

Magazine for the Squatter-Homeless

No. 2 FREE

Every squatter is officially homeless according to section 58 of the Housing Act 1985.

HELP ?

● THE 121 CENTRE is a cafe, bookshop, meeting place and advice centre for those interested in squatting, women's issues, unemployment, the poll tax and other issues of social concern. The people who run the centre are squatters themselves and their energy is their only fuel. THE 121 CENTRE is there to use and be supported and can be found at 121 Railton Road, Brixton, London SE 24. Tel: 071 274 6655.

● The Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS) advice line is; 071 359-8814 (mon, wed, fri 2-6pm).

● SQUASH "Squatters Action for Secure Homes" meets every two weeks to organise a reply to, and campaign against, the Government's proposals for criminalisation. They will have a new phone by the time Squall No.3 hits the streets. Telephone number in the next issue. (In the meantime phone the ASS number for details of SQUASH meetings.)

● HOMELESS OCCUPIERS PROJECT (HOP) runs a daily advice service for squatters in the Southwark area and also publish a free HOP newsletter that contains up to date squatting info. They can be found at 612 Old Kent Road, London SE15. Tel: 071 277 7639 (mon-fri, 4-7pm).

GET INVOLVED

What can you do? Get involved with the groups mentioned here. Write to your MP and the media.

Write to SQUALL, we want to hear from you, your experiences with the Law, neighbours, the courts and other squatters. We know you're out there - raise your voice and be heard because if we don't do it now we may never have another chance, we need to raise public awareness as to the importance of squatting as a self-help housing option.

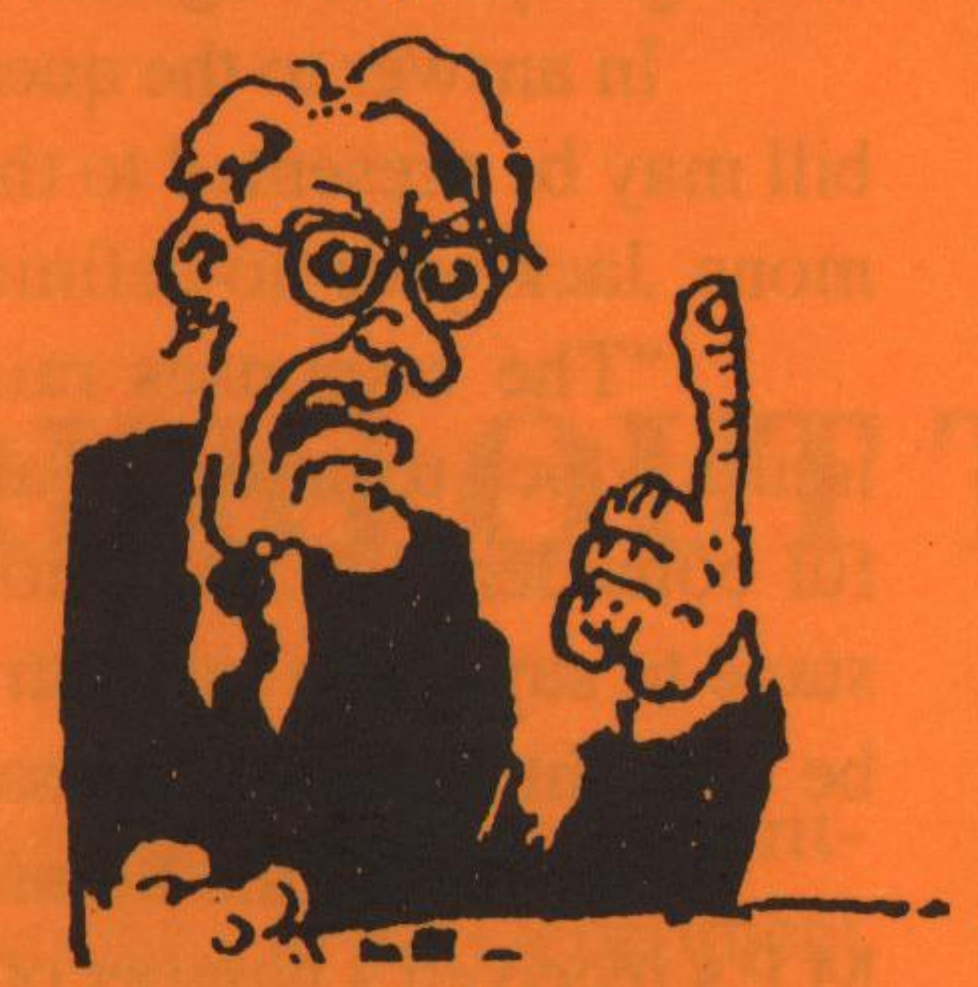
Until there are enough homes for all, until there is a comprehensive, nationwide housing policy, until central Government recognises that there is a housing crisis then squatting must continue to be the safety net it has become. The criminalisation of squatting will probably have its own bill in Parliament. If so, MPs may well vote on their own initiatives. It is therefore essential that they hear of the positive side to squatting and it is squatters themselves who are best equipped to do this.

