, and did nothing to 'engender the spirit of co-operation'.

Up until the advent of the Consultative Committee, the councillors were totally dependent upon their officers for information about the HAAs. The officers relied upon the councillors to provide them with their 'overall direction'. The Consultative Committee completely undermined this process, challenging the mutual 'trust' that existed between councillors and officers, and provoking serious conflict in both council committees and departments.

The majority of councillors, including Labour members, and officers, were unable to cope with this dislocation. They publicly and privately accused the Consultative Committee of over-reacting and refusing to see the problems in perspective. Although certain proposals and recommendations from the HAA tenants were accepted and acted upon, there was a stark refusal from councillors and officers to admit the source and inspiration for these changes.

However, other councillors and officers were beginning to accept

that the Consultative Committee were substantially correct in their analysis and conclusions.

*"They (the officers) hated getting shouted at, but they had to admit that we were right. It wasn't as though we were inventing our poor living conditions, just so that we could shout at them. Many of them had been made to see the houses for themselves, and they couldn't deny what their eyes were telling them."*

It was the same for councillors. They could accept that their officers had made inaccuracies in one report, or in one department, but the evidence that the Consultative Committee was providing was enormous. Unlike the majority of their colleagues, they began to trust the Consultative Committee and doubt the veracity of their senior officers.

The effect of this, was that a minority of councillors and officers did support the Consultative Committee on a number of occasions. They would at least agree with the Committee that their Reports and Resolutions should be considered. In turn, the Committee was able to rely on a regular supply of 'leaked' information. Obviously, such support was a definite embarrassment to their colleagues. This was further reflected in the subtle realignment of forces taking place within the Council Chambers and departments. The conflict might not have been popular with either councillors or officers, but they could not deny that it was effective.

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### **. . . and with the Landlords**

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There had always been a conflict of interest between the private sector and tenants in the area. After all, the landlords and property companies are mainly interested in the profit they can make from their properties, whereas the tenants are interested in seeing that the condition of those properties is maintained and improved.

Prior to the campaign, the conflict that had taken place in the HAAs was little more than a skirmish. Individual tenants, and in some instances individual

households, had attempted to put pressure on their landlords to undertake repairs or have their rents reduced. Occasional letters had been written to landlords and property companies, asking that repairs were done but these were invariably ignored. Individual tenants had taken their landlords to the Rent Officer, in an attempt to have a 'Fair Rent' registered. The registered 'Fair Rents' tended to be too high for the tenants anyway, and there was no compulsion for the owner to carry out repairs. Even more occasionally, tenants had appealed to the Council to force the landlord to carry out repairs and, in a very small number of cases, 'Informal Notices' had been served on the landlord. These were worthless. In extreme cases, tenants had actually withheld their rent 'in lieu of repairs'. At best, this was a delaying tactic, at worst, it led to the eviction of the tenants. All these attempts to secure gains against the landlords only occurred in a small minority of cases, and they were generally unco-ordinated and unsuccessful.

In contrast to this, the landlords and property companies had waged a virtual war against their tenants, aided by enormous sums of money, by the Courts and central government, they had treated their tenants with disdain and disgust. Their power over the living conditions of their tenants was virtually absolute, and they wielded it with vigour. Properties were bought and sold, and tenants were evicted. Rents were increased and repairs were refused. As the income of the landlords and property companies increased, so the living conditions of their tenants deteriorated.

The Consultative Committee did not alter the balance of power between the landlords and the community that it exploited. But it fought against this exploitation with a energy and a sense of commitment that had not been seen before in Kilburn. Normally, when the Council served a Notice on a landlord to carry out repairs, the landlord's response was to sell the property. Quite often, this would merely be a paper transaction

# LOT 73 LOT 73

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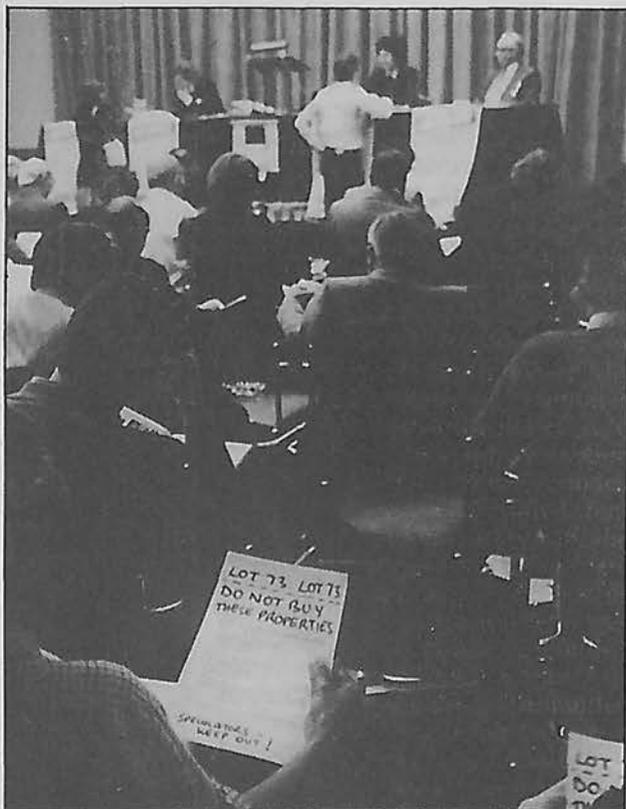
## DO NOT BUY THESE PROPERTIES

In addition to the facts stated at the foot of the page in the Auction Catalogue the following are also true: -

1. All six properties are in a state of disrepair.
2. Several tenants are withholding rent in lieu of repairs being undertaken.
3. 4,4a,6a, and 6a were declared 'unfit' by a Magistrate in April of this year.
4. 2,4,6 and 8 have been declared unfit by Camden Council's Environmental Health Department.
5. 4,4a,6a and 6a have been declared unfit by an independent surveyor.
6. As a result of this disrepair several tenants are in the process of having their rent reduced by the Rent Officer.
7. Several tenants are taking legal action against their previous landlords.
8. The tenants of 2-10 Shoot Up Hill will not tolerate further exploitation by ANY private property company. We are fully aware of our rights and intend to exercise them.
9. We are actively campaigning for Camden Council to Compulsory purchase order the properties, and if anyone other than Camden Council intends to buy these properties at this auction we intend to continue campaigning.
10. WE URGE YOU TO STAY OUT OF THE MARKET FOR THESE PROPERTIES.

STOP PRESS: 10 Shoot Up Hill has also been declared unfit and a Section 9 Repair notice has been served.

### SPECULATORS - KEEP OUT!



August 1979. Cumberland Hotel. Tenants 'bust' the auction of the Shoot-Up Hill properties. Leaflets were handed out, and a tenant made a speech pledging total resistance to anyone buying the properties (Lot 73). No-one bid and the properties were sold to the PCHA, which is what the tenants wanted.

between one property company and another, the management of the house remaining in the hands of the same agent. The exchanges of properties in this way successfully confounded the council machinery. The Council would be unable to trace the new owner, or the landlord would demand (and usually get) extra time to comply with the Repair Notice. The tenants of the property would become confused about the ownership of the property, and would not know who they should complain to about their appalling living conditions. Through it all the agent would continue to collect the rent.

The same was true when the Council eventually began to serve CPOs on landlords. Landlords could sell off or exchange their property, and the council machinery would be unable to respond. At the subsequent Public Inquiry, to determine whether or not the CPO should be granted, the landlords' barrister could succeed in making the council's own Legal Department look ridiculous. It

would be pointed out that Notices had been served on the wrong i.e. previous landlord, and that the present owner either didn't know this or didn't realise that his 'new' property was in a poor state of repair. In addition to this, the landlord's barrister would produce bank statements at the CPO Inquiry. These would show either, that the owner had the funds to carry out repairs and intended to do so immediately, or that the owner did not have sufficient funds, and could therefore not be held responsible for the poor state of his property.

The Consultative Committee addressed themselves to all these problems. When 'For Sale' notices were erected in the garden of a property that was either unfit or had a Repair Notice or CPO outstanding against it, these notice boards would be ripped down. Usually this would be done within 12 hours of erection, but occasionally it would be left until night time. Supported by the Consultative Committee, tenants

would refuse potential buyers access to the properties. The buyers would be informed of the Notices and/or CPO that was on the property, and would be informed in no uncertain language, of the tenants' determination to make life difficult for them.

In one instance, a block of five houses was being sold off. There were Notices and CPOs on all five properties, and it was obvious that the owners were attempting to get rid of them to avoid spending money on their improvement. The Consultative Committee procured a programme (the means of admission) to the Auction, and attended it. The Auction was held in the Cumberland Hotel, in the heart of London's West End. There were over two hundred rich landlords and property companies represented. Six members of the Consultative Committee attended the Auction.

Over 300 leaflets were distributed telling the prospective owners not to buy the five properties. When the Auctioneer

began the sale, he was continually interrupted by the tenants. There were numerous exchanges between the prospective owners and the tenants, and the heckling was so intense that eventually the five properties were withdrawn from the Sale. Not one bid had been made for the properties, despite the absurdly 'low' reserve price of £200,000.

In another case, a landlord attempted to comply with a dangerous structure Notice by demolishing the property while the tenants were still in it. A group of 30 tenants turned out on the streets to prevent this.

Against the advice of Camden's Legal department, the Consultative Committee was allowed to attend and give evidence at the CPO Inquiries. The normal procedure was for members of the Committee to interview all the tenants involved about the neglect and vandalism that their landlord had caused during their occupation. These statements would then be read aloud at the Inquiry, and submitted to the Department of the Environment Inspector who chaired the Inquiry. Statements would also be presented from the Consultative Committee.

The Committee had long realised that a small number of large property companies owned a considerable number of properties in the HAAs. Members of the Committee went to Companies' House in the City of London and did company 'searches' on the owners. In this way, it was possible for the Consultative Committee to present a truer financial picture of the property company to the Inspector. They were also quick to realise the connections between several of the companies. The Directors of one property company would be virtually the same as another, and often, another and another and another. In this way it was possible to show up the 'paper' transactions between 'different' landlords.

It was also possible to monitor the work of the Legal Department of Camden Council. In case after case, the Council evidence was badly compiled and presented. The

solicitors often had no knowledge whatsoever about the area, even to the extent of not knowing the number of properties in the HAAs. Notices had been sent to the wrong addresses, or had been wrongly prepared. On other occasions tenants had not been informed that CPO proceedings were under way.

It was a shock for Consultative Committee members to see the Council's solicitors and those representing the property companies greet one another like long-lost friends. This is not to imply that the council officers were deliberately inefficient because of this acquaintanceship (they would probably sue us if we did) but it often seemed that they had generally more in common with their adversaries than the people whose interests they were supposed to be representing.

The Consultative Committee not only waged a vigorous campaign against the landlords and property companies, but it also had to campaign against private industry

in the HAAs. As described earlier, the HAAs had been made virtually uninhabitable by the small garages and car repair firms that operated underneath the railway arches. These companies used the streets of the HAAs as a dumping ground for their wrecked cars, and the Committee had long complained about the Council's lack of activity against them. The Council had explained that it was difficult to force companies to comply with the various laws and regulations, and the most effective way was for the Committee to present evidence when the companies' planning applications came up for review. The Consultative Committee did this, but several of the companies would not come up for review for several years, if at all.

