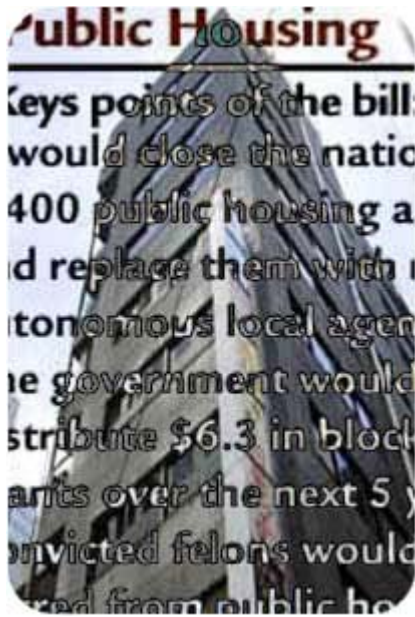




HMO's - HOUSING BILL



rather than thank us.

Last night, I attended a public meeting in my constituency. The banner headline on yesterday's edition of the Nottingham Evening Post was "Students Drove Me to the Brink of Suicide". A two-page spread inside told how attractive areas of the city were doomed to become the slums of the future. Such was the scale of feeling in the city that the meeting was covered on BBC Radio Nottingham as an outside broadcast. I did not come across anyone at the meeting who was close to suicide, but many appeared to be close to murder. People expressed a great deal of anger at the way in which their lives, in settled areas and communities, had been turned over because properties that were traditionally family houses had been sucked up and converted into HMOs.

Nottingham is the fastest growing university city in the country. In a couple of years, its student population will total about 55,000. In some of the areas that I represent, half the properties are occupied by students in HMOs. The police complain that those areas are becoming unpoliceable. Schools say that families no longer live there, and that as a result there are no children to make up school roll requirements. Many residents say that they do not have a clue where the landlords of these properties can be found.

Representatives of landlords' associations were on the panel at last night's meeting, but even they said that they had nothing to fear from an inclusive regulatory process that meant that everyone running an HMO should be subject to a licence. However, there are gaps in the way that the Bill defines HMOs, and the landlords at last night's meeting said that those gaps will be an invitation to cowboys.

Good landlords do not present a problem—many of the best have been involved in setting up voluntary agreements, and they stand by those agreements—but cowboys are a problem for everyone. The landlords told the meeting that the proposed definition of HMO will allow the most exploitative of landlords to move from three-storey properties into two-storey properties, and that that is exactly what they will do. They said that those landlords will seek to exploit the definition and make the greatest

Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South) (Lab): I rise to support amendment No. 87, which I intend to press to a vote.

I begin by thanking the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes), for his kind and generous remarks about my work on fuel poverty. That is an issue to which we will return later in the debate.

I also want to thank the members of the Standing Committee that considered the Bill—and especially my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Attercliffe (Mr. Betts) for what they said in Committee about the problems encountered in university cities, and the proliferation of properties that are being acquired and turned into HMOs. I also want to congratulate the Government on grasping the nettle that is a national licensing scheme. However, I want to press the amendment, as the holes in what we have done mean that people will criticise us

amount of money for the smallest outlay. Do they care about standards and conditions? Not one jot, we were told, and that is why I urge the House to support a definition that is as inclusive as it needs to be if we are to preclude the Bill becoming a cowboys' charter.

Many residents at the meeting asked exactly the same questions that the local authority was trying to ask. How do we deal with misbehaviour by tenants when there is no constraint on the people who own the property? The Government—rightly, properly and proudly—have introduced a series of measures to tackle the standards of tenants' behaviour, including antisocial behaviour orders. In addition, local authorities have been invited to take a much tougher and intrusive line when it comes to telling council tenants, "Look, if you can't control your kid's behaviour, your tenancy is in jeopardy and you can expect to be evicted."

Do any similar powers exist in respect of the private sector, and HMOs? No. Last night, everyone—including representatives of the police, the local authority, landlords and the universities, and even student bodies—were asking for a level playing field. They want standards of decency and community stability to be part of the framework for housing provision, in which safe neighbourhoods and sustainable communities are delivered, and are not just slogans used by the Government.

We can achieve that if we have the courage to use a definition that covers the majority of properties currently being acquired and converted into HMOs. My definition would accept the three-storey limit but would apply to properties in which four or more people live. Effectively, therefore, it would also cover properties in the two-storey category.

I hope that the House has the courage to vote for the amendment. If it does, landlords, local authorities, students and communities across the country will sing our praises. If we do not have that courage, we will get only brickbats from communities that are divided against each other.