Self-help - we house ourselves with it, now we must defend ourselves with it, don't assume that someone else will do it for you.

Write to;

SQUALL,
c/o 2 St. Paul's Road,
London N1 2QN

SOME PEOPLE ARE GENETICALLY UNSUITED FOR DECENT HOUSING!



OBSCURING THE CURE ?

- BRING OUT THE EMPTIES !
- SQUATTING THE PRESS
- WORDS, FAIR AND RARE
- HUMAN ZOOS

SQUALL NOW WHILE STOCKS LAST.

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necessity breeds ingenuity. SQUALL

The State it's in

"The government are committed to strengthening the law against squatting," announced Michael Jack, Minister of State at the Home Office.

Jack was replying to a question tabled in the House of Commons by Nick Raynsford (Lab. Greenwich) on June 17 and it seems to support the view that the Government had already decided to legislate on the issue even before the so called 'consultation' period had ended. So much for the "broad public discussion" they asked for in the 'consultation' paper.

Although some legislation on squatting is now inevitable, just how extensive it will be, and whether it will cover residential property and even trespass, is still to be decided.

Nick Raynsford had asked the Government what plans it was making for legislation and what responses it had received to the 'consultation' paper.

"In all we received 216 responses," Jack replied. "Fifty-eight supported no change in the current law; six supported a limited extension of the law; seventeen supported an extension of criminal law to all squatting including residential premises; fifty-six supported a general extension of the criminal law to squatting in any premises."

Although it is evident from Michael Jack's reply that a small majority of respondents had been in favour of legislation that includes residential property (where most squatters find homes), he also said that eighty-four of them were from individuals or com-

panies. These are likely to have inflated the pro-criminalisation numbers but may well carry less political weight than some of the more substantial and involved groups like Shelter and the Institute of Housing. Both of these groups were against any legislation.

In answer to the question on when the bill may be presented to the House of Commons, Jack gave no definite answer.

"The responses raised a number of issues which require, and are receiving, careful consideration. It is not possible at this stage to say when legislative proposals will be brought forward," he said.

Just before the Summer recess in July, M.P.s received a number of briefing notes on the squatting issue. It is likely that unless it becomes more politically controversial (and at the moment the government is feeling safe), the squatting bill will be un-whipped. This means that MPs may not be told to 'toe the party line' but will be allowed to make up their own minds. The opportunity to inform their personal view with more relevant opinions than the negative stereotypes of squatters they have been fed, is now open.

What has to be understood if a solution, rather than a gloss-over, is to be found, is that squatting exists not because of lifestyle choice but because of a lack of adequate affordable housing.

Criminalising the symptoms amounts to the prescription of political Valium. The consequent prognosis will be that the problem remains only to develop new, probably worse, symptoms.



BRING OUT THE EMPTIES

A staggering 768,000 homes in Britain are empty, according to the Department of Environment. The figure makes a mockery of the vehemence with which the Government attack homeless people who take the initiative of making homes out of idle buildings. Why sleep in a doorway when you can walk through the door and have a roof over your head? Or even better, get the owner to agree. One organisation passionately involved in finding ways of getting owners to lease idle property to homeless people is the Empty Homes Agency.

