

Glasgow's Housing Crisis

Glasgow's Housing Disgrace (1947)

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Glasgow, by common consent, is a great city, though there is room for disagreement regarding what its greatness consists of. There is much in Glasgow that favours the picture of greatness which our civic dignitaries like to paint.

It is when we take a glance at the housing conditions that we see a different kind of picture. We then see tragedies which would tax the efforts of a thousand Shakespeares to portray in an adequate manner. It is not possible to appreciate properly the amount of suffering caused by the housing shortage, but unless we know something of this we will not see how urgent the problem is.

Thousands of families are denied a decent home life because of the bad housing conditions. In some houses, three, four and five persons share the same bed because there is no room for beds. Children, in many cases, are familiar with the sight of rats because the houses in which they live are rat-infested. Young people living in old dilapidated properties cannot tell their friends where they live. There are overcrowded single-apartment houses with TB cases living in them. There are young married couples unable to get a house of their own. The lack of proper sanitary facilities in many of the houses is another of the many evils connected with the housing problem. Overcrowding has spread everywhere, including the new housing schemes. This detracts from the picture of a great and prosperous Glasgow.

Councillors behave as if they were unaware of these conditions. Many of them are far removed from the problem and are apt to forget all about it as they shuffle, to and fro, between the committee rooms and the buffet in the City Chambers. They don't like to be reminded of it.

The late Miss Ellen Wilkinson, before the outbreak of war, was publicly rebuked because she made strong reference to the housing conditions in Glasgow. It is necessary, however, even if the tender feelings of our councillors are hurt, to draw the public attention to the question in order that something may be done to tackle it effectively.

It can be solved. Houses can and must be rapidly built. The type of house that lends itself to rapid construction is the house on which attention must be concentrated. Those who are building the houses must be given every encouragement to get on with the job. Houses must be given, first of all, to those in the greatest need of houses. They must be let at rents the people can pay.

These simple facts are easy to understand. Yet, strange to say, those in charge of housing seem to be unable to grasp them. It took months to convince Glasgow Corporation that temporary houses should be built. It took three years before they were compelled to convert empty shops into housing accommodation. It took several years before they agreed to employ private contractors as an additional means of getting houses erected. They have retreated but still resist proposals to speed up house-building. They cling to ideas formed many years ago when the urgency was not so clearly marked.

Experience has shown that those in charge of housing are incapable of moving forwards on their own initiative. They require to be pushed. If the people push hard enough, and in the right direction, they will get the houses within a reasonable period of time. It is possible to outline a programme and to indicate steps necessary to carry it through. Success then depends on how hard the housing authorities are pressed.

The present position

It will help if we spend a few minutes on the present position before dealing with the practical steps necessary to solve the problem.

It is now common knowledge that Glasgow requires a minimum of 100,000 new houses to meet the need of the population. This figure was given officially by Glasgow Corporation in answer to a questionnaire sent out by the Clyde Valley Planning Advisory Committee in 1944. This did not prevent Mr James McInnes from stating, at the public inquiry on East Kilbride, that Glasgow's housing problem could be solved by the erection of 50,000 new houses. It is to the credit of Mr Joseph Westwood, Secretary of State for Scotland, that he demolished this statement by sound argument and showed that Glasgow required 100,000 houses.

The case for 100,000 new houses is established beyond doubt and does not need to be laboured here. We would mention that the last report on the number of applications for new houses showed that there were 98,000 families on the waiting list. It is known that many families made no applications because they hoped to be removed under slum clearance legislation.

The position becomes worse day by day because the old houses are more rapidly decaying. The shortage is becoming more acute and continually adding to the overcrowding. This all indicates that the estimate of 100,000 required by Glasgow is not an exaggeration.

Broken promises

There is no excuse for the failure of Glasgow Corporation to come anywhere near the housing output promised before the end of the war. The contrast between what was promised and what was actually achieved can be clearly seen from the following figures.

In the first post-war year we were to get 8,000. Had the promise been fulfilled we would have had by last May a total of 14,500 new houses, and we would now be working to get another 10,000 houses promised in the third post-war year. The actual number of houses built up to the end of last July was 3,684 of which 1,465 were temporary houses.

Had Glasgow Corporation not been compelled to accept temporary houses, by public opinion, we would have been worse off by 1,465 houses. It will be recalled that the Commission Party wanted 10,000 temporary houses built on some of the sites not likely to be used for considerable time. The Corporation, when it did yield, agreed to only to a total of 2,500.