Attempts were made to convince the police that they should take action against the dumped and abandoned vehicles, but these requests came to nothing. The police did not have the resources to undertake such work, or so they

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## THE KILBURN CONNECTION

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### LEMON BURTON ESTATES LTD

Owned 19, 47, 49, 51, 53, 55, 57, 77, 81, 89 Iverson Road.

Director John Lemon Burton's other directorships: Jacksons Real Estate Ltd., Hendon Metal Works Ltd., E.W. Clark & Son Ltd., Acra Rowing Club Ltd., Stelmartin & Mulley Ltd.

Properties managed by S.E. Cayford & Co. of Kilburn High Road.

### KILBURN & DISTRICT HOUSES LTD

Owned 176 Maygrove Road, 4 Loveridge Road, 20 to 24 inclusive Iverson Road and more than 20 other properties outside the HAAs.

Directors: Lawrence Sidney Gilbert, John Howard Harris (Solicitor), Dora Woolf.

Harris is a director of Sixty Loveridge Road Ltd., and also a director of six companies involved in properties outside the HAAs. Woolf is a director of Brentrent Ltd., a property company active outside the HAAs.

Properties managed by S.E. Cayford & Co of Kilburn High Road.

### IAN ARTHUR LAWRENCE

Owned or managed at least 15 properties in the HAAs. Office: 4 Iverson Road.

Director of Wiltesden Investment Co. Ltd., Formesta Properties Ltd., B.L. Advertising (Kilburn) Ltd.

### UNIT LAND SECURITIES

At one time this company owned 22 houses in the area.

Directors: Clarice Pears, Clive Pears, Jack Gardner, Monty Fisher. The Pears family are famous for soap, and were involved in 60 other companies.

### THE MEIKLE SISTERS

Owned 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 91, 93, 94 Iverson Road.

### BECK & POLLITZER LTD

Owned 202 to 220, even numbers inclusive, Iverson Road.

### NOTE

Numerous other companies with one or two houses. Many owners/landlords used the same managing agents.

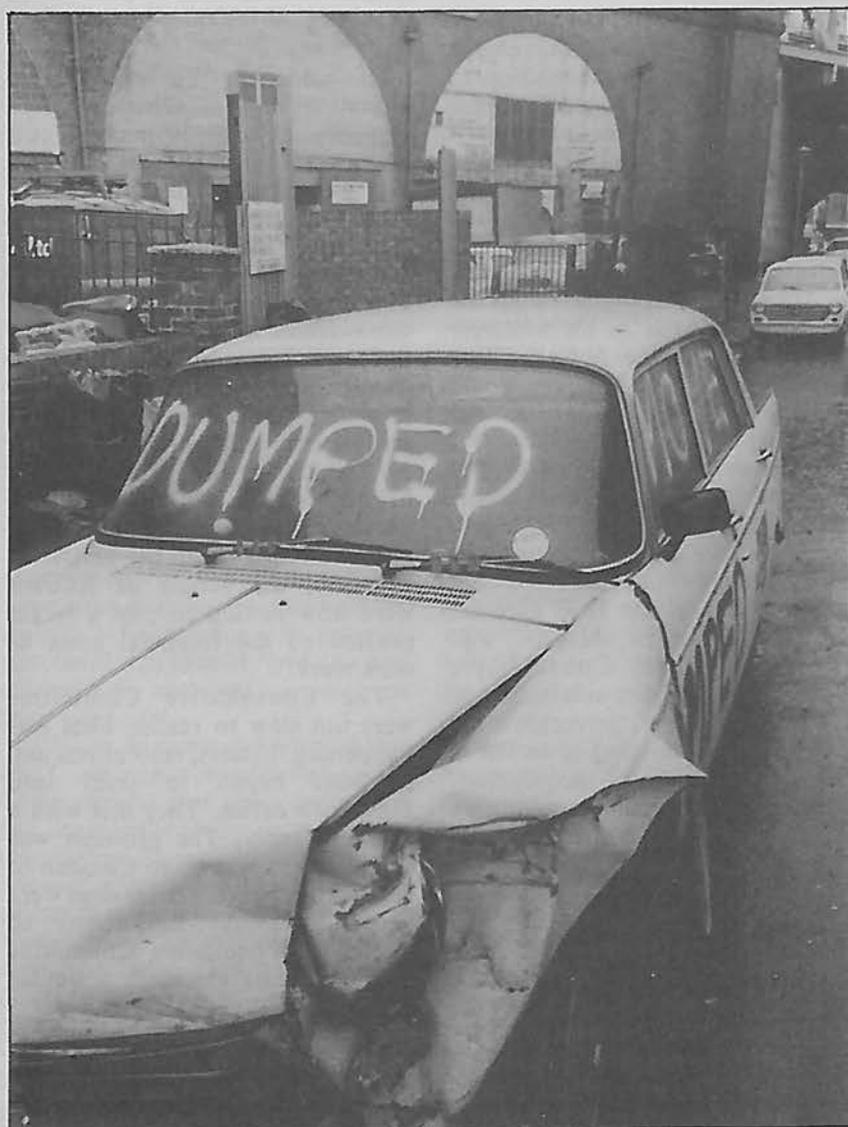
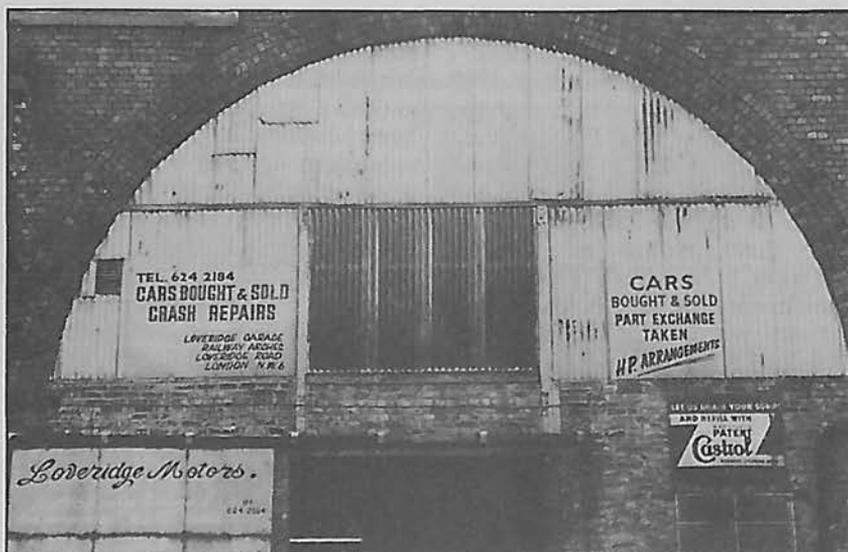
### FRANK RICHARDSON

23 Ashton Avenue, Kenton, Middlesex.

Richardson is a director of the following companies: Maygrove Plastics Ltd a local employer, Belitha Properties Ltd., which owned 134 and 58 Iverson Road, Geo. Hyde & Sons Ltd, local building firm, and J. Howling & Sons Ltd.

Information as at 1979

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Top: garage repair business in Loveridge Road. Above: one of the cars dumped by garages in Loveridge Road. Residents sprayed this one to draw attention to it.

claimed, although there was never any shortage of them on the High Road at the weekends. Members of the Consultative Committee therefore took matters into their own hands. While the police were busy patrolling the High Road, Committee members equipped with cans and stencils, spray-painted all the dumped cars in the area. This made it impossible for either the Council or the police to 'have difficulty in recognising' the abandoned vehicles, and within 24 hours, the garage owners had removed them. In response, one resident in the area received a brick through a window.

It was inevitable that the campaign would bring a violent response from the landlords, property companies and their agents. They had been committing violence against local residents since the properties had been built in the 19th century. Numerous tenants and members of the Committee were either physically threatened or harassed during the campaign. Tenants would return home to find that their electricity or gas supply had been cut off at the request of the landlord, that the sink had been ripped out, or that the hot water supply had been disconnected. Other tenants received threatening letters or phone calls. The residents who attended the Auction, were told that "rats would be put through their letter boxes" and worse. Landlords who were collecting rent would be accompanied by 'heavies'. One tenant was sexually assaulted.

The actions of the landlords and property companies against the tenants constituted a conscious and co-ordinated attack. It was matched only by the arrogance of central government.

### The Arrogance of Central Government

*'Bloody Tories'*<sup>12</sup>

Unlike the private sector, there was not necessarily a conflict of interest between the community and central government. Central government, like local government, can operate in the interest of those people

which it is meant to represent. However, it would be foolish to deny that the Conservative Government that came to power in 1979 represented the interests of the private sector. It made this plain in its manifesto, and the speeches of its leaders echoed this message. Once in office, it set about dismantling the public sector as quickly as possible. The Labour-controlled Council found it impossible to ignore the Consultative Committee. The Conservative Party was under no such compunction.

The Consultative Committee's response to the Tory Government was to campaign actively against the 1980 Housing Act, which has been described elsewhere as a 'Landlords' Charter'. Housing Action Area tenants attended meetings, organised petitions and spoke at conferences, in an attempt to organise opposition to the Act, but it was a futile gesture. The petitions were ignored, the speeches unheard, and the amendments to the Act swept aside.

The campaign against the 1980 Housing Act was essentially formal, bureaucratic and conservative, all of which was in direct contrast to the tenants' campaign. Members of the Consultative Committee were uneasy and uncomfortable in the company of 'professional' pressure groups such as Shelter and SHAC, and it was obvious from the beginning that the campaign against the Act would fail.

If Camden Town Hall had seemed like 'a million miles away' from the reality of Kilburn's HAAs, the House of Commons was another universe. There was no way in which the Consultative Committee could gain access to the Commons, and much less invade the Debating Chamber. Instead, the committee concentrated its activities on their Member of Parliament, Geoffrey Finsberg, the Conservative MP for Hampstead. The House of Commons might have been beyond the reach of the HAA tenants, but Finsberg lived less than two miles away. As well as representing Hampstead, his

constituency also included Kilburn's Housing Action Areas.

Finsberg was re-elected in 1979 and became a junior Minister in the Department of the Environment (DoE). The DoE had direct responsibility for housing and HAAs. It was inevitable, therefore, that there would be conflict between Finsberg and his constituents in the HAAs. It is perhaps worthwhile remembering, that HAAs were actually introduced by a Conservative Government in 1974, and their reliance on the improvement of old properties at the expense of new council house-building, is still a central plank in the Conservative platform.

In June 1979, the DoE issued a Circular which henceforth, refused local authorities the permission to acquire properties direct from the private sector. Permission for such acquisition could only be granted in special cases. Since this date, Camden Council has not acquired one single property direct from the private sector.