The EHA is a charity, founded in February this year, that has already knotted up some major triumphs. Not least amongst these was negotiating a lease on the Leysian Mission building near Old Street roundabout. Near derelict for a number of years, the building is now home to two hundred previously homeless people.

Mysteriously however, after the EHA

showed interest in a 400 bedroom building lying empty for the last three years in Tower Hamlets, the Local Council suddenly decided that they needed it for offices after all. The mystery might well be explained by the rumour that the council decision was based on not wanting to have 400 needy homeless people move into its borough.

The EHA report that, on the whole, local authorities have been reducing their proportion of housing stock left idle, although there are still 83,000 empty properties under their control. This drop is due in part to the selling off of council housing but also to the introduction of government fines for idle housing stock. Now the councils are suggesting that the government should take some of its own advice and do something about its own high proportion of idle property. Sixteen per cent of Government owned housing is empty, by far the greatest percentage in any sector of housing.

WORDS, FAIR AND RARE.

The Housing Committee of the Association of Metropolitan Authorities has told the Government that it is not in favour of the criminalisation of squatting.

The AMA, which represents 30 provincial metropolitan district councils (British cities) and thirty London boroughs, has just circulated its 'consultation' paper response among MPs for comment. For a council-based appraisal of the issue it is remarkably balanced in its view of the subject.

In its response, the AMA criticises the Government's approach to consultation. "It is a matter of some concern that given the often emotive nature of the subject matter, there are a number of unsupported assertions made about squatting throughout the document. The fact that these views are unattributed, with no way of gauging their authority, or the evidence on which they are based, seriously undermines the credibility of the 'consultation' paper's argument."

The AMA further criticises the as-

sumption made in the 'consultation' paper that "squatters are generally there by their own choice, moved by no more than self-appointed gratification or an unreadiness to respect other people's rights." (Government 'Consultation' paper, Para 62)

The AMA points out that "squatting is, by its very nature, unlikely to provide anything more than extremely unsatisfactory accommodation. It will almost invariably be insecure accommodation. It will certainly be temporary. It is more often than not in very poor condition. It would therefore seem implausible that, given affordable alternative housing, many people would voluntarily choose squatting as a housing option."

The AMA accuses the Government of not seeing the "wider social and economic context" of squatting and calls the 'consultation' paper incomplete for failing to consider "the influence of the general rise in homelessness".

The large increase in homeless households resulting from criminalisation, it says, will also produce additional housing demand and require more tax-payers money to pay for temporary accommodation.

The AMA concludes its response by stressing the not often publicly visited core of the issue - "the most effective and permanent solution to squatting is to tackle its cause - the lack of adequate affordable housing."

Recent Department of Environment figures show that the number of homeless families in Britain has increased 25% in the year up to March '92. The Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS) reports that one in three calls for advice are from families.

Britain's Business Boots

"Booting out the squatters," cried the Confederation of British Industry in its June news magazine.

"Britain's Business Voice" as it describes itself, ran the headline to announce that it had sent a response to the Government's 'consultation' paper supporting criminalisation.

"The CBI believes that there is in principle no distinction between a shop-lifter or a person who snatches a handbag in the street and a person who squats in an empty property," said John Pollard, a policy adviser in the CBI's company affairs directorate.

The CBI quoted Mr. Pollard's words in a news release, published on June 1st, that attracted a small amount of press and radio coverage but lacked any balancing voice.