It will be said that failure is due to abnormal circumstances and this will be readily accepted by those who know nothing of Glasgow Corporation's declining output before the work broke out. A clearer picture will be seen if we place the Glasgow figures alongside those of Scotland as a whole, keeping in mind the fact the Glasgow's problem forms one-fifth of Scotland's problem.

The Government promised to build 50,000 new houses, in Scotland, in the first two post-war years. The total houses now completed to the end of July, well over the two years' period, is amounted to 30,382. Had Glasgow completed its full proportion of the houses, we would have had 6,076 new houses instead of the figure 3684 already mentioned. It is clear that Glasgow did not keep step with other parts of Scotland and that, no matter what angle it is view from, the failure to do the job is there for everyone to see.

Not having used our full proportion of materials, the bottom is knocked out of the argument that housing, in Glasgow, at any rate, was held up by a shortage of materials.

Present target

The target for 1947 has been set at 4,143 permanent houses. It is obvious that this target will not be reached. For the first six months, up to the end of June, the number of houses completed was 545, leaving, 3,598 to be completed in the second six months of the year.

The output may be higher than last year. This will be due mainly to the fact that Mr G. Buchanan practically forced Glasgow Corporation, a few months ago, to accept a higher proportion of prefabricated permanent houses. It will also be partly because, for the first time, a serious effort was made to secure the help of private contractors who are working alongside the Direct Labour Department on the erection of traditional type houses. The slight departure from the methods of the past has led to a slight improvement. A greater departure can lead to a greater improvement.

This will create new problems and will confuse those with a fixed mentality. It is possible, however, to get the results we are after without dispensing with the principle of Direct Labour as some of our councillors would like to do. The Direct Labour Department has started to play a minor role in housing, but this will be dealt with later. The important thing is that we clearly recognised the unsatisfactory position which confronts us at the present moment and take steps to get back the houses in much greater numbers. Great possibilities present themselves, and no person has the right to accept responsibility for housing who is not prepared to make the greatest use of these possibilities.

Prefabrication

The idea of using mass production methods in house-building became popular during the war. It was in that period that we saw the greatest experiments in prefabrication. It enabled us to get temporary houses for a number of young married couples. About another thousand have yet to go up in Glasgow.

Prefabrication has been extended to permanent houses. Steel erectors are playing a part in the building of these non-traditional houses. Steel, concrete and other materials are being used to a greater extent than ever before.

Ayr County Council has designed a house which is prefabricated in all parts. An old shipyard, in Irvine, has machinery installed which cuts and shapes metal parts for this house. This very fine house is named the Lindsay house, after its designer. It is precision-built. The roof is erected before the walls, thus enabling work on the walls to proceed and inside fittings to be installed in wet weather.

There are about 20 types of prefabricated houses under construction in Scotland. Some, like the foam-slag house, have only prefabricated walls, while others are prefabricated in all their parts.

Glasgow Corporation made a slight departure when it asked powers to build a factory for the making of foam-slag walls. It was a very expensive factory and it will never give us the 2,000 houses per year which its sponsors promised. Foam-slag walls do not a dwelling make, but if the slabs were smaller the walls would be erected faster and the money spent on the factory would be justified.

Prefabrication makes speedy erection possible. Most pre-fabricated houses can be built within a month or 6 weeks. Traditional houses take on average 15 months to build. It is clear that there must be a concentration on prefabrication if we are ever to overcome the housing shortage.

What to do

Nothing should be allowed to hinder house-building. The problem is particularly serious in Glasgow where housing has never been adequately dealt with. We must fight for increased output if the morale of the people is to be maintained. Even in the present crisis we cannot permit a cutting down in housing.

It will be gather from what we have already said that we favour prefabrication and would ask for a concentration on this type of house. It is not proposed to stop building traditional houses. They also can be used. We must, however, put prefabrication in the forefront of our proposals to get houses.

Labour

Next to that we must take into account the fact that houses are built by human beings and that their everyday needs must be met if they are to do the job well. The working conditions of the building trade workers are a scandal. Private contractors only pay a guaranteed week of 32 hours. Welfare facilities, where they exist at all, are far from satisfactory. This is not a pamphlet on working conditions, but it should be clear that unless the grievances of the works are remedied, output will be affected. In addition to this, it is necessary that the workers be given an incentive to increase output. There is no need to apologise for advocating payment by results. There are signs that this is coming along, and the sooner the better for everyone concerned.

Many of those engaged on prefabricated houses are already working on a system of payment by results. This applies particularly to steel erectors who are members of the Constructional Engineering Union. Payment by results will secure greater output and should be adopted by everyone engaged on the building of houses.