*"The Tories were just an excuse for the landlords to do whatever they wanted in the HAAs. There was no way that Finsberg could provide any real answers to our housing conditions. His Government represents the landlords who made our homes slums in the first place. He wasn't going to side with us against his own bleeding kind."*<sup>9</sup>

The effect of the DoE Circular on the Kilburn HAAs was enormous. The Consultative Committee was just succeeding in forcing the Council to recognise the gravity of the housing situation in the HAAs. Direct acquisition, which was much quicker and more effective than the lengthy and cumbersome CPOs, could have immediately brought relief to scores of tenants. Instead, they had to rely upon CPOs.

However, in July 1979, the DoE introduced a policy of blocking councils from obtaining CPOs against small landlords who refused to modernise decaying and derelict homes in HAAs. This policy, according to the *Guardian*, was introduced without public

announcement. Its purpose, according to Finsberg, was 'to give landlords a chance'. The vast majority of HAA residents had been living in poor housing conditions for years. Immediately upon declaring the HAAs, Camden Council offered numerous incentives to landlords to undertake repairs. This approach was continued with the Council practice of serving only 'Informal Notices'. The landlords in the HAAs had been given not just 'a second chance', but a third, fourth and fifth chance. A CPO had become the only way in which scores of tenants could hope to see their homes improved. A 'second chance' for the landlord, meant no chance at all for their tenants.

In addition to these two measures, the Conservative Government ordered massive cuts in local government expenditure. The Consultative Committee had been successfully winning the argument that more resources should be allocated to the HAAs. The cuts imposed by Central Government would effectively veto the commitment of such resources. Camden responded to these cuts by increasing the rates, which led to the Government imposing further cut, which in turn provoked still higher rates. Although the increased rates maintained services, and allowed work in the HAAs to continue, the people of Kilburn were now having to pay a larger portion of the financial costs of such work.

The Consultative Committee were not slow to realise what was happening. Letters, resolutions and petitions began to pour into Finsberg's office. They met with a standard reply. The problem was Camden's; it was up to Camden to deal with it but cuts in services were needed anyway. Invitations to attend a Consultative Committee public meeting met with a similar response.

In November 1979, when the cuts and the DoE initiatives were beginning to severely restrict the Council's activity in the HAAs, a deputation of two dozen Consultative Committee members

# LET THEM ROT

CAMDEN'S policy of buying and building the maximum possible number of homes in the borough was dealt two further crippling blows by the Government this week.

Councillor Derek Godfrey, the council's Housing Development Sub-Committee chairman,

## Government cripples Camden homes policy

In Camden this means that the housing investment programme allocation is reduced by £6,500,000 to £49,731,000—and the move has been condemned by council leader.

Councils will also be allowed to buy houses for which compulsory purchase orders have been confirmed—and as Camden has discovered in recent weeks, these

Ministry have been doing for the past few months by stealth."

He explained that Camden's housing development programmes had virtually ground to a halt because of the Government's delay in approving schemes submitted to the Department, and because of the refusal to increase the housing cost limits in line with inflation.

He gave the example of Camden's proposal to build timber-framed housing for about 50 families on the Spedan Tower site, next to Branch Hill, Hampstead.

visited Finsberg's Advice Surgery on Kilburn High Road.

*"First of all we explained what was happening in the HAAs. We told him (Mister Finsberg) about what the landlords and property people were doing. We explained how they ignored all the Notices and wouldn't do repairs. We said that Camden needed the powers and the money to get those repairs done."*

Finsberg responded by telling the deputation that a landlord *"had every right to sell his property on the open market, it was a free country"*. The improvement of housing conditions *"was entirely Camden's concern, and he was not responsible"*. He stated that he was *"opposed to Camden acquiring more properties"* and that *"they were already spending too much on repairs"*, furthermore, he believed that landlords should *"get a second chance"* to undertake repairs on their property.

*"When he came out with all this stuff, we could hardly believe it. Some people lost their tempers a bit, especially those in the worst conditions. Some of us said that he should come and look at the properties himself, and asked if he would come up the road with us now, or when his surgery was finished. He told us that we were being too political."*

Even those residents who had voted Conservative in the 1979 election were alienated by Finsberg's attitude and answers. The fact that he had accused the

Consultative Committee of being the political allies of Camden was simply absurd. They had spent the last nine months attacking Camden's policies in the HAAs.

However, it was impossible to ignore the effects of Central Government policy. Early in 1980, Camden's Housing Investment Programme was cut by 40 per cent. This was the money that Camden used to finance the building of new council houses. Hundreds of HAA residents were in desperate need of new housing, and there was even a shortage of council housing for those who needed to be temporarily moved out of their homes while repairs were done. As a result of this massive cut all mortgage and improvement grants were stopped throughout the Borough. The rehabilitation programme was immediately curtailed, and the cost of the Housing Investment Programme to the ratepayers rocketed: council house-building came to a halt, and the Council was instructed to start selling off council houses at a time when there were 12,500 people on the council waiting list.

The 1980 Housing Act, which was referred to earlier, also had a catastrophic effect upon the HAAs. As well as the much-needed council houses having to be sold off, landlords were greater powers and discretion. Their tenants became more insecure and were forced to pay higher rents. In addition, councils were also told to lower their repair standards. This

meant that landlords could no longer be forced into making substantial repairs to properties, and 'patch-up' jobs became the norm.

The Council's Direct Labour Organisation was dismantled, thus leaving all repairs to the private sector, who were only interested in minimising costs and making as large a profit as possible. This was especially true where the landlord had been forced to do the repairs by the Council. Neither landlord nor contractor had any interest in doing the job properly. As a result of the DLO being run down, the council lost more money making good these 'repairs' than the Building Department had lost in five years.

After years of bottling up anger and frustration, the Consultative Committee's response to this state of affairs was predictably direct. On a Sunday afternoon in April 1980, tenants and residents from the HAAs began climbing the hill up to West Hampstead, where Finsberg lived. A coach was hired to take the elderly, and to carry the soft drinks, placards and food.

Over 50 HAA residents proceeded to hold a picnic and picket outside Finsberg's house. The food and drink was distributed, along with leaflets to passers-by and local residents. The placards were erected in Finsberg's front garden, and dozens of individual letters were put through his letterbox. It was suggested that the letters should be accompanied



15th April 1980. The picket of Geoffrey Finsberg's house. Finsberg is the local MP and was at the time a junior Housing Minister.

by rats, but the tenants decided that rotting wood from one of the properties in the HAAs would be more appropriate. Each of the letters received an identical reply. There was no mention of the rotten wood, or the trampled rose bushes. Finsberg said that he would pass on the tenants' letter to Camden Council, who were responsible for the HAAs.

*"The headline in the local paper said it all. 'Finsberg, you're a disgrace', it said. And it's bloody true.*

*"It was a nice day for a demonstration, and we got on the local radio as well as in all the papers. It was the first time that we'd been on the radio."*

But the conflict with central government was obviously less effective; the cuts continued, and Finsberg himself remained totally intransigent. He opposed a Private Members' Bill in the House of Commons, which sought to improve the safety standards of hostels. A few weeks after he had successfully prevented this Bill from becoming law, a fire at a hostel in Kilburn killed ten people.

He argued that "public spending

# MP disgusts tenants

RESIDENTS in the Kilburn Housing Action Area have expressed their "disgust" at Mr Geoffrey Finsberg, their MP, for failing to act against landlord-type

## FINSBERG 'WON'T HELP FIGHT SLUM LANDLORDS'

Tenants deliver to MP a rotten wood protest



as a whole must be brought under control and substantially reduced, and local authorities will have to play their part in reducing the burden of taxation". He argued this when hundreds of his constituents were living in slum housing conditions in the HAAs, when their only hope of improvement lay with Camden Council being given adequate resources. He argued this when he personally had just agreed to spend £84,000 on furnishings for Committee rooms at the House of Commons, when he had agreed that £475,000 should be spent on re-designing the lighting and ventilation system in the House of Commons.

He agreed to this expenditure when hundreds of his own constituents were living without ventilation, and without lighting. The response from the Committee was to write more letters and to send him more reports about the housing and living conditions in the HAAs.

*"When we asked Finsberg for better housing conditions he accused us of being political. His attitude reminded us of the solicitor who had once told us to*

save up and buy our own home when we were evicted.<sup>2</sup>

*"This man, this creature, this thing, either doesn't know what it's like to live without a bath, or heating, or whatever, or he just doesn't want to know. Whatever the reason is, we need to go and tell him."*<sup>14</sup>

The Consultative Committee told him, not once, but again and again. Individual cases were sent to him, which he referred to Camden Council. Proof of the unfit housing conditions was given to him which he referred to Camden. He also told Camden that they were overspending on repairs and rehabilitation work. The standards that were legally enforceable on landlords were lowered. The Committee invited him to attend one of their public meetings. He declined. He was invited to see the housing conditions for himself. He declined.

It cannot be argued that he, and by inference, the Conservative Government, did not and do not understand the need for decent housing and living conditions. They are surrounded by that need. They believe that it is the price that we have to pay to sustain the

profitability of the private sector. The landlords' and the property companies' profits are more important than the provision of decent housing for working class people. Although the concept of profit is in direct contradiction to the reality of need, this ideology sustains and nurtures the Conservative Government and their supporters. This fact cannot be denied and against it, the Consultative Committee was impotent. The strength of the campaign within the boundaries of Camden was enormous, outside it, it amounted to nothing. Central government was impervious to the demands of the community.

Finsberg was intimidated enough to order a personal inquiry into housing conditions in the HAAs after the Consultative Committee had stamped on the rose bushes in his front garden. Nothing has ever been heard of that enquiry again.

*"You don't believe that such people really exist, not until you actually see them and hear them speak. I was frightened about what I might do to him (Finsberg), so I had to leave the room. We should go back though. Not just once or twice, but again and again until the bastard has to notice that we exist."*<sup>15</sup>

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### **Camden Council's changing response**

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*"THE basic slogan that the Consultative Committee adopted was 'EVERYONE DESERVES A DECENT PLACE TO LIVE: FIGHT FOR IT'. This slogan appeared on virtually every leaflet and newsletter that we brought out. I think that we held true to it."*<sup>16</sup>

From the moment that the tenants and residents began campaigning, it became obvious that the Council would have to change its policies and strategy in the HAAs. The anger, commitment and sheer hard work of the campaign could not be ignored and the period between 1979 and 1981 resulted in some spectacular successes for the Consultative Committee. Throughout the campaign the slogan had been, 'Everyone Deserves A Decent Place

*To Live: Fight For It!*' and people did.

By December 1979, an Area Team had been established by the Council, comprising a Principal Environmental Health Officer (EHO), two other EHOs and a Technical Assistant. These people were responsible for surveying all the properties in the HAAs, and drawing up a list or schedule, of repairs that needed doing. The pressure from local people and the Committee on the Area Team, and on other council departments, forced the officers to pay more attention to the needs and the priorities of the HAAs. Progress reports appeared at regular intervals, and any lack of momentum was immediately brought to the attention of the officers responsible.