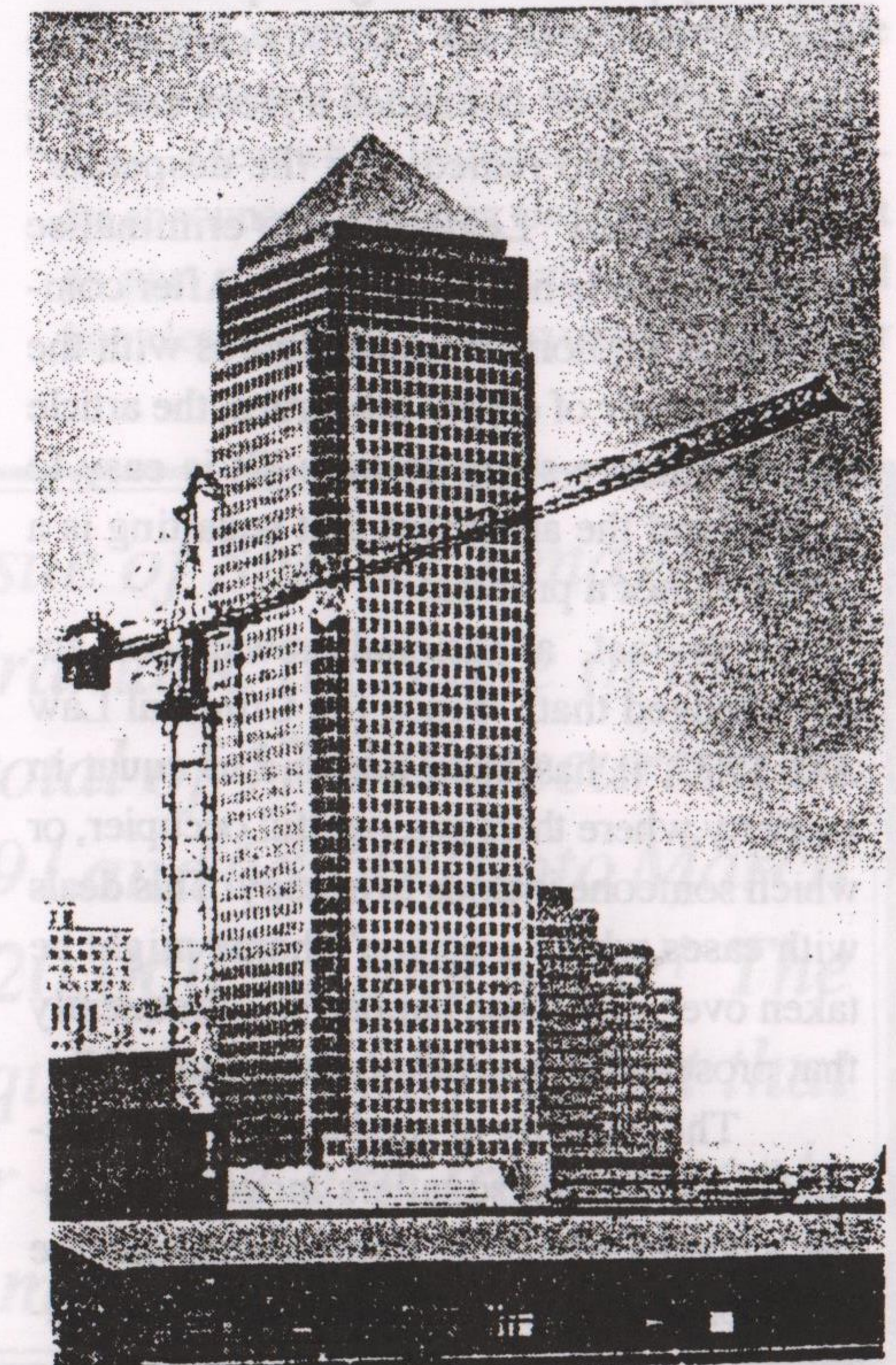
"While the loss of a handbag, including cash credit cards and other personal belongings is serious, it is even more serious to return from holiday to find squatters denying you access to your own home."

Most squatters would not consider depriving someone else of their home but even if they did, the Criminal Law Act 1977 has a 'displaced residential occupiers' clause that renders it illegal to do so. Quite evidently Mr. Pollard, as a member of the public and as a spokesman for "Britain's business voice", is grossly mis-informed.

But let us pretend that we might use the CBI's technique of employing

bad examples to generalise the whole. Was not Robert Maxwell part of 'Britain's business voice' and whilst it may be true that certain pensioners still have their hand-bags, it is also true that they have no pension money to put in them. The CBI might claim that, in general, businessmen are not all like Robert Maxwell. Then might Squall also demand, with full justification, an acknowledgement that in general all squatters are not thieves?