There is also the proposal to set up Joint Production Committees. The point of view of the workers on the job is always valuable. The workers should be given greater responsibility on questions affecting output, and for that reason Joint Production Committees should be made effective functioning bodies, and where they do not exist they should be set up immediately.

Materials

There is a shortage of materials, and this is having a serious effect on housing output. There is a shortage of timber, and, to a lesser extent, a shortage of cement. It is questionable if

anyone in authority has any right to talk about a shortage if the best use is not being made of the materials available. Everyone in Glasgow has seen cement and timber used on non-essential work. The matter has been raised with the authorities time and again.

Recently the Ministry of Works tried to explain the use of these materials for the Grand Hotel, a floor at Woolworth's Stores, and at an ice-cream factory. The Grand Hotel transaction was excused on the grounds that the Government wanted to encourage the tourist industry. The excuses advanced for the use of materials for Woolworth's stores and the ice-cream factory were even more trivial. Materials could be controlled and directed to housing and other essential work. The misuse of materials is criminal in view of the present position.

Trade negotiations should be opened up with Russia and other timber producing countries. By dropping out trade talks with Russia we lost time for 30,000 houses. Cement production and the production of certain fitments in our foundries should be examined with a view of getting a greater supply of materials. Housing should be included among the priorities for steel, cement and timber. It will surprise many to learn that such is not the case at present.

Push the councillors

Perhaps more important than anything else is the need to press the councillors into action. They are too ready to accept cuts when they are proposed by the Government. The proposed cut in timber imports should be resisted by Glasgow Corporation, but here again the councillors will require to be pushed if we are to get results.

Let us sum up what is wanted if we are to get the houses:

1. We must look upon housing as being of urgent importance and a problem that cannot be shelved if the welfare of the people is to be our concern.
2. The urgency of the problem must be brought home to every councillor by means of deputations and demonstrations. To get this we must get the people organised around the housing question.
3. The fight for prefabrication must be waged in earnest. The various types of prefabricated houses available must be made use of.
4. Taking into account the fact that the building workers know more about house-building than the members of the Housing Committee they should be brought into functioning Joint Production Committees.
5. The people must identify themselves with the effort of the building workers to get decent conditions.
6. We should fight for trade with countries that can supply us with timber. We must fight for strict control over all materials available.
7. While uniting in a national struggle for houses, the special position of Glasgow must be raised. We must press the Government and the Corporation to get as many houses as possible this year and to set a target of 6,000 houses for 1948.

This programme will get the new houses, but there are other questions which require attention. Something must be said about the allocation of houses and the question of the unfit houses. But before going on to that let us deal, briefly, with the East Kilbride proposition.

East Kilbride

The members of Glasgow Corporation, without a single dissentient, made Glasgow a laughing stock over the proposal to build a new town at East Kilbride. East Kilbride will be centre of a new town despite the opposition of the Glasgow councillors.

We cannot go into the matter in detail, but the proposal to develop a new town came from the Secretary of State for Scotland. He considered the housing and industrial congestion in Glasgow and North Lanarkshire, and concluded that East Kilbride should be developed as a means of easing that congestion. The defects of previous development in Glasgow, together with proposals made by the Clyde Valley Regional Planning Advisory Committee, were taken into account. He marshalled a host of facts in support of the proposition but they did not convince the members of Glasgow Corporation. The fact some thousands of those waiting for houses in Glasgow might get a chance of houses in East Kilbride did not weigh with them.

Glasgow Corporation, along with a number of private individuals, objected. There was an inquiry and the objections got short shrift. The attempt of Mr McInnes, the Housing Convener, to convince the committee of enquire that 50,000 new houses would solve Glasgow's problem was completely demolished. Facts regarding the housing needs of Glasgow were produced and most of these facts came originally from Glasgow Corporation itself. Valuable as these arguments are, it is not possible to reproduce them here.

The East Kilbride proposition will ease the problem in Glasgow by taking some of the people out. The opposition of Glasgow Corporation was an indication of how the councillors view the housing problem. We are desperate for the houses and we should place nothing in the way of easing the problem. East Kilbride means more houses. It must be allowed to proceed.

Allocation of houses

In view of the widespread suspicion prevalent in Glasgow over the allocation of houses, there is a strong feeling that steps should be taken to ensure that the public know how the allocation is made. The suspicions have their roots in facts known to the people. Nobody believes that all the councillors who got houses were among those in greatest need. There has been proved bribery of officials in the past. Things have happened within recent years which lead the people to believe that there is still considerable room for improvement.