In January 1980, Camden appointed a Chief Environmental Health Officer. The Environmental Health Department was expanded and reorganised, becoming directly responsible for the Serving of Notices on landlords to make them do repairs. A Co-ordinator was also appointed in 1980, with responsibility for co-ordinating all the work that was undertaken in the HAAs. He had the power to cut across the bureaucracy, and to go directly to the council departments who were doing, or not doing, work that directly affected the operation of the HAAs.

The Area Team held monthly meetings with the Consultative Committee where individual properties were discussed. The tenants of these properties were invited to attend these meetings by the Committee, and the Council's record of progress was checked against the tenants' experience of that progress. The Council's House Improvements and Environmental Health Departments were merged for the purpose of processing Compulsory Purchase Orders. This was after the Committee had highlighted the delays in this procedure and meant that the Legal Department were receiving first-hand accounts of housing conditions in the properties that they were attempting to CPO.

The way in which council

officers operated in the HAAs changed dramatically. They had to produce identification whenever they visited a household, and visits were preceded by a letter. If the tenants were not at home when the officers called, another letter was sent to them. Between 1979 and 1981, the upsurge in council activity in the HAAs was dramatic. Every property was surveyed or resurveyed. More CPOs and Notices were served on landlords. The first Formal Repair Notices, which legally obliged landlords to do repairs, were served and acted upon. Where the landlord refused to do repairs, the Council did them and charged the costs to the landlord. The first CPO was served, and won. The first Control Orders, and Compulsory Improvement Orders were served on landlords.

In October 1979, the Council accepted that 'persuasion' did not always get the necessary response from private landlords to achieve the aims of the HAAs and a 'more formal approach' was adopted. Gradually, a Notification System whereby landlords had to inform the Council of their various transactions and procedures, was brought into existence. The private sector began to realise that the holiday atmosphere of the first three years of the HAAs was at an end.

The serving of Notices and CPOs was properly targetted by the Council, so that they could keep track of the work they were doing and the progress that they were making. Defying Government policy, the Council went ahead with plans to acquire 22 properties direct from the private market. Where they were unsuccessful in either acquisition or CPO, the properties were referred to the 'zoned' housing association, Paddington Churches Housing Association (PCHA).

At the time of declaration, the Council owned 81 properties in the HAAs. By 1981, Camden owned 111. In addition more and more properties were being acquired by PCHA. Pressure from the Committee also ensured that properties were not left empty once

they had been acquired and the tenants 'decanted' (reoused). Other council properties that were in need of repair, were also brought to the Council's attention.

Finally, four years after the declaration of the HAAs, an Action Programme was produced by the Council in consultation with the Committee. The Action Programme admitted that previously *"there had been a total failure to acknowledge HAAs as priority areas by extra staffing and financial resources"*. It went on to acknowledge what the effects of this neglect had been. Properties had been selected on a random basis, no attempts had been made to carry out a survey of council houses in the HAAs, and there had been no moves to see that the work on these properties was programmed. It also admitted that HAA tenants were not given priority for being reoused locally.

Although these admissions did not necessarily mean that all the problems were put right, it was now impossible for the Council to ignore them. The extra resources and staff that were now being allocated to the HAAs enabled the Council to establish a full rehabilitation programme for all unsatisfactory council-owned properties. Scores of these properties were rushed into contract before the Government enforced its building moratorium. Deferred rehabilitation schemes were referred to PCHA.

The allocations and rehousing policy was also changed as a direct result of a dozen cases that the Consultative Committee had referred to the Local Government Ombudsman. The Ombudsman found Camden Council guilty of 'maladministration', and a complete review of Housing and Allocations Policies was instigated. The results of this review were far-reaching. All the individual tenants who had complained to the Ombudsman were reoused. Three new tenancy liaison officers were employed by the Council. Accommodation and resources were made available for temporary and sometimes permanent rehousing of HAA residents while

repairs were carried out. Private tenants in the worst houses were reoused while Notices and Orders were still being served on their landlords.

It is difficult to describe the amount of activity that was taking place in the HAAs as a result of the campaign organised by the Consultative Committee. Although there were some complaints that the area was beginning to look like a massive building site, people were pleased enough to move into their new homes.

*"Even when we got the keys to our new flat, I was still scared that might just be another Council mistake. I'd heard of cases where six people had been sent to look at the same flat. It was only when I actually signed for the place that I knew that it was ours."*<sup>17</sup>

*Every time that I went round the HAAs to deliver leaflets and to see people, I'd have to spend the first half-hour going round their new home with them. It was a joy to see people so happy after such a long wait."*<sup>16</sup>

The Committee also addressed itself to environmental problems in the HAA. The only children's play space was re-surfaced and re-fenced. The fences alongside the railway lines were repaired. Legal proceedings were started by the Council against British Rail because of the condition of the railway bridges and their 'tenants', the pigeons. Petitions and deputations were organised to protest against the planning applications of the garage and car repair workshops under the railway arches. The Council tightened up its conditions for granting licences and at least one company was turned down when they asked for a renewal of their licence.

After a meeting between the Committee and trade union representatives, the two groups were able to get Camden to adopt a policy of not sweeping the roads until after the dustcarts had taken away the refuse. A number of derelict sites and rubbish dumps were removed from the area. A traffic island was built, and the corner of a major junction was made safer. Two pedestrian

crossings were created. Cracked and loose paving stones were repaired or replaced, and, yes, more trees and shrubs were planted in the HAAs.

The Consultative Committee however, had not confined itself just to the HAAs and Camden Council. The work that was being generated by the Committee was enormous, not only for the Council but also for the unpaid voluntary Committee members. Members of the Committee were involved in organising other tenants' groups outside the HAAs, and even beyond the boundaries of Camden. An exhibition of photographs and statement had been put together, and this was used by many tenants' groups as a basis for their meetings. Individual members of the Committee visited these groups and spoke about community action and Housing Action Areas.

The Committee spoke at the first meeting of the Federation of Private Tenants in Camden, they gave talks in Hammersmith and Kensington. They were involved in the campaign against the 1980 Housing Act, even addressing Conservatives who were worried about the effects of the Act on their 'desirable residences and minimal rents'. The Consultative Committee also spoke to representatives from HAA tenants' groups from all over the country, at a conference organised by Shelter in Birmingham. This conference was useful in making the committee assess its work. The Committee's conclusions to the conference were that *"... the apparatus and machinery of local government itself is exclusive and self-perpetuating. It is in direct contradiction to the dual concepts of accountability and democracy"*. It's advice to other tenants groups was:

*"Fight Dirty. Use whatever lies at hand but don't trust it, not unless it's involved in the same experiences as yourselves. Create as much conflict as possible because through that conflict you not only educate yourselves, but also those you are in conflict with. And don't say please, or thank you, to anyone and mean it."*

# 5

## COMMUNITY ACTION & LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Solidarity Wins

*"We'd have never got anywhere if we hadn't organised. The number of people that have been rehoused since we started is proof of that."*

All of the people involved in the campaign were working class, the vast majority of them women. There were mothers, pensioners, single parents, and single people. Few of them had ever been involved in community politics before. Most of the activists were employed, either in the service industries or the light manufacturing industries that had grown up around Kilburn. They combined this paid employment with unpaid work in the home. They cared and cooked for their children and husbands. They kept their homes clean and tidy, taking care of the bills and doing most of the minor repairs.

Ann Thomas, the Chairperson of the Committee had three jobs. At 6.00am until mid-morning she was employed as a cleaner in the local school. In the afternoons, she cleaned for a firm of local solicitors and in the evenings, she returned to the school and continued cleaning. In addition to this, she cleaned, cooked and cared for her two children and family.

*"I was terrified when people first suggested that I should become the Chairperson. I'd never spoken at a public meeting before, never mind told other people to shut up."<sup>18</sup>*

Ann is typical of the people who became involved in the campaign. They were invariably living in poor conditions, and believed that decent housing should be available to anyone that needed it. 'Anyone' meant everyone, and throughout the campaign, tenants fought not only for themselves, but for the rest of the people living in the community.

It was for this reason, that the monthly public meetings attracted an average of 50 tenants and residents. Month in and month out, regardless of the weather or what was on television, they would climb the hill to the church hall where the meetings were held. By this time the numbers involved meant that the meetings had to move out of the cosy side room into the main hall. Tenants came to the meetings not only to discuss their housing problems, but also to fight alongside other people for an improvement in everyone's living conditions. They were encouraged by Ann, and other members of the Committee, to become more actively involved in the campaign. The bi-weekly 'small' Committee meetings were regularly attended by over 20 people.

These 'small' meetings were used to plan and discuss what the Consultative Committee were going to do next. The reports, resolutions, deputations and delegations were all decided upon at these meetings, and the work

was shared amongst those present. It was soon discovered that everyone, irrespective of age, sex or race, had something to offer.

Joan Cage, who became the Treasurer of the Committee, had taken tranquillisers the first time that there had been a deputation to the Town Hall. It was often remarked in the subsequent months, that it was the councillors and officers who needed the tranquillisers, not Joan.

*"People usually wait for authority to act. That was the reason why nothing got under way in the HAAs. We'd have just sat there forever and ever on our backsides, if the Consultative Committee hadn't been started. People should take the initiative themselves. You shouldn't just wait for Authority to act. You should go to the Town Hall and make them do things."<sup>19</sup>*

The deputations to the Town Hall formed a major part of the Committee's work. It gave them the chance to actually confront the councillors and officers who were held to be responsible for the lack of activity in the HAAs. The solidarity of these occasions was powerful enough to daunt even the most seasoned bureaucrat, and it gave added strength and impetus to the Committee's work.

*"What people don't realise is that the only weapon you've got is to stick together and fight. If the crowd is all together you can push*



August 1979. Tenants monthly meeting at St. Cuthbert's Church Hall.

the Council into doing things. It's no good if you just moan and groan and stay away from meetings like some people do who are disillusioned or have run out of steam. They're just laughing when you do that. The power to change things is in our own hands.'<sup>20</sup>

There was an enormous sense of recognition between people when they first became involved in the campaign. Tenants who had been neighbours for years suddenly realised that their concerns and problems were not individual affairs, but were common to all the people who lived in the HAAs and outside.

'We were fools for not getting organised before. We'd have never got anything if we hadn't got organised.'<sup>20</sup>

The tenants were not only learning about each other, but about their rights and the laws that related to Housing and Public Health. The more knowledge that was gained and shared, the less daunting the council machinery became. The smallest success was often enough to increase the confidence of the most reluctant tenant, and when the success rate began to increase, it was difficult to contain the sense of exuberance.

'I met one of the council officers who had just been put into the HAAs, and I told him that I

was in charge of the Areas, and that if he wanted to do anything he would have to ask us first. You should have seen the look on his face.'<sup>18</sup>

It was a fact that council officials who were used to having their own way, to making their own decisions and policies, were literally being challenged in the street to defend and justify those policies. It was a sobering experience for many of them, and they soon realised that to dismiss one member of the Consultative Committee was to herald the arrival of 15 or 20 more people, each making the same demands and the same points as their neighbour.