Limp and Dork last minute rescue initiative for homeless



News of the Sqews

A REVIEW OF RECENT SQUATTING AND HOME- LESSNESS ISSUES REPORTED BY THE NATIONAL AND LO- CAL PRESS.

As it's summer we'll begin with some unusually positive coverage. A pull out section of *The Observer* (5/7/92) called 'The Housing Report' contained a piece entitled; "Squatting: No remedy for the desperate" and concluded "Legislation to criminalise the homeless is not the answer". After comparing rising homelessness figures with the rising number of empty properties, the article makes a brave stand stating: "It is easy to understand the argument that squatting is a solution, not a problem."

At last, a national newspaper acknowledged that: "Since the Criminal Law Act 1977, it has been a crime to squat in property where there is a rightful occupier, or which someone intends to occupy. This deals with cases where a person's home might be taken over, and these happen so infrequently that prosecutions are almost unheard of."

The majority of media/politician's accusations are that squatters move into people's homes whilst the rightful residents are either on holiday or waiting to move in themselves. *The Observer* article suggests that the

cases used to back up these accusations are often more complicated than the squatter-damning way they are reported. One skeleton laid to rest. But will the voting public get to know of this simple truth when tabloid squatter-stories arise from rumour, are edited for sensationalism and return to rumour?

The report also credited the zealous Margaret Thatcher with having 'declared war on squatters', claiming that it was she who, as former PM, had promised legislation back in June 1990. An interesting point indeed. Perhaps it would not be too difficult for the present Government, in view of the Pandora's box it is about to open, to withdraw all its plans for legislation against squatting. It could then blame the idea on the myopic ravings of the former PM, an already tried and successful method with the Poll Tax.

Among the contributors to the pile of bad news stories about the May Bank Holiday festival at Castlemorton Common was the *Daily Telegraph* (27/5/92) who, in the front cover contents, announced "Guide to Hippiland. How to tell a traveller from a raver from a squatter. Turn to page 4". On page 4 the paper ran the headline "From Ravers to Travellers: a Guide to the Invaders" and followed it with a packaged dissection of the festival goers who had "inspired the loathing of the locals" - "The Traveller", "The Raver" and "The Squatter".

'The Squatter' was called Claire who "lives in a squat in Stockwell" but what is not clear is what Claire had done to inspire such loathing and why carpenters, social workers and teachers, who had also been at the festival, were not also given their own category.

One group definitely in a category of their own, for all the good it does them, are homeless families. They are defined by law as being in a 'priority' housing category and

yet Department of Environment figures, published in June, show that there has been a 25% increase in the numbers of families still without settled accommodation. *The Independent* (17/6/92) was the only broadsheet to mention these statistics and even then it was only a small article tucked into page 4 of the newspaper. These figures make for a fine irony next to the London *Evening Standard's* editorial column (22/6/92), in which the author announced with Thatcherite religiosity: "the root of the problem is surely the breakdown in family life."

"The age of permissiveness has its price," the paper opined "part of that price is homelessness. Divorce, single parenthood, rejection of adolescent step children, these are the real reasons for the inexorable rise in homelessness". Try telling the record number of homeless families this (still together in spite of it all)!

But wait, Sir George Young, the Housing Minister, has an answer to all our problems (*The Guardian* 16/6/92). He has told the Institute of Housing that Local Councils and Housing Associations could make

better use of their homes if they tackled under-occupation. Paul Johnson in the *Daily Mail* (6/92) could not agree more - "At any one time, half the bedrooms in Britain are unoccupied," he says aghast. As a result Sir George proposes tax relief on renting out your spare room. This new pack -'em- in solution is supposed to convince housing workers that the government is serious about tackling rising homelessness.

Going local for a moment, Hackney Council come in for a slamming from mother of three, Cheryl John (*Hackney Gazette* 12/6/92). Cheryl had been asked to sign a tenancy agreement for a flat so that the squatters occupying the property could be removed by the council using a 'protected intended occupier' ruling. Nine months after the flat was vacated they still had not allowed Cheryl to occupy the place. "It's a complete waste of time and money," she said "and has made most squatters homeless needlessly".

