



The independent federation of
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Open letter to Caroline Flint, MP from Leeds Tenants Federation

Monday, 11 February 2008

Dear Minister

We would like to respond to the views expressed in your speech to the Fabian Society on 5 February. It is absolutely true that young tenants who have just left home and those who are very vulnerable, for instance people with learning disabilities, need a package of support that housing organisations should be providing. This support is likely to take the form of advice on budgeting and independent living but could include training and help finding work and you rightly point to the foyer system as an example of good practice in this field.

However, your speech to the Fabians and your interview with The Guardian newspaper quite wrongly linked social housing to worklessness, as if there was some negative power that social housing commanded to suddenly deprive people of the will to work. It is true that the poorest and the most vulnerable in society are the only people – in the main – who are able to access the dwindling supply of social housing. Social housing was never intended to be a welfare safety net but your government and previous governments have turned it into one. You have overseen a process of privatisation through Right to Buy that has skimmed off the best and biggest properties, and encouraged tenants with financial resources to exit the sector, leaving behind the worst and the smallest properties and the poorest and most vulnerable tenants. At the same time your government has championed home ownership while restricting access to social housing to those who are most vulnerable in society.

Your government believes in a free market so you will not be surprised that market forces apply to housing choices, and that the poorest people end up in the cheapest housing. If there were no social housing, they would end up in the worst private rented stock. Such is the power of the market. You should ask yourself why these people are poor; why are they workless? And the answer will be close to hand. Because your government has helped to deregulate the economy to drive forward globalisation; and this has created an increasing gap between rich and poor, and has casualised the labour market, sentencing those on lower incomes to low skill, low paid, often

temporary jobs, forcing them into 'portmanteau' jobs – where they must take several part-time jobs just to make do. The economic fall-out from globalisation is not the fault of social housing, nor is it only social housing tenants who are poor. So how do we explain your belief that social housing tenants have a special need for careers advice?

Your speech appears to promote a discredited and prejudiced 'underclass' theory. It seems that your government views social housing tenants as failures because they have not – and often do not chose to – buy their own home. You appear to be close to believing that social housing tenants are not full citizens. Renting in the social sector is a badge of failure for you, isn't it?

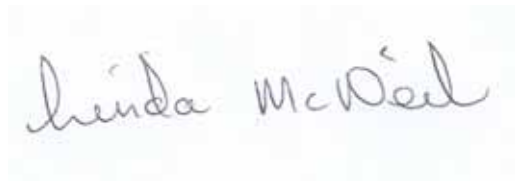
Social housing has always been seen as a universal benefit and, since the birth of the Welfare State, it has been a basic belief in our society that everyone should be able to rent a quality home in the social sector rather than buying one, or rent privately. You and your government, however, clearly regard social housing as a tenure of last resort – after all a safety net is not a place to live, it's purpose is to catch you when you fall. In this way you deny people any real choice over their housing options. Only if your government promotes social housing as a universal good and stops treating it as a welfare safety net; only if you promote it as much as you do home ownership; and only if you admit that people have the right to choose a social rented home, will the stigma and problems associated with the residualised social housing sector be overcome.

You ended your speech by saying that '*social housing should be based around the principle of something for something.*' You seem to be under the impression that it is your government that has given tenants more influence, and your government that has improved housing services. We know you do not want to be seen as arrogant and paternalistic. Perhaps we should point out that tenants and residents organisations have worked concertedly over many years to increase our influence in housing decision-making and it has been our efforts – much more than your government's – that has forced improvements in housing service. We do not get something for nothing. Residents in organisations like our own put in more hours of unpaid labour than even Government Ministers to make sure tenants views are heard and that housing organisations are dealing effectively with the issues to be addressed. We pay the full cost of our housing management services. And as you know, council tenants pay an extra hidden tax in the rent that you claim back as negative subsidy.

And because we have fought for so many years for a better service and for greater influence, we do not want to see Government Ministers make the mistake of thinking that social housing tenants are some sort of second class citizen who must be trained and improved before they can become a full citizen and buy their own home. We want a thriving social housing sector that enables people to make a real choice about their housing options. These are our homes; and we want future generations to have the right to access to social housing in their turn.

We are proud to be social housing tenants. Social housing is not a safety net and we are not second class citizens. We have the right to rent – and the same rights as every other citizen to make our own choices and perhaps if you start to engage in a real dialogue with us, you will find that out.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda McNeil". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered within a light blue rectangular background.

Linda McNeil
Deputy Chair, Leeds Tenants Federation