Again and again, the point was made: 'The councillors and the officers don't have to live in the HAAs. They don't have to put up with the high rents, the damp walls, the broken gutters and cracked ceilings. Why should they be able to decide what happens? We live in the bloody place. We should make the decisions about what happens to us.'<sup>20</sup>

When confronted with this anger, officials found it almost impossible to hide behind their professionalism. If they attempted to make excuses or deflect the question, they were asked how much they earned a week, or what their housing conditions were like.

A refusal to answer these questions was to side with the landlords and property companies. The tenants were quick to make this connection.

'Sometimes you couldn't tell the difference between the landlord and the council officer. They spoke the same language and wore the same clothes. It seemed almost crazy to expect the council officers to side with us, but we would make them.'<sup>20</sup>

The campaign created a common identity and purpose for the HAA tenants. The identity had existed before the campaign, but the community action made it impossible to ignore it, and the sense of purpose gave it momentum. Not one single vote was ever raised against a resolution. Of the hundreds that were forwarded to the Council and elsewhere, each bore the words 'Passed Unanimously'. The tenants in the HAAs were discovering their power and exercising it, collectively.

This strength not only gave the activists a 'communal strength', it also allowed them to act independently, secure in the knowledge that the group could be relied upon to support an individual's initiative. Tenants carried out their own surveys of the area, and numerous isolated



'Kitchen' in Shoot-Up Hill.



Camden Town Hall Council Chamber.

tenants were helped by their neighbours.

*"She told me that the hot water hadn't been working all weekend, so I phoned up the Housing Association (who were her landlords) and got them to send someone down immediately. At the next public meeting, we passed a resolution demanding that the Housing Association provide their tenants with an emergency repair service to cover the weekends.*

*"This old woman had been burgled and she was obviously frightened out of her wits. I put her up in my house, and immediately got on to the Council to get her rehoused. They had moved out all the other tenants and left her in that big house on her own. It worked."*<sup>21</sup>

These are just two examples, but there are many more. Some of them didn't even come to the attention of the Consultative Committee. The individual activists just considered them to be part of their job.

The major achievements of the campaign have already been outlined, but it is important to emphasise the personal aspects of community action. Not only did the campaign challenge the structure of local and central government, it also brought people closer together. The democracy of

the Committee was absolute, in that each member felt personally responsible for the collective effort. The male-oriented structures of the trade union movement or the broader labour movement would have both been inappropriate and inadequate vehicles for the work of the Consultative Committee. There was no competition between activists to see who could achieve the most, or propose the 'best' resolution. The dynamic and purpose of the group was such that 'point scoring' was completely unnecessary. The tenants campaigned alongside one another, and were not interested in the internal wranglings of power. For example, whenever an Annual General Meeting was held, there was no jockeying for positions within the Committee. People were allowed to do, or continue to do, what they were best at. If someone was unsuited to a particular type of work, she accepted that. It was not a cause for concern or bitterness. There were plenty of other things that needed doing anyway, and she was bound to discover another area of the Committee's work to which she was better suited.

The Council's Grants Investigator was shocked when he discovered that £20 of the Committee's grant had been used

for providing 'food and refreshments'. It was pointed out to him that the majority of Committee members didn't have anyone to cook for *them*. They were expected to do that as well as attend to the Committee's business. He was forced to agree with the Committee's representatives.

*"We had lived in 8 Shoot-Up Hill for 35 years, and we didn't know Ann except to say good morning to her. We'd never even seen the people who lived at number four. The campaign brought people together, and it showed that communal effort could achieve things. It was a damn good ice-breaker, quite apart from anything else.*

*"I would walk round the HAAs and I wouldn't know anyone. The campaign changed all that. People were forever stopping you in the street to find out what was happening. The shopping took a lot longer, but we achieved a fair bit more than fresh vegetables."*<sup>22</sup>

### 'Local' Government?

Camden Town Hall, and its administrative complex, Bidborough House, are situated on Euston Road, about 200 yards east of Euston Railway Station. The Town Hall is a foreboding

Victorian building of marble staircases and hallways, and oak-panelled Committee Rooms and Chambers. Bidborough House is a modern, straight-edged building of concrete and glass.

In purely geographical terms, they are both a long way from Kilburn's Housing Action Areas and there is no direct rail or bus link from the area to the Town Hall. A mini-bus and taxis were usually hired to ferry members of the Consultative Committee to Council meetings. In economic and social terms, the Council's legislative and administrative centres are a million miles away from the HAAs. It was hardly surprising that the housing and living conditions in the area had been totally ignored until the campaign began. There were no damp walls or cracked ceilings, extortionate rents and absentee landlords, in either the Town Hall or Bidborough House.

It was probably inevitable that there would be a clash of values when the Consultative Committee confronted the Council bureaucracy and its members.

*"The council machinery had a lot of faults. It kept a lot of things from the people. Not even one person was ever prepared to tell the truth."*

It was both physically and politically impossible for the Council to ignore the Consultative Committee. The sheer volume of the Committee's work and support, would have been enough to ensure a response, and the political control of the Council meant that this response could not be entirely negative. The controlling Labour Group on Camden Council were in principle committed to 'democratic and accountable local government'. The Consultative Committee forced it to translate this theory into practice. The Council was also ideologically committed to controlling the worst excesses of the private sector. The Consultative Committee provided them with evidence of these excesses, and demanded their removal.

Even the more conservative and

right-wing Labour councillors were forced into the position of 'welcoming the Committee's contributions' and 'sympathising with the long-standing problems of the HAAs'. It would have been impossible for the Labour Council to have rejected the involvement of the Consultative Committee. However, Camden's acceptance of the Consultative Committee was heavily qualified. At no point in the campaign was the Council prepared to admit that the Committee was an equal or valid partner in the democratic process.

There were numerous delays before Committee Reports and resolutions were placed on the Council's agenda. Several of these were referred to other council committees without informing the HAA residents. Whenever individual properties or tenants were discussed, the Consultative Committee was excluded from the meeting. Other Council meetings were held in the morning or afternoon, when it was impossible for HAA tenants to attend. The demand that the Council should hold some of its meetings in the HAAs was rejected outright. Council agendas did not reach the Consultative Committee until the actual week of the meeting, sometimes the very day before, and frequently the day after, making it impossible for the Committee to organise a deputation or delegation. The HAA tenants were never allowed to speak at meetings of the Grants Sub-Committee, which discussed the amount of money that was going to be made available to the HAA tenants.

From the outset, it was obvious that the Consultative Committee were adopting an openly critical stance towards Camden Council. The Council were seen as being primarily responsible for the failure of the HAAs, and the Committee were demanding that the Council take immediate steps to remedy this failure. The initial response of the Council had been to attempt to evade these criticisms. A smokescreen of promises and bureaucracy was thrown up by councillors and officers alike, in the hope that the

tenants' anger and concern would become dissipated. The Consultative Committee was seen as a direct threat to the power of both the Town Hall to legislate, and the bureaucracy to administrate.

When it became evident that the Council were not reacting quickly enough to the tenants' demands, the anger of the Consultative Committee increased. They were also becoming more adept at challenging the answers and the diagnosis provided by the Council. The resolutions and reports emanating from the HAAs were providing councillors with the opportunity to acquaint themselves more fully with the issues. The Consultative Committee were invariably more well-informed than the council officers, and their case was presented with a commitment and a ferocity that was almost alien to the austere Council Chambers.

However, the councillors responded to the HAA tenants, not by demanding immediate and effective action from their officers but by demanding explanations. It was not that the HAAs had failed, but that the council bureaucracy had failed. The bureaucracy must explain and excuse itself. The HAAs could be dealt with later.

When the explanations provided by the council officers were challenged by information presented by the Consultative Committee, the Committee hoped that the councillors would at last recognise the justice of their case. They were disappointed. The councillors continued to rely on their officers for advice, and to ignore the suggestions being made by the Consultative Committee. For example, the Chairperson of the council committee which dealt with HAAs, actively supported the Environmental Health Department's policy of serving Informal Repair Notices on landlords. This practice was championed by the Acting Deputy Chief of that Department, who believed that they offered a better incentive to landlords than the legally enforceable Formal Repair Notices. When the councillor



*Camden referred many houses for compulsory purchase with no result.*

offered this explanation at a public meeting of the Consultative Committee, he was presented with case after case where landlords had totally ignored the Informal Notices. He refused to act on this evidence. Informal Notices remained the practice of the Environment Health Department until well after the new Chief Officer has been appointed. This was in spite of successive cases, reports and resolutions, submitted

to the Council by the Consultative Committee.

The same councillor was also given overwhelming evidence about the delays by the Council in carrying out repairs to sub-standard properties in the HAAs. Many tenants had been waiting for over ten years for the Council to carry out the work, and the individual cases had been meticulously documented by the Consultative Committee. The

councillor's response was to claim (via the local press) *'that recent criticisms that the Council delayed carrying out repairs for lengthy periods are nonsense, as legal standards for housing have changed so much over the years!'*

Other councillors responded in a similar manner to the delays in forwarding CPOs to the DoE. By early 1980, over 60 properties in Kilburn's HAAs alone had been referred for CPOs. Not one of these had been forwarded to the DoE. The Consultative Committee continually brought these delays to the Council's attention. No action was forthcoming. When council officers eventually admitted that there were serious delays in the processing of CPOs, the councillors expressed their horror and surprise. The information had been in front of them for months, but they had refused to believe it. Again, the Consultative Committee continually submitted Reports about the poor standard of rehabilitation work that was being done by private contractors in the HAAs. All these reports were ignored. Neither the contractors nor the work that they did was properly supervised. Again, the Consultative Committee continually submitted Reports about the poor standard of rehabilitation work that was being done by private contractors in the HAAs. All these reports were ignored. Neither the contractors nor the work that they did was properly supervised.

Two years after the first report submitted by the Consultative Committee, the Committee undertook a survey of homes that had been rehabilitated by private contractors in the HAAs. Almost every house was found to be in need of substantial repairs. The walls were damp and crumbling, the floorboards rotten, and the ceiling cracked. The Council could not ignore this evidence. And once again they expressed their 'horror and surprise'.

*'It's a bloody disgrace that we had to complain to the Ombudsman (sic) at all. Councillors and council officers have been to our meetings, read*

our reports, listened to our complaints. And fobbed us off with fairy stories."<sup>23</sup>

The Formal Notices and the CPOs were the most effective powers available to the Council if they were to control the vandalism of the private sector. Both these powers were either not used or misused until the failure was acknowledged by the council officers responsible. The Consultative Committee had been highlighting the failure for years, but their protestations and advice had been totally disregarded by the councillors who were supposed to represent them.

*"The council machinery was circular, self-perpetuating, and exclusive. Within it, there was no difference between either councillors or officers. The officers made policy, the councillors defended the administration. Both of them ignored the Consultative Committee to protect their joint interest, which was power."*<sup>13</sup>

Occasionally, the officers were forced to accept minor changes in the way that they worked. The CPO Public Inquiries were a classic example of this. The Council's Legal Department objected to the Consultative Committee's involvement in the Inquiries, but they were forced to bow to pressure from the councillors. Instead of the Council welcoming and co-operating with the Committee, HAA tenants were made to feel like interlopers. The officers refused to discuss their evidence with the Committee prior to the Inquiry, and often this led to the Council presenting evidence that was either wrong or contradictory.