Meanwhile Islington's Housing Service announces (*Islington Gazette* 11/6/92) that as part of its "better deal for tenants and homeless families", "it is to reduce the number

A survey in the June issue of Shelter's magazine 'ROOF' has shown a dramatic increase in mortgage repossessions. A total of 47,940 occurred in the year upto March 1991 and 68,600 upto March 1992, an increase of 20,060 in one year! The Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS) report that one in twenty calls for advice are from people made homeless due to mortgage repossessions.

HUMAN ZOOS (and other exhibitions)

8 of squatted properties (in its area) from 26 to a maximum of 24". How the creation of 2 more homeless households, in an area with more empty properties than squatters, is going to help the situation is un-clear.

What is also un-clear is why the heavies that "allegedly wielded pipes and sticks to smash their way into a derelict house in Fitzjohn's Avenue, Hampstead to evict squatters, walked free from court." (*Ham and High* 15/5/92). Only six out of the ten heavies were caught by police and, despite the bruising and a broken finger suffered by the squatters and onlookers, they escaped any charges of violence. Four walked off with conditional discharges and the other two were ordered to pay costs of £20 and £50 for disorderly conduct.

A letter from the Campaign for Bedsit Rights (*The Independent* 1/6/92) put into perspective private rented accommodation as an option for the homeless. "The 1988 Housing Act which the government claimed would revive the private rented sector (PRS), merely reduced security of tenure and increased rents," the letter stated. This law ensured that, very often, landlords can evict tenants or raise the rent after only 6 months. "Apart from the inability of many low-in-

come households to raise large sums for rent in advance and security deposits and so gain access to a tenancy, when they do they are given such limited security that they are placed on a treadmill of homelessness." Options for the squatter-homeless? What options?

And finally, if you are thinking of getting out of town and into the countryside, the Rural Development Commission (*Guardian* 3/6/92) reports that the number of rural homeless is also rising fast. "The chief villain," it says, "is Government policy aided and abetted by long distance commuters, second home owners, holiday lets and the hardening hearts of British Landowners". Hardened hearts seem to be official policy these days, but rather than sitting around waiting for them to soften, the Commission reports that some rural homeless have "resorted to sleeping in woodlands, cars and the back of a local leisure centre. Two youths even set up home in an electricity sub-station". Well, necessity does breed ingenuity. But wait for it, coming up soon at a Political Arena near you are amendments to the Caravan Act aiming to ban sleeping in cars, vans, bendovers, tents or caravans anywhere except on limited official reservations.



These days, passers-by looking through the cages of the Milan City Zoo are not gawping at the elephants and lions that once paced restlessly in its confines. A year ago, after complaints from animal rights organisations, the beasts were moved to other, more spacious zoos. In their place have arrived homeless people who, lured by the prospect of a roof under which to shelter, have squatted the zoo's animal houses.

Embarrassed by the multitude of obvious ironies that these 'homeless on display' have created, Milan City Council have decided to level the animal houses and build a public park instead. Reports that the one hundred or so people consequently evicted from the site may be on a world tour with the second leg at the London Branch, are unconfirmed.

What is known is that London already has its display case for the homeless in the form of Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Surrounded by several top lawyer firms including the Queen's QC, as well as the Royal College of Surgeons and the High Court of Chancery, Lincoln's Inn has been an obvi-

ous target for the media and consequently an embarrassment to the Government. The Police who patrol the area have refused to become involved with official suggestions that the homeless people should be harassed into moving on.

Plans are now afoot to shovel the whole homeless population of the Georgian square into an ex-police residence block off Tavistock Square near King's Cross. This building is in good condition but local housing workers are up in arms that the hardened street sleepers, including some alcoholics, are to be dumped in the building with no back up services to habilitate them into their new situation.

Lincoln's Inn Fields meanwhile is to be fenced off according to the plan, and the media will have to find a new, visually blatant example of homelessness. Lincoln's Inn is certainly a juicy one, but with rising homelessness figures it should not be too hard to find others especially if the estimated 30,000 squatters that live in London are forced onto the streets by the impending criminalisation.

