

The centenary of the “Addison Act”

“The money we propose to spend on housing is an insurance against Bolshevism and revolution”

Introduction

The year 2019 marks the centenary of the first national council house building programme, funded in part by central government. This article examines the background to the Act, why it was introduced and how it was swiftly neutered. Under the Act Swindon council decided to build housing for “the working classes” owing to the housing crisis in the town, which was reflected in overcrowding as well as poor living conditions. But it wasn’t done as quickly as other towns. It was more than two years before tenants would move into the first council homes in the town, owing to resistance from the sacred defenders of the rates and micro-management of building by the government. In a second article I will examine the building of Pinehurst and the obstacles which had to be overcome to bring the plan to fruition.

July 2019 is the centenary of the post First World War government's Housing & Town Planning Act, “An Act to amend the enactments relating to the Housing of the Working Classes, Town Planning, and the acquisition of small dwellings.” Prior to 1919 housing acts were 'permissive', that is local authorities could utilise them as they saw fit, or simply ignore them. There was very little building carried out by councils because there was no central government funding and most councils opposed using the local rates to build housing for the poor or the working classes. The Act was anticipated by a Local Government Board Circular 86/1917 in July 1917, *Housing after the War*, which promised ‘substantial financial assistance from public funds’ to local councils for the building of working-class housing.

The 1919 Act declared that

“It shall be the duty of every local authority...to consider the needs of their area with respect to the provision of houses for the working classes, and within three months of the passing of the Act and thereafter as often as occasion arises, or within three months after notice has been given to them by the Local Government Board, to prepare and submit to the Local Government Board a scheme for the exercise of their powers...”

For the first time central government funding was provided, paying the difference between rent, the cost of building and a contribution from the local authority of a penny rate. The government would top up the funding so councils did not lose money. This did not mean they were over generous. Every penny had to be agreed with the Health Ministry.

It was ironic that the first *obligatory* council house building programme was introduced by a coalition government comprising the Tories and some Liberals. One of those Liberals was Christopher Addison, MP for Hoxton in London. He had a medical background. He was a lecturer in Anatomy at Charing Cross Hospital, London, prior to becoming an MP in 1910. As Health Minister he would oversee the introduction of the Act which had his name associated with it. The logic of housing coming under the Ministry of Health was based on the fact that poor housing was in large part responsible for poor health¹.

¹ This remained the case until after the second world war. Anueran Bevan, associated with the launching of the NHS, also had responsibility for the large scale council house building programme carried out by the Atlee government.

Why did parties that had shown little inclination previously to tackle slums and overcrowding introduce a council house building programme? The impact of the war and the post-war situation provides the answer. The British rulers were worried about the potential radicalisation of returning troops combining with the growing militant independent shop stewards movement which had emerged during the war. They were fearful of a British version of Bolshevism emerging. Men who had been through the hell of the trenches were unlikely to be content to passively return to penury and slum living conditions.

At the time somewhere in the region of 90% of the population lived in private rented accommodation. During the war, in 1915, the government had been forced to introduce rent controls in response to rent strikes organised against increases by profiteering private landlords. The most famous of these strikes was in Glasgow led by Mary Barbour (later to become a councillor) and other working class women. This followed campaigning activity against widespread evictions. A "Labour Party Housing Committee" had been formed in 1913 to press Glasgow council to build homes for the workers. Glasgow owned its own tramway system and gas works and the Housing Committee agitated for the profits of these to be used for housing.

Helen Crawford, who campaigned with Mary Barbour against the landlords, told how the women fought back:

"The Glasgow Women's Housing Association took up this issue, and in the working class districts, committees were formed, to resist these increases in rents. Cards, oblong in shape, were printed with the words 'RENT STRIKE. WE ARE NOT REMOVING.' and placed in the windows of the houses where rent increases were demanded."

