

— **READ ALL ABOUT IT ! EXTRAVAGANCE !**

Feb 1976

**RECKLESS SPENDING SPREE !**

**CAMDEN CONDEMNED**

# **THE WORST OF THE BIG SPENDERS**

1975 was the year in which the national press made the unremarkable discovery that the cost of council housing has increased substantially under pressure from land and building costs and loan charges - at least in money terms. A spate of articles in the national heavies have made much of this development and the increased cost of subsidies to council tenants.

Some of this reporting has been balanced by, for example, consideration of the various financial benefits which accrue to owner occupiers - especially those who bought before the house price boom of the early seventies. But at other times the reporting has been simply sensationalist, and has been used as part of the general campaign against public spending, particularly by local authorities.

If there were any doubts about how far the media will go in an attempt to create a climate of opinion hostile to public expenditure, these have surely been dispelled by the respectable, if financially ailing OBSERVER. The paper saw fit to devote more than half of a centre page on consecutive Sundays to an extraordinary attack by Messrs. Booker and Gray on Camden's housing activities - a continuation of their long-running vendetta against the Council. Their 'analysis' was based either on the unpublished work of others - to which they had been given privileged access

for some reason - or on their own incompetent efforts to comprehend an admittedly complex situation. Perhaps it is charitable merely to call their efforts incompetent; but the alternative description of the tissue of inaccuracies, half-truths and false comparisons which they presented might be thought libellous.

---

ANYWAY, WHO ARE BOOKER AND GRAY?

---

Before we consider what Booker and Gray have to say, it is worth noting what they do when they are not campaigning journalists.

They reside in the leafy lanes of Hampstead. Chris Booker we know is intent on becoming a full-time media personality. Bennie Gray we know - thanks to the vigilance of PRIVATE EYE No. 432 is a property developer himself.

*reprinted from*

# **public eye**

*the magazine of the Camden branch of Nalgo*

In the early sixties, in the wake of the 1957 Rent Act, he formed over 20 property companies and at one stage he was letting over 300 bed-sits in London and Cambridge. But Gray moved with the times. Having worked with two of Rachman's henchmen he then helped to expose Rachman to the Sunday Times. He also diversified his interests into antiques, following in the footsteps of earlier tycoons. He is no doubt worth every penny of the £18000 p.a. he paid himself from one of his companies and the £10500 p.a. from another, although his accountants have noted with respect to a number of other companies "We have been unable to verify certain of the assets and liabilities and proper books have not been kept." And apparently the Dept. of Trade and Industry are rather less impressed with Bennie than the DoE.

It is not surprising then that an earlier attack on Camden's policy of acquiring rented properties for modernisation ended in a lament for a "host of private landlords."

---

#### BOOKER AND GRAY ATTACK

---

Well, what did they have to say in the Observer, and how valid was their analysis? We list just some of their claims below, and put the record straight.

---

#### YOU TAKE A FEW INACCURACIES...

---

- B & G stated that Camden has housed only 4000 households in the ten years since it was created. Fact: Camden has housed 12,733 in its own property and 5873 others through nominations to the GLC and other bodies.
- With the help of a neatly constructed graph, B & G showed Camden's 'annual housing debt' soaring out of control to £24 million in 1975. Fact: the deficit on the Housing Revenue Account for this year is estimated at £6million.

- B & G state that 93% of expenditure on revenue account this year will be met by taxpayers outside the borough. Fact: we do not believe it is possible to obtain figures for 'taxpayers outside the borough' but the available figures show that an estimated 22% of Housing Revenue Account expenditure will be met by income from rents and other charges, some 55% will be met by the national exchequer and the remaining 23% will come out of local rates - and both of these sources draw their funds in part from the 27000 Camden council tenants and their families!

- B & G claim that by "1960 most of the undisputed slums had been cleared" from the nations housing stock. Fact: this must come as something of a surprise to the multitude of people still living in slums, and contradicts the findings of every authoritative source known to us. The official House Condition Survey of 1967, for example, put the number of slums at nearly 2 million.

---

#### ADD A LIBERAL DOSE OF HALF-TRUTHS...

---

- B & G state baldly that "this year spending by Britains local authorities will rise by 51%" Fact: this may be true, B & G do not quote a source for their figures, but it might have been more representative of the trends to point out that in real terms revenue expenditure will not grow by more than 6%, or that housing capital expenditure will be 14% down in 1975/76.

- B & G adopt a cavalier approach to the use of the facts about a number of schemes which they cite to bear out their argument that the Council wastes money. Perhaps the most glaring example of this is their criticism of the Council for buying "a house in Hampstead" at a cost of £470000. Fact: yes this is true, but the 'house' is Rosslyn Lodge, a former nurses home with some 40 rooms, and the deal included 1.6 acres of land which may house a further 40 people.