NEWS FROM YOU

- Letters to SQUALL

Speculation is the name of the game.

Dear Squall,
I used to live in a privately owned house that had been standing empty for at least a year in De Beauvoir Town, NI. We had quite a long stay in it and eventually the property was put up for auction and bought by a development company. Well - the eviction came up in due course and, not being the obstructive sort, we allowed surveyors and architects in to do their reports. When we were eventually told that we were going to be evicted I asked one of the company's architects what they were going to do with the property as I would be prepared to protest at a pointless eviction. The

And prejudice plays a strong hand.

Dear Squall,
Thanks for the magazine, I really enjoyed it. One of my first squats was on the York Way Court estate, Islington. It was run-down and there were a lot of squatters there. Some of the residents were friendly, but the general tone was one of open hostility, most of the residents blaming the problems of the estate on the squatters. There was a hard drugs problem, smack, which included as its victims residents and squatters alike. One notable dealer was a council tenant and yet the squatters took the blame.
The council had their usual policy - evictions as a matter of course, whether the houses were needed or not. In the beginning, evicted flats had steel security doors fixed to them. They would then lie

developer told me that, rest assured, the building was going to be refurbished to provide homes in the rented sector.

We were evicted.

Three years later the property remains undeveloped and empty. Although in the year after it was repossessed workmen did come and 'alter' the structure. They smashed a four foot hole in the first floor walls and, as if this wasn't enough, a fire 'mysteriously' ravaged the ground floor a couple of weeks later, leaving the building completely uninhabitable. I expect the developers were covered for this 'accident' and hope that it wasn't another case of arson for insurance.

Yours sceptically,
Jonathon Rogers.

empty for weeks or months before someone would get in, remove the steel door from the inside and, once again, the property would become a home. The council must have got tired of all these re-evictions so they then resorted to bricking up the windows and doors. The properties would then again lie idle.

On York Way Court I saw, for the first (but not the last) time, the mindless damage that council workmen sometimes commit to render property un-squattable; smashing toilets and wash basins, cutting water pipes and tearing out electrical cabling. The squatters again get the blame.

I have seen this policy being adopted more frequently throughout London and it exasperates me. Even private landlords are now following suit, disused pubs, offices, venues, halls and houses are being vandalised in the name of security.

Yours faithfully,
Pat Godwin. NI.

Anti-social who?

Dear Squall,
In early July me and my flat mates awoke at 1.45 am to the sound of our basement door being kicked in. It was the Police and we came out our front door and asked them what the hell they were doing. They then came up from the basement and told us that there had been a burglary on our street and someone had said that they had seen the burglars come in our front door. We told them that we were the caretakers of the property (the owner lives in Dublin) and that there was only one key to our front door and that was always left in the lock on the inside. We also let them know that we had been in bed for a couple of hours. "Oh," one PC said "thats alright we were told you were squatters" as if that also meant we must be the burglars. I told them that I had been a squatter once but that didn't mean I liked being woken up by someone booting down the door.

"We didn't cause any damage," the P.C. said. I asked him why he didn't knock. "We could have I suppose, but you're lucky we've de-

cided not to search the place," he said and then they left. Can you believe it? I'm lucky? I read in Squall No. 1 how one politician called squatters "anti-social parasites" but having your door kicked in by the police, at nearly two in the morning, isn't exactly the height of good manners is it?

By the way, a mate passed me a copy of Squall No. 1 and after reading it I thought it was about time someone had got something together like this. Good work.

Yours,
Rob WCI

Address all letters to;
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c/o 2 St. Paul's Road,
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London N1 2QN.

All adresses kept strictly confidential.

A recent survey carried out by CHAR (The Housing Campaign for Single Homeless) showed that four out of 10 homeless young women have been victims of sexual abuse, 90% of which was carried out by their fathers. In 1991 a survey from the Advisory Service for Squatters (ASS) reported that over a period of 6 months they had received 143 calls from women interested in squatting in order to escape violence in their present housing situation.