(See <https://remembermarybarbour.wordpress.com/mary-barbour-rent-strike-1915/>)

Mr Willie Reid MP described some of the scenes in the Glasgow Evening Times:

"A soldier's wife in Parkhead, had an eviction notice served on her, with a warning that if she failed to vacate her house by 12 noon on a certain day the Sheriff's Officer would call to enforce it. The strike committee got busy. They instructed every mother in the district with a young child to be there for 11 am on D-Day, complete with perambulator. Long before noon the close and street were packed with prams, and every pram had at least one youngster in it. No raiding party could have got near the house. Moreover the men of Parkhead Forge and other works in the district decided to down tools at 11.30 am and lend a hand if necessary.

By the time the Sheriff's officers and his clerk arrived there was a crowd of something like 5,000 ready to give them a rousing welcome. It is scarcely surprising that they decided to forget all about the eviction and take their leave."

In October the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Lord Advocate, met the chair and secretary of the Labour Party Housing Committee. The tenants representatives explained that the agitation against increased rents was universal and that thousands of munitions workers were involved. If the Government did not deal with the situation as requested the tenants would continue the strike and if any tenants were evicted then it was almost certain industrial strikes would follow.

The prospect of workplace strikes led the government to swiftly introduce the *Increase of Rent and Mortgage Interest (War Restrictions) Act* to quell the movement. The Act prevented an increase of rent and mortgage interest on small dwellings above the level at the start of the war, and would initially apply for six months after the end of the war. Whilst

the passing of the Act was important it was not universally implemented locally. In Swindon, for example, the Trades & Labour Council had to organise a campaign to pressure the local Council to issue a notice bringing the new law to the attention of residents, tenants and landlords. It overcame the resistance of the council.

Organisations like the Workers Rent League campaigned for rent controls and then for their practical implementation after they were passed.

“The work of the War Rents League now seemed to be concluded. Many of its members had been called away to other spheres of national activity, and the workers homes were at last free from invasion. But within a month it was discovered by chance that the Act was almost a dead letter, hardly known beyond the circle of those who had so courageously fought for it. All over the country tenants were being told that the Act did not apply to them, and were being frightened by unscrupulous landlords into paying illegal increases.... Hundreds of letters have been received from soldiers in France, Gallipoli, Egypt, and elsewhere asking for the protection of their wives and families from the grasp of greed. Several soldiers have obtained leave to come back to fight the landlord in the County Court and the Police Court, and they have returned in every case to their duty in the trenches with the flush of victory on their faces.”

“Determined attempts were made to drive the proverbial coach-and-four through the Act, by misrepresenting its provisions, attempting to dispossess tenants ignorant of its safeguards, demanding more than the standard rent from new tenants, intimidating long term tenants who tendered their legal rent by entering ever-increasing “arrears” under threat of recovery after the War, and depriving them of obtaining another abode by robbing them of a clean rent-book.”

National Conference on housing after the war

Before the end of the war a debate arose on the question of addressing the housing crisis at its end. A widely circulated document by the “Joint Committee on Labour Problems after the War”, for instance, called for an ambitious building programme of one million working class dwellings to be built with government funding estimated at £250 million (the cost of five or six weeks of waging the war). They proposed that the 1 million target should be divided between each local authority. As we saw earlier although local authorities had the right to build homes under the Housing of the Working Classes Act the absence of central government funding and opposition from rate-payers to contributing to the cost of a building programme meant that only around 15,000 had been built nationally.

The scale of the housing crisis, especially of over-crowding, had been shown in the 1901 Census. In England and Wales alone there were 2,667,506 people living more than 2 to a room. In Glasgow where every room in an 'artisan's' house was used as a bedroom, 55.7% of the population was living more than 2 to a room and 27.9% more than 3 to a room. There was little house building during the war and the shortage increased.

There was, of course, resistance from the building trades to the idea of local authorities building homes for rent. The employers organised a “*National Conference on Housing After the War*”, which was “to consider the Shortage of Houses, its causes and remedies and to formulate proposals to lay before the government calculated to assist in solving the question of the housing of the people on the conclusion of war”. Unsurprisingly, the Organising Committee came to the conclusion that “the housing problem can only be solved permanently and satisfactorily in one way, that is, by encouraging private capital

and private enterprise to resume the building of houses for the people.” The Committee said it had no antipathy to the involvement of the state or local authorities in building homes “if it were hopeless to expect private enterprise to cope with the demand for houses”. However,

“The vast interests which have arisen by the free and liberal investment of the savings of the people in house property and the enormous sums involved render any rash disturbance of values a matter of national importance.”

