

LABOUR'S HOUSING PROBLEM

At the Labour Party Conference in Brighton last week, Penny Guest discovered the Opposition's reaction to the new housing white paper.

According to environment secretary Nicholas Ridley, anyone criticising the proposals in his new housing white paper is not interested in inner city regeneration, but only in making politics – which leaves the Labour Party with a bit of a problem.

To Labour delegates in Brighton, the Conservatives' belated discovery of the inner cities and the housing crisis is very much a political issue – and one calculated to scatter Labour strongholds in metropolitan areas.

Opposition housing spokesman Clive Soley, MP for Hammersmith, outlines the way forward for Labour after a shaky start: "The core of our policy would be a three-pronged attack on building, renovation and repair. We got ourselves in a hole on the right-to-buy issue – whereas really we don't disagree with home ownership – but councils must have the power to replace those houses which are sold, and this will need subsidies."

But how is Her Majesty's Opposition to counter Conservative pledges to clear up the worst estates and give tenants a democratic choice of landlord without appearing to obstruct urban renewal?

It is a threat many Labour MPs are taking seriously. Ladywood's Clare Short is convinced the party must now avoid being too "pure" in its policies by rejecting all chances for partnership renewal.

She warned: "Shortly after the June election, a Tory MP approached me in the House of Commons bar. When he found out I had a 10 000 majority, he said: 'That's an inner city constituency isn't it? Watch out, we're coming for you.' We have to sharpen up our services to avoid being associated only with crumbling estates."

But housing experts at the conference debate in Brighton last Thursday would have been disappointed by the cursory discussion allocated to the inner cities, sandwiched as it was between noisy resolutions on the economy and nuclear defence.

Delegates passed without complaint a motion calling for a complete review of all the party's housing policies through



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CLIVE SOLEY
LABOUR HOUSING
SPOKESMAN



housing in HATs will be put right, altered and finally disposed of

NICHOLAS RIDLEY
ENVIRONMENT
SECRETARY
(at the launch of the
white paper)

consultation with the public and private sectors, local authorities, tenant associations and unions.

A two-day meeting of the shadow cabinet, to thrash out this and other party issues, was held in Rottingdean, Sussex, this week. This review will have to counter "Slasher" Ridley's plans to reform housing legislation – which have three main aims in addition to the old Tory favourite of increasing home ownership.

They intend to deregulate the private rented sector and breathe life into the renovation market; perform a similar Pygmalion-like transformation of local authorities from housing managers to "strategic planners" of housing need; and create Housing Action Trusts to restore the worst areas of need and dispose of them.

But despite the howls of

complaint which greeted the proposals, Labour knows it has to put its own housing policy in order before attending to the housing needs of others.

Meanwhile, Labour hardly has a kind word to say about the white paper. According to Soley, the proposals are naive at best, wicked at worst.

"There is one suggestion in the white paper for housing action areas with local involvement, which we agree with. As to HATs, they are not on; they will only create more expensive housing. And if the government is so anti-quango, why is it intent on setting up more?"

Soley will not be drawn down the previous Labour road of setting yearly housing targets. To Eric Heffer's proposed total of one million, he replies

cautiously that it depends on where and how it is done.

Soley also disputes the claim that Labour's only solution would be to inject a "massive" amount of cash into the inner cities.

"We will be discussing housing finance and the way it is distributed. It must be fair to owner-occupiers and tenants alike. I think William Waldegrave would be sympathetic to this, but whether Ridley or Margaret Thatcher are is another matter.

"But the Conservatives are talking about regenerating only the inner cities. The housing problem also applies to towns and rural areas, north and south."

It is not only the Labour Party which doubts the effectiveness of the Tory plans to increase low-cost housing. Shelter and local authority organisations have condemned its lack of provision for the homeless. And even the government-funded Housing Corporation has expressed some disquiet.

The latter's chief executive, Dave Edmonds, commented: "It is essential for the new subsidy arrangements to operate in such a way that the existing client groups for whom we provide housing are not forced out of the market by inability to pay."

Former Fulham MP Nick Raynsford maintains that the white paper's proposals are merely a rehash of the 1980 Housing Act.

"That act was meant to increase the number of assured tenancies and it only produced 3000. Since housing associations came into being in 1974 they have produced 250 000 new homes. Just compare the figures.

"Where there are proposals to transfer housing to other landlords, local councils should investigate the records of the private developers or housing associations involved. The same will apply to the new HATs."

One thing was made clear at the conference. Labour councils across the country will be fighting any attempt to hand over control of their estates into the hands of the much criticised yuppies.

So it was nice to see the conference bookshop catering for all sections of the community by selling red Filofaxes