

The Tenants' Movement: incorporation and independence

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At the beginning of this century, the participation of local authority and housing association tenants in the management of their homes was enshrined in law in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. But what might appear at first sight to be a long overdue recognition of tenant power, has proved in practice to be a highly effective managerial tool in the hands of the local and national state and social landlords. As the chairman of the Scottish Tenants' Organisation points out, the legislation was framed in terms of a duty on the landlord rather than rights for the tenants,¹ and landlords have been able to use the system to their advantage. Almost a century on from the mass rent strikes of 1915, when organised Scottish tenants played a major part in the movement that forced the British government to introduce rent control and - eventually - subsidised public housing, anything that could be described as a tenants' movement has shrunk to a few handfuls of campaigners. There are many tenants' organisations, but even a quick glance suggests that all is not what it seems. Half the tenants' organisations registered with my local council – Dundee - give a council employee as their main contact, and half the rest list a council employee as a source for further information.

What is happening is not unique to the tenants' movement. It is symptomatic of the growing use of new forms of local governance to incorporate potential sources of resistance and limit debate. New 'partnership' structures function as part of a management strategy, geared towards the implementation and strengthening of policies consistent with hegemonic neoliberal economic practice. This article looks at this process at work, drawing on my own experience in Dundee. For the last five years, I have been involved as an activist and researcher with council tenants campaigning against the demolition of their homes, and I am currently acting as secretary of the residents' association formed by the remaining tenants in two multi story blocks in Derby Street. The use of this example is not meant to suggest that the situation in Dundee is either worse or better than elsewhere. I am sure that tenants and activists in other places will recognise familiar patterns in this account. Housing association tenants may also find themselves incorporated into the system of management through becoming members of the housing association board, where they are legally bound to keep discussion confidential and to prioritise the interests of the association. Tenants of private landlords are not even covered by the law on tenant participation – despite the recent emphasis on increasing private renting.

In Dundee, the body that the city council consults in order to fulfil its duties under the 2001 Act with respect to the participation of its tenants, is the Dundee Federation of Tenants' Associations, and this has become the conduit for the implementation of all council policy affecting its tenants. The Federation is also quoted in the local press as the voice of the city's council tenants, although only a very small proportion of tenants have any interaction with it. It exemplifies the new form of organisation promoted by partnership governance, and it receives generous funding from the council – although, since this comes from the housing revenue account it is in effect paid for by Dundee's council tenants.

¹ Submission to the Scottish housing Minister written by John Carracher, September 2009

When, six years ago, the city council agreed to undertake an initial consultative vote on the possibility of transferring its housing stock to a housing association, it was the Federation that organised the consultation. Stock transfer votes have become notorious examples of the abuse of democracy. Tenants have a legal right to vote on the change of landlord, but in recent years they have been told that investment in their homes is contingent on their voting 'yes' to transfer, and huge sums of public money have been spent promoting transfer campaigns. Despite this, there have been growing numbers of 'no' votes as a result of concerted grass-roots campaigns that hope, ultimately, to change the system so as to allow direct investment in council housing. In agreeing to organise Dundee's consultation, the Federation ruled itself out of taking a critical or campaigning role that might challenge the rules of the game. And, in setting out the limited options available within those rules, its newsletter suggested that transfer was the only option. It was left to independent activists to put the case against transfer and win a two to one vote against taking the process any further.

Through avoiding taking up a critical position, the Federation effectively supports the status quo. This was demonstrated again a couple of years ago when a group of us formed Dundee Independent Housing Action Group in response to the then council administration's dismal record on housing, which had been headlining the local paper. We arranged a public meeting and sent an invitation to the Federation, but they refused to attend on the grounds that the meeting was 'political'.

The Federation has not, however, refrained from campaigning over the Derby Street multis, and its chairperson recently wrote to every political party and tenants' organisation to emphasise that they do not support the retention of these buildings. This view was reached without any attempt to consult Derby Street tenants, who have been campaigning publicly for five years against demolition. The stance taken by the Federation is the natural conclusion for an organisation that relies on council officials to set out and interpret its options. Tenants are expected to make decisions in a world where, rather than campaign for more investment in much-needed public housing, you must rob Peter to pay Paul; and the Federation was convinced (though this need not actually be the case²) that money spent on the Derby Street multis would put up rents for their members, who are lucky enough to already have secure council tenancies.

Derby Street Residents' Association's first - and probably last - attendance at a Federation meeting was certainly instructive. We saw from the minutes of the previous meeting, at which no Derby street tenants had been present, that there had been a unanimous vote against retaining the buildings, and sought to make a brief comment on this under 'matters arising'. We were refused. The main business of the meeting was a discussion on the setting of the next year's rents. There were two speakers, one from the council and one from the national Tenants Information Service, and they explained how all the different but vital calls on the budget necessitated a 4% rent rise. To call this consultation is a cruel joke. Even the Federation objected that, unlike in previous years, they were presented with only one option. But in those previous years they had been ready to give their stamp of approval to options put to them by the council that involved similar rent rises. After the meeting everyone was treated to a buffet and taxis

² Demolition not only results in a loss of social housing; it is an extremely costly process, and also has long term impacts on rental income.

home. Those who attended could clearly count on having a good night out, and the council could rest in the knowledge that they had complied with the 2001 Housing Act: but it is difficult to see this as real tenant participation.

If tenants encounter a tenants' organisation, it is likely to be in this vein. When we registered the Derby Street Residents Association,³ the council officer we spoke to expressed surprise that no-one from the council was involved, and suggested that our major expense would be tea and biscuits. Toothless tenants' organisations serve a similar function to a company union. They restrict debate within limits that present no challenge to existing authorities, encourage cynicism towards the political process, and make it difficult to attract people to alternative more radical organisations. They drive a wedge between tenants who believe that it is only possible to work within the existing, increasingly restrictive, system and those who believe in challenging it; and by encouraging reliance on officially dispensed subsidy they effectively discourage dissenting voices.

In addition to working in partnership with approved organisations, authorities can go out of their way to prevent others from participating or having a voice. Derby Street tenants had to appeal to the Information Commissioner before they were able to see the report on which the decision to demolish their homes was based. And our Independent Housing Action Group was told that it could not put up a stall in the city square without liability insurance. We went ahead with the stall anyway, after first informing the local press, and the council clearly decided not to court worse publicity in front of the camera, but we later learnt, through sources in the council, that the insurance rule was brought in specifically to try and cut across our protest. By being prepared to contest the rules we were able to make more space for critical voices to be heard.

One stall cannot make much impact, let alone challenge hegemonic political and economic structures. But it is important that tenant organisations are not bound by the limits imposed by those structures, both in what they strive to achieve and the manner in which they take the fight forward. Like trade unions, tenants' organisations need to be independent - free to set their own agenda outwith the limited choices presented by those who control the current system, and free to challenge current policies.

³ Although it is not necessary to register a tenants' organisation we hoped it would make the council take us more seriously and also give us access to money to pay for essential costs such as photocopying.