It would seem (where have we heard this before?) they were worried about house prices declining, and the profitability of building companies suffering a mortal blow.

“Extensive public building schemes, where the houses would be let at uneconomic rents in competition with privately owned property, would create a great disturbance in values in the areas affected and should only be embarked upon as a very last resort. As the causes of the decrease in house building by private enterprise can be pointed out with certainty it is obvious that the solution of the problem should be sought in the removal of those causes rather than in costly experiments in new directions.”

The public authorities “would always have a large and expensive duty to perform in housing the poor” but we the builders can do it “much more economically”.

The scale of the housing problem was indicated by the “National Conference” Report. It said that since 1906 “there has been a steady and serious decline in the number of houses erected. It showed this statistically by collecting information from 40 municipalities. In these 34,000 houses were erected in 1903, declining to around 13,000 in the year before the war.

The war brought house building to a virtual standstill with the exception of government assisted building to tackle a shortage in “munitions areas”. The industry had become “a victim of political contention”. Apparently, although they didn't use the term, 'red tape' had raised its ugly head.

“Unfortunately through lack of coordination between those who framed and passed building laws, those who have administered them, and those called upon to observe them, this great industry has become the victim of political contention. Idealistical (sic) and impractical legislation has been put upon the Statute Book out of touch and keeping with the practical necessities of the complex housing question. Agitation has stirred up strife between landlord and tenant, and public opinion has been prejudiced against the ownership of cottage property as a form of investment.”

They were fearful that if such investment didn't proceed then the industry would die. Home ownership was essential to the health of the country, not to mention the health of their bank balances.

“The more individuals there are who possess a permanent interest in the country in which they live in the form of real estate the better it will be for the country.”

Where the state or municipality had been involved in house building it had usually involved the demolition of housing for health purposes, and where the possibility of the private sector doing the work “has been non-existent”. Alas, such schemes had not “had a commercial basis” and had become “a charge upon the rates”.

“A crushing burden on the state”?

What was being proposed now, said the report, was “provision of relatively cheap and convenient working class dwelling” in competition with existing housing. The schemes would be “to supplement and possibly entirely supplant private enterprise”. This work could be “a crushing burden” on the state. Despite these overblown concerns expressed by the building industry, the government had other urgent considerations. Mr Bonar Law, a Conservative member of the Coalition government, declared that:

“If we did not make every effort to improve the condition of the people, we should have a sullen, discontented, and perhaps angry nation, which would be fatal in the last degree to trade, industry and credit.”

Yet as the Parliamentary Secretary to the Local Government Board made plain the government expected the private builders to do the work as contractors for local authorities, the latter not having the staff to do the work in any case.

Tudor Walters Report²

Fear of post-war radicalisation led the government to ask Sir John Tudor Walters, an architect and Liberal politician, to examine “questions of building construction in connection with the provision of dwellings for the working classes in England and Wales (and Scotland), and report upon methods of securing economy and despatch in the provision of such dwellings”. The report was conscious of the expectations of returning soldiers.

“The general standard of accommodation and equipment demanded in their dwellings by the working classes has been rising for some time; and there is every prospect that the influence of war conditions will considerably increase the force and extent of this demand for an improved standard.”

Tudor Walters called for a more comprehensive method of improvement than the ‘permissive’ 19th century legislation on the grounds that

“It is quite evident to those who have examined the facts of the case that special remedies are needed to deal with the acute housing difficulties that have arisen...It seems evident from these circumstances that, unless there is some supreme guiding direction, an adequate housing programme is not likely to be carried out, but that the shortage of houses for some years after the war will increase rather than diminish.”