The Communist Party raised the question with Glasgow Corporation some time ago. It was proposed that the method of allocation should be made public and that a list of those to whom houses are allocated should be posted up in the public libraries. These proposals were turned down, but almost immediately, the Committee on House Management which was appointed by the Scottish Housing Advisory Committee recommended that the so-called 'points system' be used in the allocation of houses should be made public. On this matter Glasgow Corporation has surrendered but they still refuse to publish lists of allocations.

The leaders of the groups in the Corporation receive copies of the lists and that is supposed to be a guarantee everything is perfect, but thousands of Glasgow citizens think otherwise and nothing is done to convince them to do the contrary.

It is not easy to believe that houses are allocated properly when it is known that there are cases of ten persons in a one-apartment house and that they have not been allocated a new house, while four apartment houses are let to families of two persons. There are thousands of families living in appalling conditions but they do not seem to be among the first when houses are allocated. The Councillors should learn that there are reports going about which reflect no credit on members of Glasgow Corporation.

This will continue until Glasgow Corporation reverses its present policy and ceases to act as a secret society concealing information from the citizens of Glasgow.

Rents

The rents charged for new houses prevent many working-class families from gaining any advantage from rehousing. Many families who have been removed to Pollok and elsewhere are finding it very difficult to make ends meet. Families living in bad housing conditions are scared in case they are offered houses at high rents. Others are not offered houses because the Housing Department officials know that they will be unable to pay the rents.

When the new Government subsidy was introduced, early in 1946, Government spokesmen said it was based on an average rental of 10/- per week. No permanent houses have been let in Glasgow at 10/- rental since before the outbreak of war. There have been some intermediate houses let, but the majority of the houses let have been ordinary houses. The subsidy from the Government should be increased to enable families to get houses at reasonable rents, but on this the Corporation has nothing to say.

Unfit houses

This problem is growing because houses are decaying more speedily than new houses are being built. There is legislation on the Statute Book to protect those living in unfit houses but it is not observed. Glasgow Corporation does not take the necessary steps to inform tenants regarding their rights. Mrs Jean Mann, MP, said recently that Glasgow Corporation had set up a committee to advise Glasgow citizens regarding their rights. Mrs Mann is wrong because there is no such committee in existence.

Tenants who apply for repair certificates are often met with hostility from the sanitary inspectors who investigate their cases. It is these inspectors who report to the Insanitary Areas Committee.

The Insanitary Areas Committee, which is composed of councillors, turns down the overwhelming majority of the applications. This has resulted in thousands of tenants living in unfit houses paying excess rents. The owners get 40 per cent over standard rent to enable them to carry out repairs, but in the cases referred to they carry out no repairs. Glasgow Corporation members are responsible for this because of their indifference to the question.

The Communist Party has given advice to hundreds of tenants, but the greatest obstacle to progress is Glasgow Corporation. Tenants who should be paying only 1914 rents are paying full rents, because the Insanitary Area Committee does not, in all cases, issue the necessary certificate.

The Corporation has power to prosecute property owners who do not provide proper sanitary facilities, but the property owners get away with it. This is a job for the housing associations. They should be on the job organising the people to secure repairs and press for amenities. The Corporation must be made to take action against owners who do not keep houses in a good condition.

Direct Labour

Direct Labour is sound in principle. It has not been successful in Glasgow because of the limited outlook of those who have been in charge of the Direct Labour Department. To cover up its deficiencies the Housing Committee kept private contractors out. What is needed is that steps be taken to improve the efficiency of the department. It must develop prefabrication and secure co-operation of the men on the building jobs. The Direct Labour Department must not be allowed to slip out of existence. On the contrary, it must continue and develop.

Vote for houses

The Communists have been the foremost fighters for houses in Glasgow. Many of the steps taken by Glasgow Corporation were forced on them by public opinion which was stimulated by the Communist Party. It is admitted that most of the councillors were reluctant to make changes and only yielded when forced to do so.

The Communists have been fighting from the outside. They want to fight inside. Nine vigorous candidates have been put up for the elections in November. They are fighting on many questions but housing is placed in the forefront. If elected, they will make Glasgow Corporation a platform for raising the urgent question of housing and from which they will endeavour to arouse public opinion. Their success will be your success. Vote for them and you will further the fight on housing and rents.

Housing cannot wait. It must be give priority. For that we must fight. Houses of all kinds must be built. The rents must be reasonable. Old houses must be kept in a state of repair. The list of those getting houses must be published.

Racketeering of every kind in housing must be brought to an end. These are some of the outstanding things for which we must fight:

Organise on housing! Fight on housing! Vote on housing!

As many houses as possible before December.

Six thousand housings in 1948.