*"The Council had got the landlord's address wrong, so all the Notices had been sent to the wrong place. We knew the address, but they wouldn't even talk to us before the Inquiry. The landlord was able to claim that he knew nothing about the Notices because he had never received them. When I went back to the HAAs, and talked to the pensioner who lived in the house, I had to tell her that I didn't think that the Council had won the CPO. She burst into tears and cried her heart out."*<sup>24</sup>

Needless to say, the CPO was lost. The Legal Department made no apology, either to the tenant concerned or the Consultative Committee. The councillors promised to look into the matter. No action was taken.

Throughout the campaign, councillors were faced with a straight choice. They could side either with their officers and the bureaucracy, or they could side with the Consultative Committee. The councillors created this choice by refusing to admit the HAA tenants as valid partners in the process of local government. It was perhaps inevitable that the majority of them should side with their officers and their bureaucracy. The few councillors who did give support to the Consultative Committee, were invariably isolated within the controlling Labour Group. They were seen as 'radicals' and 'left-wingers' by their colleagues, and yet in every instance where the campaign's policies were eventually applied and adopted, they were found to be more successful.

Camden refused to accept this fact. Officers and departments claimed responsibility for changes that had been forced upon them by the strength of the campaign. Individual officers were promoted, Chief Officers were complimented on their ability to reorganise and restructure the administrative machinery, councillors claimed the credit for their achievements in promoting new policies and initiatives. All of these changes came as a result of the Consultative Committee's campaign. At the same time, the Council was still refusing to fund a part-time worker who would be employed to work alongside the Consultative Committee.

The relationship that exists between councillors and council officers is to the detriment of the practice of democracy and accountability in local government. Neither party responds to the genuine needs and aspirations of the community. They respond and relate, only to each other. It must be remembered, too, that in the majority of Boroughs, the local

authority is far less 'caring and progressive' than Camden. The relationship that exists between Conservative, Liberal/SDP Councils and the community is vicious enough to make Camden appear almost commendable. Nevertheless Camden Council never reconciled itself to working alongside the Consultative Committee in an open and equal fashion.

*"There is no doubt that many of their (the Consultative Committee's) complaints were justified and that the pressure they brought to bear generated an upsurge of activity in the Areas and an increase in members awareness of the problems. However they also aroused needless antagonism between residents and officers with their often misdirected attacks against individual officers and on particular issues."*<sup>25</sup>

That the Council could make this statement in 1981, after the Consultative Committee had been in existence for two years, is proof enough of their attitude towards the community that they are supposed to represent, and in whose interest they are meant to work. Without the antagonism, and without the attacks, the vast majority of people in the HAAs would still be living in slums. The councillors and their officers were completely incapable of seeing the truth of this statement. Until they can accept such truths, they will never operate in the interests of the community. The middle class bureaucracy will triumph, and the working class needs and aspirations will be smothered beneath it.

*"They (the councillors) live in a different world from us. They're like the officers. They don't live in houses with damp walls and cracked ceilings. They don't even believe that such places exist, not really."*

*When we first went to the Council, they thought that we were Martians. Then they thought that we were Tories or Liberals. And when that wouldn't stick, they decided that we were just trouble-makers. It never occurred to them that we just wanted somewhere decent to live."*<sup>16</sup> ■

# 6

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## THE LAST TWO YEARS

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THE LEGISLATION and the cuts which were being imposed upon Camden Council and other local authorities by the Conservative Government were bound to have an effect on the Housing Action Areas (HAAs) although the effect was minimised by the work of the Consultative Committee, which continued to campaign for more resources to be allocated to the HAAs.

However, the success of the Consultative Committee in maintaining the level of activity in the HAAs, was at the expense of other parts of the Borough which were equally in need of resources. The continued strength and presence of the Consultative Committee, was such that they could not be ignored by the Council. In other areas of Camden, where tenants' groups did not exist or where they were less vociferous, it was possible for the Council to safely neglect the needs of the community.

As the Council's Action Programme continued to be implemented in the HAAs, there was a noticeable improvement in the area. Properties were being repaired and rehabilitated, wider environmental improvements were taking place, and tenants were being rehoused from the more derelict houses. But the Action Programme demanded that resources be increased rather than sustained, and it was becoming

obvious that the Council were unable to increase resources in line with requirements.

More properties were taken out of the private sector as the Consultative Committee had demanded, but the Council were unable to provide the funds necessary to rehabilitate those properties. The tenants were decanted into council houses, and the unfit properties were boarded up and left empty or referred to the zoned Housing Association, PCHA.

PCHA became more active in the HAAs, and properties were acquired direct from the private sector and from the stock that Camden had originally targetted for Council acquisition. While the majority of these properties were rehabilitated and let, the rents were considerably higher than those charged by the Council. In addition to this, Housing Association tenants were deprived of their rights under legislation which controlled the private sector, and unlike council tenants, they did not have the democratic right of redress against their landlords via the ballot box.

It was also the case that Camden could not provide the Housing Association with the finance necessary to rehabilitate all the properties that it had referred to the Association. Unable to repair these houses, the Housing Association decanted the existing

tenants and either boarded up the properties, or let them to single people on short-life tenancies. Where properties were let under these short-life agreements, the repairs that were undertaken by the Housing Association were only to a minimum standard.

As the economic and social climate worsened, the demands that were being made on the Council increased outside the HAAs. The Council were not allocating more resources to housing, and in many areas these resources were actually being reduced. The increase in demand, coupled with this reduction in resources, meant that the Council were finding it increasingly difficult to fulfil even their statutory obligations.

The departments which were primarily responsible for implementing the Council's Housing Policy were unable to do all the work that was being demanded of them. Although several of these departments had been reorganised as a result of pressure that had been put on the Council by the Consultative Committee, the amount of work that they could cope with was finite. The delays in serving Formal Repair Notices on landlords began to increase. So did the delays in enforcing these Notices when they had expired, and the delays in processing CPOs.

At first, the lengthening delays

were imperceptible, but they became more obvious over time. In April 1981, the Consultative Committee organised a deputation to the Town Hall, where evidence was presented about the increased delays. It was pointed out that fewer properties were being targeted by the Council in the HAAs, and that the repairs standards being demanded of landlords were being reduced. The standard of work being done by private contractors in the HAAs was also attacked by the tenants, and there were demands that this work should be done by the Council's own Direct Labour Organisation.

There was increasing opposition in the HAAs to the number of properties that were being referred to, and acquired by, PCHA. The number of derelict council-owned properties in the HAAs was shown to be increasing, and the delays in serving Repair Notices and Compulsory Purchase Orders on private landlords were highlighted.

The Council's response was to blame the Conservative Government for the lack of resources to enable them to carry out their programme. The Direct Labour Organisation had been virtually disbanded. Properties were ear-marked for 'home-steading' i.e. selling-off to the private sector. A proposed Community Centre on a council development adjacent to the HAAs was considered for commercial rather than community use.

It was obvious that the Consultative Committee would react virulently to these proposals and lack of action. But the resolutions, reports and deputations were now being met with a blanket response from the Council. The Conservative Government were forcing Camden to make cuts. It was no longer Camden's fault that the HAAs were not working properly.

The Environmental Health Officers and the Area Team were assigned to other work in addition to the HAAs. The HAA Co-ordinator was also given responsibility for co-ordinating General Improvement Areas in

another part of Kilburn. Because of financial constraints, PCHA stopped collecting rates as well as rents from their tenants. It was impossible for the Council to prosecute private companies who used the HAAs as a dumping ground because of the increased demands being made on the Legal Department. It was impossible for the Council to prosecute building contractors who did poor rehabilitation work because the Council did not have the resources necessary to prosecute. The Council could not adopt a private Mews in the HAAs because the financial costs would be too great. The Consultative Committee continued to express its anger at these proposals and changes, and demands were continually made on the Council to change its policies in the HAAs.

When directly challenged by the Committee, the Labour councillors responded by offering the HAA tenants a choice. They could have either the Conservative-imposed cuts, or alternately, rate and rent increases which would be used to improve services. The Consultative Committee refused to accept this choice, and called upon the Council to go into direct confrontation with the Conservative Government. The Committee argued that the Council should adopt a policy of no rate increases, no rent increases, and no cuts. The Council refused to do this.

By the autumn of 1981, it had become obvious that the Council were losing Compulsory Purchase Orders in the HAAs because the Legal Department was unable to prepare its cases properly. Successive CPOs had been turned down by the DOE. The Council argued that this was because the Conservative Government was naturally opposed to CPOs. While accepting this, the Consultative Committee cited case after case where the Council had prepared its evidence badly. Tenants and the Committee had not been involved in the CPOs, notices had been sent to the wrong addresses, rehabilitation schemes had not been properly costed. The success

rate of CPOs in HAAs was only one in four, and this was much less than the success rate in adjacent Labour Boroughs.

In 1981, as in previous years, the Consultative Committee's grant application, which asked for the funds to employ a part-time worker, was turned down by the Council. This was in spite of the fact that every single council or council-sponsored agency in the HAAs had supported the application. The refusal was justified on the grounds that the financial cost of £2,500 would be too great and that the Council had other areas which were more deserving of priority for grant aid.

Early in 1982, the Consultative Committee submitted the results of a survey they had conducted on all rehabilitated council-owned properties in the HAAs. The evidence contained in this report justified every single resolution that the Consultative Committee had submitted (and that the Council had ignored) about the poor work that was being done by private contractors in the HAAs. Virtually every rehabilitated council property was now in need of substantial repair. Walls and floors were damp and cracked, the plasterwork was crumbling, floorboards and staircases were rotting. Hundreds of tenants in the HAAs had been moved from private slums to public slums. It was pointed out that not one single private contractor had been prosecuted for poor work. The cost of repairing these 'rehabilitated' properties will run into millions of pounds, a thousand times the cost of the part-time worker.

In addition to the failure of the Council to secure decent living conditions for its own tenants, the private sector was also becoming more adept at circumventing and using HAAs for their own ends. When the Environmental Health Department had begun serving Formal Repair Notices and CPOs on private landlords and property companies in 1979, the private sector had been slow to respond. This had allowed the Council to secure the repair and rehabilitation of several properties in the HAAs.



*Boarded up 'short-life' properties in Shoot-Up Hill. PCHA does not have the money to do them up.*

Once it became obvious to the private sector that Camden was pursuing a more active and efficient Environmental Health policy, the landlords responded by changing their own practices in the HAAs. Prior to 1979, the private sector had concentrated its efforts on multi-occupied rented accommodation. When their income from this area was threatened they reverted to the rehabilitation and sale of their properties.

Grants and bank loans were secured to pay for the cost of rehabilitating houses, the existing tenants were offered financial inducements to move elsewhere, and the properties were rehabilitated and sold. There were massive profits to be realised from this form of property speculation. The improvements in the area which had been brought about by the Consultative Committee's campaign, ironically had increased

both the overall attractiveness of the area, and the value of the individual properties.

A single, one-bedroom flat in Kilburn could realise £30,000 on the open market. The fact that none of the existing tenants or residents could afford to pay this much for a self-contained flat was immaterial. The private sector's motivation was profit, not need.