Walters recommended the building of large numbers of houses, to be publicly owned, with affordable rents. Each house should have at least three downstairs rooms and three bedrooms and a minimum floor space of 760 square feet, and there should be no more than 12 houses per acre. His recommendations were adopted by the Board of Local Government in its Housing Manual of 1919. It was the President of the Board, Dr Christopher Addison (soon to become the First Minister of the new Ministry of Health, whose responsibilities included Housing and local government) “who picked up the Tudor

² This was the catchily named *Report of the Committee Appointed to Consider Questions of Building Construction in Connection with the Provision of Dwellings for the Working Classes* published in 1918

Walters Report and ran with it". Historian Peter Hennessy says of Addison, "If any man can be thought of as the father of the council house it's the thoughtful medical man, one of the quietly influential people of twentieth century government..." Historian AJP Taylor wrote that "he, more than any other man, established the principle that housing was a social service, and later governments had to take up his task".

Addison introduced the Housing & Town Planning Act in 1919, with its *mandatory* duty on local authorities to assess the housing needs of their area and *make plans to meet them*. It required local authorities to supply homes for rent with financial support from central government.³ Addison's critics accused him of wanting to "assume the powers of an Oriental potentate" because the Bill included provision to compel local authorities to "act in accordance with the housing needs of the district".

The debate in the House of Commons gives a fascinating insight into the motivation for the Act and attitudes towards housing. Labour MPs, more representative of working class communities than they would be later, could talk of their own experience of living in slum conditions. John Cairns (MP for Morpeth) recounted the conditions in the mining community from which he sprang.

"Sometimes in a one roomed house we have a father who meets with an accident on the coal pit and he is laid on a bed in the kitchen. That room is more dangerous to the man's life than the accident. The family are there in that one room, the mother and perhaps two or three children – the air becomes vitiated on account of the shortness of space and the lack of ventilation. The way Honourable Members have been speaking reminds me of the character of Rip van Winkle. They seem to have been asleep. They talk about Naples and Rome and do not know their own country. These homes in our mining villages are hotbeds of fever, and sometimes the fever bred there gets into the castle and the palace. It sometimes reaches the least expected places. We spend through our insurance committees large sums of money for the purpose of sending tuberculosis cases to sanatoria. Would it not be better, instead of spending the money on sanatoria, to spend the money in building better homes for the people?"

James Sexton (MP for St Helens) recounted his experience of living in cellar dwellings, which men employed in the docks often had to live in, "in a foetid atmosphere, with no back yard, with wet clothes hanging over their heads, with the whole place reeking of soapsuds from Monday morning 'til Saturday night...In Liverpool we get 80 houses to the acre not twelve, and ground rents are paid to the ground landlord."

"Behind the very walls of the Art Gallery of Liverpool, behind the very frame of a celebrated picture by Holman Hunt, a slaughter of the innocents is going on every day of the week, in filthy slums built on land owned by a Noble Lord in another place, who put up his rents by 25% only last week."

The most startling speech, given the social origins of its author, was by the Conservative MP, Horatio Bottomley.

"It being universally admitted that the housing problem is one of the greatest problems with which we have to deal, and all the old permissive powers which existed before this measure, and all the private enterprise, for which the honourable gentleman behind me

³ You can read Addison's speech for the Second Reading of the Bill here: <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1919/apr/07/statement-by-dr-addison>

pleaded just now, having absolutely failed, the word “shall” has to take the place of the word “may”... I am not at all alarmed by the argument that it may mean the death of private enterprise. Private enterprise in connection with the housing question stands tried and hopelessly condemned.”

Such an outrageous proposition elicited cries of “No” from the Tory benches. However, continued Bottomley, it would not, mean the end of “real private enterprise”, but so far the “speculative builder” was concerned, “I will not even say ‘peace to his memory’. I hope this Bill means the end of him.” He said that it had been admitted in the debate that there had never been any desire on the part of even the speculative builder to build houses for the working classes “except that he could sell them the moment he built them”.

“He knew they would not last long enough, for one thing, to get an economic rent, and, in addition, he knew that the houses had been run up in a reckless manner.”