- B & G criticise Camden for its involvement in the YMCA redevelopment by claiming that the "council has helped to commit £7.5 millions of public money ( £5.5 millions in outright gifts )". Fact: the Council's direct involvement is only a little over £2 millions, the rest has been committed by central government.
- They go on to say that the YMCA accommodation "will have to be let at a rent of £18-25 per week." Fact: this is true, although the equivalent unfurnished rents are £11.50 - £13.50. What they failed to point out is that Camden does not control the rent levels for this sort of housing association accommodation and that the Council has been in the forefront of the campaign to warn central government about the high rent levels being set on such schemes.
- B & G point to the small number of waiting list applicants housed in a newly completed part of St. Silas St. North, implying that there is no housing improvement as a result. Fact: The tenants who have been transferred from other council housing vacate units that may be offered to waiting list applicants. The tenants decanted from other redevelopment areas, or properties due for improvement, are very often on the housing list. So they are decently rehoused and their names are withdrawn from the waiting list even though for the statistical record they are rehoused as 'decants' and not waiting list applicants.

---

AND MAKE SOME FALSE COMPARISONS

---

In the introduction to their first article, B & G suggest that the way to answer questions about the effectiveness and control of public expenditure is to "examine in detail just one area of spending by one local authority". A fairly questionable proposition, but

they would have done better to stick to this approach rather than introduce misleading comparisons at random whenever they fit the argument. Thus, when it suits them, the authors drag in comparisons with Leeds or national average figures. The least one could ask for would be a comparison with other Inner London Boroughs but, of course, that would not show Camden to be the villain that B & G would have you believe.

Virtually all of their second article was based on unpublished work, still in draft, carried out at the Architectural Association. Camden assisted the AA team in their investigation, but have not been shown the results of their work. Someone saw fit to let B & G have the results first; so that they could write their exposé, and presumably draw a nice fat fee for their trouble. Leaving aside the ethics of this, it would be good to see the AA's work itself rather than have to react to the garbled version by B & G.

Fred Berry, who has a well deserved reputation as a commentator and critic of housing policy, commented on the AA's new method of appraising schemes, as described by B & G, as a matter of "multiplying the number of bedspaces you have not got by the number of years you have not had them"!

It appears to be a method so obtuse that it can prove only one thing: redevelopment is always wrong. It assumes that old properties can continue to provide decent accommodation indefinitely, and seems not to question the quality of that accommodation or whether it is useable at all.

B & G also endorse a popular myth that rehabilitation is always less socially disruptive than redevelopment. A survey in Westminster has shown that after completion of a rehabilitation scheme only 3% of the original furnished tenants and 27% of unfurnished tenants remained. The greatest part of the tenants had been moved on, one way or another, to make way for new well-heeled, and no doubt "community conscious" trendies. On the other hand some council redevelopment schemes result in whole communities being lifted

lock, stock and barrel out of one area of worn-out housing, to continue life, virtually intact, in a new estate.

The question of whether redevelopment or rehabilitation is the best way of tackling worn out housing cannot be answered abstractly. It can only be resolved in relation to a particular area of housing. And far more factors must be considered than in B & G's bedspace years in wonderland scheme. One area in Camden B & G were convinced was more suitable for rehabilitation than redevelopment was Harmood Street. After eight months of expensive delay, the DOE has finally had to agree to allow Camden's redevelopment to proceed. Camden's scheme is within the DOE's cost yardstick and the DOE could not show that rehabilitation would be a better or cheaper way of improving housing in this area.

---

FINALLY

---

We are not pretending that there are no real and difficult problems affecting the finance of public and private housing that need consideration. Nor are we saying that Camden's housing record is above criticism. What we can say is that the deliberate, sensational and inaccurate attacks of Chris Goofer and Bennie Bray are of no use to anyone, except those who have an interest in bashing public expenditure - regardless of its real social value.

Rob Hammond and Steve Wilcox  
Housing Department.

reprinted from

# public eye

No. 32

FEBRUARY 1976

PUBLIC EYE is the magazine of the Camden Branch of NALGO. It is currently the holder of NALGO's top magazine award. With over 3,000 members, Camden is the biggest London NALGO branch. It claims among its past successes a generous agreement on office working conditions, extra allowances for special duties, the first agreement in Local Government for a 35 hour working week, a record of solid support for NALGO's London Weighting Campaign, sponsorship of a Chilean refugee. It is currently engaged in promoting a non-discrimination clause for gay workers, the provision of a staff crèche and other amenities which will enable women to maintain equal status with men at work. The branch has vigorously supported NALGO's campaign against cuts in public spending.

PUBLIC EYE does not necessarily represent the views of the Camden Branch of NALGO, but that branch will defend the right of its members to express their views.