Increasingly, the indigenous population of the HAAs were forced into either sub-standard council or housing association housing, or out of the area all together. The owner-occupiers who could afford to buy the £30,000 plus flats had neither the commitment to improve other residents' housing conditions, or the allegiance that had brought the Consultative Committee members together in the first place.

The Consultative Committee itself, had not been immune to the changes that were taking place in

the HAAs. Numerous HAA residents had been rehoused, either by the Council or PCHA. The majority of these people were rehoused outside the HAAs, often in other parts of the Borough. Many of them had been active members of the campaign.

At the second Annual General Meeting (AGM) in 1980, virtually the entire elected membership of the Committee changed. This was not because the original activists had grown tired or disillusioned, it was because they had been rehoused outside the HAAs.

The same changeover in membership occurred at the AGM in 1981, and the tenants began to find it increasingly difficult to do all the work that was required if the momentum of the campaign was to be sustained. Again, this was not because of any lack of commitment on the part of activists, it was simply because the remaining activists did not have the necessary time and skills to maintain and develop the campaign. Recognising this, the Committee employed a part-time worker for a short period in 1981, in an attempt to secure the funds necessary to employ someone on a more permanent basis. In addition to this, the worker was also able to do much of the administrative work that was being neglected by the Committee. The Council, despite intense pressure from the activists and other agencies throughout the Borough, delayed making a decision on the part-time worker until after the local elections in 1982.

This last delay caused considerable consternation within the Committee, and there was some demoralisation as a result of it. The monthly public meetings were still attended by scores of tenants, but it had become impossible for the active members of the Committee to sustain the level of work that had characterised the earlier stages of the campaign. The skills that were needed to prepare the agendas, minutes, resolutions and reports, were no longer available, and neither was the time necessary to do the 'back-up' work in between the public meetings ■

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## CONCLUSION

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### The Lessons of Community Action

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THE ACHIEVEMENTS of the Kilburn Housing Action Areas Consultative Committee should not be under-estimated. The solidarity and commitment expressed by tenants in their campaign for better housing and living conditions has been exemplary. The tactics that they adopted, and the way in which they organised, serve as a model for other community groups who are involved in similar campaigns. Their achievements, in the face of enormous and concerted opposition, were impressive.

For the majority of activists, the campaign was their first ever involvement in community action and politics. The ensuing conflict taught them about the intricacies of local government and housing legislation. It taught them about the inadequacies of both. It taught them about the overwhelming power of private capital, and about the dictates of profit over need. It taught them about inequality, not that it existed (they had known that all their lives) but that it was perpetuated in the interests of those people who controlled the power, the wealth, and the resources of the country. The campaign also taught the activists that it was possible for working class people to actually challenge those who controlled society.

However, this challenge was essentially localised. It was against the individual landlords and property companies who systematically vandalised Kilburn. It was against the local authority who refused to take action against these landlords and property companies, and against the local Member of Parliament who supported the latter.

When the Consultative Committee attempted to break out of the geographical and ideological boundaries of the HAAs, they were less successful. That it was necessary to break out was never doubted, but it was a difficult transition for the Committee to make.

One of the main reasons for this is inherent in community action. By definition, community action is predominantly committed to achieving localised change. The majority of activists and their supporters, are united around issues which are seen as fundamentally secular in character. It was obvious that appalling housing and living conditions existed outside the HAAs, but the Consultative Committee addressed themselves primarily to improving conditions in the HAAs.

When the Committee attempted to form links with other tenants groups in the Borough, they were less successful than they had been within their own area. The reasons for this were to some extent

practical. It was difficult for HAA tenants to travel to other areas and meet with tenants groups. Time was not available to organise other tenants, especially given the amount of work that was being done by the activists within the HAAs. Resources and finance were not available to effect a Borough-wide campaign.

However, a more important reason was the level of achievement that could have been expected from a wider campaign. The support that the Consultative Committee enjoyed in the HAAs was forthcoming because the Committee actually achieved results. The success of the campaign sustained the commitment and the involvement of the activists. If this success had been less dramatic, the support that the Committee could rely on, would have been less secure.

A Borough-wide, or London-wide, campaign could not have expected the same level of success. The demands that were being made by the Consultative Committee, would not have been realised so easily if every tenants group in the Borough had made them. The Council would have refused to allocate the resources necessary to implement changes on a Borough-wide scale. Resolutions, reports, deputations and pickets would not have swayed it from this position. It would have placed the blame for the lack of resources on Central

Government. It had used this argument when the cuts had begun to bite deeply into its finances from 1981 onwards. It would have used it immediately if the demand for more resources had been echoed throughout the Borough in 1979.

The refusal of central government to make more money available to local authorities, and the failure of local authorities to confront central government on this issue, would have effectively reduced the capacity of a larger campaign to effect change. Changes would have been necessary to have sustained this campaign and its supporters. The support that such a campaign had enjoyed would gradually decline as results were not forthcoming.

There were also problems when the Committee attempted to establish links with the trade unions that represented the council workers in the HAAs. Active trade unionists also had limited time and resources at their disposal, and it was difficult for them to give the commitment necessary to support the Consultative Committee and vice versa.

In addition to this, the trade union leadership was as reluctant as the councillors to take on central government. While the unions were glad of the support that the Committee was giving to them, they would not generally have taken industrial action to defend and improve the services available to the HAA and Borough residents. They would possibly defend jobs when cuts were being made, but they were much less likely to defend the level and effectiveness of services.

However, links were established and joint agreements of trade unionists and the community activists successfully demolished excuses that were given by the Council's bureaucrats. The Consultative Committee campaigned against redundancies, and in support of the Council's Direct Labour Organisation.

Obviously, it is essential for community groups to build links between each other and with the trade union movement if change is to be effected, not only in housing,

but in all other areas of human activity. Over recent months there has been some cause for optimism that such co-operation is being established. The Federation of Private Tenants has been established in Camden, and is attempting to unite private tenants throughout the Borough. Several new tenants groups have been established in Camden, and the Federation is attempting to persuade other groups to affiliate to it.

Tenants who were rehoused outside the HAAs, and moved into council houses in the adjacent General Improvement Areas (GIAs), have combined with other tenants and established a Consultative Committee along similar lines to the one described here. The first meeting of all Consultative Committees in Camden has been organised, and although this was done under the auspices of Camden Council, it is hoped that future meetings will break away from this control.

Public meetings have been held throughout Camden by NUPE and UCATT, at which tenants groups and representatives have been invited. These meetings have invariably voiced opposition to the cuts, and Camden Council's policy of implementing the demands of the private sector. Tentative links have been established between these unions and various tenants groups, including Kilburn's Consultative Committee.

These links have been strengthened since the local government elections in May 1982. Labour retained its majority on Camden Council, and several of the new labour councillors were determined that the Council would not continue to implement the policies of the Conservative Government. They recognise the need to support and unite the tenants and trade union movement, and there have been numerous meetings to initiate and develop joint action against cuts and central government legislation.

In addition to this, the Consultative Committee have at last received funds to employ a part-time worker. Hopefully this

will result in the momentum and involvement of local people being maintained and improved. There has certainly been an increase in the number of activists who have begun attending the monthly public meetings, and several new initiatives have been taken by the Consultative Committee.

The future is uncertain. There will be improvements in the way in which the Council operate in the HAAs, and the Consultative Committee will continue to play a major role in ensuring that the Council operates in the interests of the community. It remains to be seen what will happen when the Council is again threatened by the power of central government, and whether or not it can command the support of local people if it attempts to resist this challenge.

It would be absurd to be over-optimistic about the future, but it is a fact that the anger which has motivated the Consultative Committee from the outset, will not be diluted, and that the basic demand remains the same:

*"EVERYONE DESERVES A DECENT PLACE TO LIVE: FIGHT FOR IT."*

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### **Afterword: the growing attack on Local Government**

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*"Much of the pressure on local government comes from central government because they can always stop the money as Heseltine has done. They control the tap and if you take too much water they turn it off."*<sup>13</sup>

The inability of the Consultative Committee to influence central government policy, was obviously a result of the discrepancy in power that existed between the two organisations. The Committee felt, however, that if they concentrated their efforts on their elected Member of Parliament, they might achieve some changes. In the event, the collective strength of the financiers, public and private corporations, shareholders, landlords and the judiciary, was enough to sustain Finsberg in his purely local 'difficulties' with the tenants that he was supposed to represent in Parliament.

A similar discrepancy in power exists between local and central government, and this discrepancy has been increased since the election of the Conservative Government in 1979. In the earlier chapters we described how the Government slashed Camden's Housing Investment Programme. At the same time as this cut in Camden's HIP was being enforced, the money available for the Housing Corporation was also reduced. This reduction directly cut the funds available to housing associations for the acquisition and repair of properties, and Camden Council were unable to provide housing associations with the necessary cash.

Between 1981 and 1982, Camden's Rate Support Grant (RSG) was reduced to zero. The RSG is the money that is made available to the individual local authorities by central government. In effect it is a way of subsidising the locally raised rates. The removal of RSG forced Camden to increase the rates in an attempt to maintain services. However, the rate increase was not large enough to cover all the Council's costs, and Camden resorted to cuts. Cuts were made in jobs and services, and several hundred council employees were made redundant or their positions were 'frozen' (i.e. unfilled) when they became vacant.

In the year 1978/79, Camden received approximately £80 million for housing expenditure from central government. By 1982/83, this amount will have been reduced to a maximum of £25 million. The effects of this reduction can be imagined. The Council's housing policy and strategy will have been decimated. It is no longer politically possible for Labour-controlled councils to increase the rates. Services will be cut, more Council employees will be made redundant or sacked. In addition to these direct cuts which the Conservatives imposed upon Camden, there has also been legislation introduced which has further reduced the power exercised by local authorities.

The 1980 Housing Act, made it illegal for local authorities not to

sell their council houses. This has reduced the amount of housing stock available to people in need who cannot afford to buy their homes on the private market.

Local authorities have been refused permission to acquire properties directly from the private sector, and CPOs have become more difficult to obtain against landlords. Along with the moratorium on council house-building, this has further curtailed local authorities' powers to provide housing for those in need. The legal standards for repair and rehabilitation work have been lowered, not only for local authorities, but also for private landlords and property companies. Councils can no longer insist that landlords do repairs to a standard that makes their properties either self-contained or habitable for a long period of time.

The 1981 Local Government Planning and Land Act, has drastically reduced the amount of work that can be undertaken directly by local authorities. The Council's own workforce have been made to complete unfairly with private contractors, for all but the tiniest and most unprofitable jobs. Private contractors cannot be properly supervised or monitored, and this has resulted in the work that has been carried out under the auspices of the Council being done to an appalling standard.

Unable to 'compete' with the private sector, the Council's Direct Labour Organisation has been virtually disbanded. Hundreds of council employees have been made redundant, and the delay in carrying out urgent repair and rehabilitation work has increased.