Recounting his knowledge of conditions in his constituency Bottomley said:

“I do not want to harrow the feelings of the House, but I could give the name of a street in which you can find today in one case a dead child and a child born yesterday, and in the same room, a father dying, two other children in the hands of the doctor, and five other children. This is not very far from Shoreditch. Throughout the whole country one can find pictures just as bad.”

Whilst these conditions exist, he said, we shouldn't waste our time talking about “economic rent”, but need to “get rid of slum land once and forever”. “Whatever the cost may be, I am going to be unorthodox enough to say that it is not going to worry me for a moment.”

The impact of the war on this debate was palpable. Bottomley compared the housing conditions of much of the population to official protestations as to the aims of the war.

“It is the most blasphemous comment upon all our protestations of the War, that we were fighting for a better world, for the freedom of the peoples, for the little nations, and all the rest of it, that we should, I believe, be the worst country in Europe from the point of view of the character of the dwellings of the working classes and the lower strata of this Kingdom.”

Bottomley recounted a story of a recruiting speech in the war where “a poor, half-starved, pinched looking workman, with a scarf around his neck, waited to speak to me, after the meeting.” The man told him of his living conditions, where he and his wife and five children were living in one room without a pane of glass in the windows, the holes stuffed with paper and rags, “the floor is tumbling to pieces, rain comes through the roof, the staircase is creaking and dangerous”. They had “not sufficient food to keep our bodies and souls together.” The man asked the question, living as I do what difference does it make to me whether the Kaiser is to rule over me or the present King?

“I am almost ashamed to say”, said Bottomley, “that the reflection went through my mind that whatever other disadvantages, under the German system of municipal government that man's room would not be allowed to remain as it was for a single day. I say we must face the facts, and we must emerge from the War with the determination to make this country a purer, cleaner, and better place to live in.”

“Insurance against Bolshevism”

Behind much humanitarian rhetoric in support of the Act the main motivation from the government was preventing post-war radicalisation. The Parliamentary Secretary of the Local Government Board, an Astor, candidly explained:

“When we talk of expense and cost let us realise that everything is comparative, and let us measure the cost of our housing proposals by the cost of Bolshevism to the country and the cost of revolution. The money we propose to spend on housing is an insurance against Bolshevism and revolution.”

The Bill having been passed, supported the building of 213,000 homes of which 170,000 were built by Councils. However, this was a long way from the 500,000 promised. By July 1921 the government abandoned this commitment, cutting the grant available to a meagre £200,000 for the whole country. This was the result of the intervention of the Treasury and a campaign in the media against 'waste'. The permanent official responsible for housing, writing in a memorandum of July 21st, signalled a move away from higher standards and a cut in expenditure, declaring that:

“A fair proportion lived in jerry-built houses before the war, and we cannot afford better built homes now, still less the luxury of semi-detached garden suburb villas. We can only get back to cheap houses of the pre-war type under private enterprise and any move of the state should I submit be directed to fostering such enterprise.” (*Cabinet papers PRO CAB 24/126 CP, 1921*).

Addison was swiftly moved out of his post. Lloyd George apologised to the House of Commons for not removing him a year before. His failure was apparently spending too much. He was guilty of taking the rhetoric behind the Act too seriously. Sir Alfred Mond, who replaced him, announced that the government could not afford the costs of higher standards. Addison resigned from the government when the “Geddes axe”, a historical precursor to the 2010 austerity programme⁴, led to the abandonment of the funding for homes. He broke with the Liberal Party over this betrayal and joined the Labour Party. He would become the first Labour MP for Swindon in 1929.

“Betrayal of the Slums”

In response to what he considered to be a gross betrayal, Addison wrote a book, *“Betrayal of the Slums”*. He recorded that in March 1922 the new Health Minister expressed the hope “that future state intervention in any form will not be required, and that the building industry will return to its pre-war economic basis”. In an interview with the Daily News the new Minister suggested that a newly married couple “should be so happy that they can even enjoy living in one room”. Indeed, he said, in China and the East they continue to live under the parental roof quite contentedly.

