

# HOUSING SCANDAL VENDETTA

## But Booker and Gray say: We stand firm

CAMDEN COUNCIL leaders erupted in anger against journalists Christopher Booker and Bennie Gray this week, accusing them of pursuing a vendetta in a Sunday newspaper article which condemned the council's housing efforts as wasteful and chaotic.

An article published in Sunday's Observer by the two journalists "reached a new low in misunderstanding, misrepresentation, false comparisons and half-truths," the council replied in a statement.

But yesterday Booker and Gray said: "We stick to our guns." Although they conceded that one graph in the article was inaccurate, the substance of their attack on Camden—headed The Worst of the Big Spenders—was true, they claimed.

### EXTRAORDINARY ATTACK

Councillor Roy Shaw, leader of the council, said of the article: "This is an extraordinary attack—I use the term attack though vendetta would be better."

He was speaking at a specially convened press conference, where his rebuttal of the article was backed by Councillor John Mills, his deputy, Councillor Neil McIntosh, Housing Committee chairman, and Councillor John Thane, his deputy.

Even Councillor Alan Greengross, leader of the opposition — while claiming political kudos for inspiring some of Booker and Gray's attacks—dismissed their writings as shallow and hypocritical.

Mr Shaw said he would be fascinated to know whether their attack was related to Camden's rejection of an approach by Booker and Gray two years ago jointly to develop Tolmers Square area with Camden. The article said Camden's own Tolmers Square purchase from Stock Conversion "now looks as though it may involve the council in losses running into millions of pounds."

Booker and Gray were prepared to pay up to £680,000 an acre for housing land and £4,000,000 an acre for commercial land in Tolmers Square, while Camden had bought at £250,000 and £1,000,000 respectively, said Mr Shaw. Booker and Gray's financial backers would have been bankrupt if Camden had accepted the deal, Mr McIntosh added.

### DEFICIT

The Observer article opened with a graph purporting to show Camden "annual housing debt" over 10 years. Up to 1969 the graph corresponded with Camden's Housing Revenue deficit, but then the journalists apparently got confused because they showed a 24-fold increase in the deficit whereas the true figure was more like five-fold, comparable with other inner London boroughs, Mr Shaw said.

Mr Booker said yesterday there had been a confusion over the graph, but Camden was partly to blame. Most local authorities calculated the housing revenue deficit on the basis of all public subsidies, including those from the Government, which is what Booker and Gray did for 1969-75.

Camden's deficit calculations excluded Government subsidies from the deficit, but even the adjusted graph put Camden at the top of the league in spending more money than it got for housing, Mr Booker said.

The Observer figures were often misleading because they compared Camden cost figures with national figures, Mr Shaw complained. Truer comparisons with inner London, where councils faced higher costs and greater problems than elsewhere, put Camden in a better light.

Camden's management costs of £174 a unit might be much higher than the national £47 a unit, but compared closely with Kennington and Chelsea's £157 and Lambeth's £148, Booker and Gray said Camden paid an average £850 subsidy to each council tenant, the

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Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants said the figure was £639, compared with £524 in Islington and £579 in Kensington and Chelsea.

Mr Mills said Booker and Gray frequently confused gross and net figures and used misleading comparisons, as had been shown by an article in the national Municipal Journal, which had tried to check the journalists' statistics used in other articles.

### OFFENSIVE

There was some justified criticism of the high cost of repairs and management in Camden, but the council was "dealing with this at the moment," Mr McIntosh said.

Elsewhere, the journalists had ignored the unique combination of high land cost, low incomes and extra housing efforts which caused Camden special problems.

Although quoted in the Observer article, Mr Mc-

Intosh said he had not spoken to Booker and Gray and Mr Shaw said they had never bothered to consult him.

"Unless you live in an area of housing stress or have close contact with such an area, most people are probably unaware of the continuing extent of bad housing in London," Mr Shaw said.

Mr McIntosh added that the most offensive feature of the article was the suggestion that housing need had been eradicated.

Mr Greengross said later: "The article is just an anthology of the things we have been saying for the past couple of months. The thing that disturbs me is that they have pointed out the superficial aspects without getting down to the real evil, which is the dogmatic pursuit of

things done at the expense of people in Camden, who the Labour Party is pretending to help.

"I am surprised Booker and Gray should have the temerity to raise Tolmers Square after their conduct two years ago."

● Camden replies: See page 38.