Under the 1982 Local Government Finance Act, the powers of local authorities to raise revenue will be dramatically curtailed. It will be impossible for local authorities to levy a Supplementary Rate increase, and any rate increase above a figure decided by central government, will result in central government cuts equal to, and above, the rate increase. Camden Council has also been singled out by the District Auditor, who has declared that it

was 'unreasonable' for the Council to agree to pay a minimum weekly wage of £60 to its employees. The councillors who agreed to this increase, are being surcharged for the amount of overspending that has accrued to the ratepayers.

This list of legislation, powers and dictates, which has been imposed upon local authorities is by no means exhaustive. The results of this onslaught are catastrophic not only in terms of housing, but for all council services.

Not only does it herald the destruction of local democracy, and the accountability of local authorities to their electorate. It is also an unparalleled attack upon the living standards and conditions of working class people. Legislative power, finance and resources, have been taken away from local authorities. However critical we might be of them, councillors have been elected by the community, and they are accountable to the community via the ballot box. In Labour-controlled authorities, they have been generally elected on the mandate of defending and improving the services available to working class people.

This mandate has been ignored by the Conservative Government, and the power of local authorities has been handed over to the private sector. The private sector is unelected, unrepresentative and undemocratic. Its single motivating principle is profit. It shares this principle with the Conservative Government.

The collective strength of the Conservative Government and the private sector has already been described. This strength is now being used to crush local authorities who are refusing to submit to the dictates of profit, and the success of the private sector in forcing local authorities into submission has been dramatic.

Labour Councils have collapsed in the face of legislation passed by the Conservative Government. They have introduced cuts, they have reduced services. They have sacked employees, and they have refused to employ workers who are needed. They have introduced rent



*West End Sidings is the latest Council development. All tenants still living in bad housing in the area will be re-housed here — as long as they have enough 'waiting list points'.*

increases, and they have introduced rate increases. They have sold council houses, they have stopped building council houses. In short, they have done everything that the private sector has asked of them.

In bowing to the dictates of the private sector, Labour Councils have ignored the democratically expressed desires of both the community and their workers. They have ignored the community that elected them into office, and they have ignored the trade unions that represent their workers. They have done this, they argue, because of the supremacy of Law.

In this country, Parliament is considered to be the supreme legislative body. Whatever Parliament decides is considered democratic, and must be respected and acted upon. The present

majority in Parliament belongs to the Conservative Party. The Conservative Party allies itself entirely with the private sector. Therefore Labour Councils must, it appears, operate in the interests of the private sector via the Conservative Party.

The interests of the private sector have become more important than the interests of the people that the Labour Party purports to represent. That Camden Council has operated in the interests of the private sector since 1979, cannot be denied. Their main opposition to the Conservatives has been through the Courts. The individual Labour Councillors who are threatened with personal surcharge have established a 'fighting fund'. Not to fight for the maintenance of jobs

and services, but to pay for the legal costs of the court cases against them. If they win the court case, they will be safe from personal bankruptcy and disqualification from office. But the cuts will continue.

Until these Court cases are decided, every decision that might incur the wrath of the District Auditor, is referred to the Council's lawyers. No decision has been made which has gone contrary to the advice of the Council's lawyers. Cuts have continued. The Council leadership has argued vociferously within the Association of Metropolitan Authorities against Conservative-proposed legislation. Reports and resolutions have been passed, deputations have been organised to confront Conservative Ministers. The cuts



have continued. Individual Labour Parties and Councillors have spoken out against Conservative legislation. Demonstrations and pickets have been organised, petitions have been circulated and signed. The cuts have continued.

Solidarity has been expressed with trade unions who are attempting to prevent legislation becoming law, and whose members are being made redundant. Resolutions have been supported and there have been calls for an alternative economic strategy. Meanwhile, the cuts have continued. Councillors have attended the meetings of tenants and community groups, asking for support and understanding of council policies. The Conservative legislation and powers have been explained and criticised. And the cuts have continued.

Cuts have not been confined to jobs and services. They have been directly into the living standards and conditions of the very people that Labour councillors claim to represent. Council rents have been increased. Rates have been increased. School meals charges have been increased. Heating charges have been increased.

There have been longer delays before Repair Notices are served and enforced on landlords. Repairs on council and private properties have been done to lower standards. Staffing shortages and the increased demand on all council services has caused interminable delays and the deterioration of living conditions for hundreds of people in Kilburn alone.

*"It's absurd to ask people whether they would prefer a Tory*

*knife, or a Liberal/SDP knife, to a Labour knife. The cuts are still bloody."*<sup>13</sup>

Camden Council are correct in blaming the cuts on the Conservatives. But the people of Camden and other Labour-controlled authorities, are correct in blaming the Councils for implementing those cuts. A refusal to implement cuts, would have taken Camden Council outside the Law. It would have meant that individual councillors would have been surcharged. It would have meant that Camden Council would have faced bankruptcy. It would probably have meant an end to the Labour control of Camden Council, and deeper cuts being made by the Conservatives, Liberals and Social Democrats.

But a refusal to implement cuts would have prevented Camden Council from becoming the agents and allies of the private sector. It would have provided council employees and trade unions with the leadership necessary to oppose the cuts. It would have provided the tenants and community groups in Camden with the leadership necessary to oppose the cuts. It would have allied Camden Council to the workers and the community rather than to the dictates of the private sector. It would have provided other local authorities with the leadership necessary to oppose the cuts. It would have maintained the credibility of the Labour Party, as a Party which represents the hopes and aspirations of working class people.

The effect of implementing the cuts in Kilburn's Housing Action

Areas was to further alienate local people from the councillors who were supposed to represent them. It was patently obvious, that councillors who voted for cuts, did *not* represent the needs of the community.

Throughout their campaign, the Consultative Committee had demanded more resources from the Council. It was accepted that the Conservative Government were cutting the resources that Camden could make available, but it was not accepted that the Labour councillors should accept this without a fight.

The verbal protestations, the reports and petitions, demonstrations and deputations, which were organised by the Council against the Conservatives, did not amount to a fight in the eyes of the Consultative Committee.

The Consultative Committee had won the support of the people who lived in the Housing Action Areas. They had used this support in every way that they could demand better housing and living conditions.

*"The Council could have won the support of its workers, of other tenants groups. They already had power in terms of finances and resources. They should have used that power to fight the Tories. We'd have bloody well used it."*<sup>13</sup>

For years the Committee had fought to force the Council to pay attention to the needs of its working class residents, especially those in the worst housing conditions. The Council's collapse in the face of the Tory Government was a bitter betrayal of all that the Committee had stood for ■



March 1982. General dereliction still remains.

# APPENDIX 1

## Kilburn Housing Action Areas Consultative Committee

### Membership of Committee: May 1979

Ann Thomas (Chairperson)  
6A, Shoot-Up Hill, NW2.  
Michael Murphy (Vice Chairperson)  
32 Iverson Rd, NW6.  
Angela Birtill (Secretary)  
4 Shoot-Up Hill, NW2.  
Joan Cage (Treasurer)  
8 Shoot-Up Hill, NW2.  
Committee Members:  
Dan Sheehan  
24 Iverson Rd, NW6.  
Carmen Wilson  
25A, Maygrove Rd, NW6.  
Steven Taylor  
4 Shoot-Up Hill, NW2.  
Mim Renwick  
3 Medley Rd, NW6.  
Lee Siwela  
4A Shoot-Up Hill, NW2.

By May 1980, all but Ann Thomas and Mike Murphy had been rehoused. Out of those rehoused, only Dan Sheehan remained in the HAAs.

### Present Membership of Committee: May 1982

Estella McEntire (Chairperson)  
6 Maygrove Rd, NW6.  
Ann Thomas (Vice Chairperson)  
129 Iverson Rd, NW6.  
Heather Johnson (Secretary)  
17 Iverson Rd, NW6.  
Margaret Douglas (Treasurer)  
146 Maygrove Rd, NW6.  
Committee Members:  
Eddi Hennessey  
27 Maygrove Rd, NW6.  
Mick Shanahan  
9 Ariel Rd, NW6.  
Karen Rathbone  
6 Iverson Rd, NW6.  
Eileen McGrath  
24 Maygrove Rd, NW6.  
Pat Dolan  
1 Iverson Rd, NW6.

# APPENDIX 2

## Source of information & quotations

1. F. Thompson, *Hampstead: Building a Borough*, 1974, p.374.
2. Interview with tenants, Autumn 1980.
3. Interview with tenants, (committee member, M. Shanahan).
4. Interview with tenants.
5. Extract from speech made to Councils' Private Sector Sub-Committee in January 1980 by members of the Consultative Committee.
6. Director of Housing's inforamatory statement: report, 3rd February 1976.
7. Tenants recollections of March 1979.
8. Interview with tenant, 1979.
9. Interview with committee members, April 1980.
10. Quotes taken from Councillors, Chairs of Housing Committees in local papers, *Kilburn Times* — April-August 1979.
11. Minutes of Consultative Committee. August 1979.
12. Common sentiment expressed by tenants through campaign.
13. Interview with tenant, January 1981 (quotes are from various tenants).
14. Quotes from speech made by secretary to meeting in April 1980 before picket of Finsberg's home.
15. Recollections of November 1979 delegation to Finsberg's surgery by tenant, Autumn 1980.
16. Interview with committee members, January 1981.
17. Interview with tenant rehoused *outside* the HAAs, Autumn 1980.
18. A. Thomas — chairperson, January 1981.
19. J. Cage — Treasurer, January 1981.
20. Rehoused tenants recollections, Autumn 1980.
21. Chairpersons recollections, June 1981.
22. Treasurer's recollections, June 1981.
23. Secretary's recollections, June 1981.
24. Angela Birtill, after giving evidence at a CPO Inquiry, January 1980.
25. Taken from Private Sector Sub-Committee report, January 1981.

The quotations were taken from tenants in the HAAs. In April 1980, we had a special committee meeting where residents were photographed individually and interviewed about the campaign so far.

Between the Autumn of 1980 and January 1981 quotations gathered were taken by the authors visiting individual tenants. The majority of people visited at this time were living in new homes and were able to look back at the campaign and assess what it had meant to them and what they had learned.

The questions asked of them fell into the following categories:

1. What did they think the campaign had achieved?
2. What had they learnt about — themselves, landlords, the Council, the Government, through the campaign?
3. What had been the gains for the community as a whole — the collective gains of the struggle — the friendships formed etc?
4. What had been their own past experiences at 'fighting on their own' to get action, before they got involved in collective action?

Other quotations are taken from newspapers, Consultative Committee minutes and council reports.

## Other Sources of Information

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*Kilburn Housing Action Areas Consultative Committee, Minutes of Public Meetings*, May 1979-May 1982.

## Further Reading

*The Poverty of the Improvement Programme*, CDPPEC, 1977 (revised edition).

# HOUSING ACTION?



SINCE 1964, housing improvement has become an increasingly central part of government housing policy. Disguised by government as an attempt to respond to criticisms of wholesale demolition, in particular the disruptive effects of clearance programmes on working class communities, housing improvement has really been a means by which successive governments have sought to reduce housing expenditure. Housing improvement is not essentially about meeting the needs of working class people, but about saving money.

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