In response to the suggestion that the government could not afford the cost of producing housing under his Act Addison pointed to the fact that tax-payers in the UK had to pay annually 8s and 7d for 'war services'. The cost of expenditure for Mesopotamia and

4 The Geddes report was the government response to a campaign by newspaper owner Lord Rothermere whose “Anti-waste League” had started fighting by-elections on the theme of ending “excessive public spending”. In particular he opposed the spending of money on building council housing.

Palestine alone which was 11s 2d per head. In contrast the amount of tax per head for replacement or improvement of poor homes was the princely sum of one and a half pence per head.

“It was decided in July 1921”, wrote Addison, “to set aside these engagements and to restrict assistance in the building of houses to a number substantially identical with that arranged for at the end of the month of March, and, worse still, to ignore the obligations which the State had assumed under the law passed in 1919, whereby assistance would be afforded in the replacement or improvement of insanitary dwellings for some years to come, and to substitute a grant in respect of all the unsatisfactory houses in Great Britain, which, as will appear is of so trifling a character that it will not suffice even to make good the amount of deterioration that is progressively occurring.”

“The Betrayal of the Slums.”

Addison recorded the statistics and the conditions of the lives of millions of working people. In Glasgow, for instance more than half of the population (around 470,000 people) lived in 'homes' of one or two rooms. The 1911 census showed that in England and Wales 3,139,472 people were living in 430,000 tenements at the rate of more than two occupants per room, and that there were 915,182 houses in the country that consisted of not more than two rooms. A report of a Royal Commission indicated there were 399,876 people in Scotland living in houses of one room only, with 1,881,259 others living in houses of not more than two rooms. In other words 2,282,405 people, or nearly half the population of Scotland lived in houses of one or two rooms! So far as the condition of these homes were concerned the Royal Commission stated that

“To our amazement we found that, if we take overcrowding to mean more than three persons per room, we should, to secure even this moderate standard for Scotland, have to displace some 284,000 of our population. But this is not all. We conclude that at least 50% of the one room houses and 15% of the two room houses ought to be replaced by new houses...For such gigantic figures our Report submits full justification. On this point the Commission is unanimous.”

The consequences of this level of overcrowding and often insanitary conditions were reflected in the impact of the health of the inhabitants and the death rates. Mortality rates for one room homes were double those for four rooms.

In 1920 of the 2,434,252 children in attendance at elementary schools inspected, no fewer than 1,166,784 were found to be suffering from some physical defect or other. There were 500,000 described as suffering from malnutrition. Addison suggests that “their bodies had been crippled by an early deficiency of sleep, by improper feeding, and by a perpetual lack of fresh air.”

The swift ending of the funding meant to build 500,000 homes showed that the government was acting not out of principle but more from political calculation as to the consequences if they were to be seen to do nothing to address the housing crisis. The message of the Geddes axe was that the populace would just have to put up with appalling living conditions. The country could not afford the “homes fit for heroes” that Lloyd George had promised them.

Nevertheless, the Act was an important marker because it was the first time that central government found it necessary to fund a council house building programme. Between 1919 and 1922 170,000 houses were built by Councils. Whilst insufficient for the scale of the housing crisis, it was on a far larger scale than under previous legislation of the

'permissive' type. It showed what could be achieved by the local state with central government support. More houses still would be built as a result of another housing act introduced by the minority Labour government in 1924 under John Wheatley.

In Swindon the first council housing estate was built in Pinehurst assisted by funding under the Addison Act. It would face resistance from those opposed to using the rates to support council housing and it would take a couple of years before the first tenants could move in. As we shall see the quality of housing was far better than much of the private rented sector. My next article will look at the decision to build Pinehurst, the obstacles that had to be overcome, and housing conditions in the town.

Martin Wicks

February 2019

PS. Addison's book, *Betrayal of the slums* is available in Swindon library's local collection, but you can read it on line here :

<http://www.archive.org/stream/betrayalofslums00addirich#page/12/mode/2up>