

NOTES

occupation once they had been admitted. They had 'qualified' for the mortgage but had been crippled by the costs of furnishing, heating, maintaining and repairing their elderly assets. The other 13 per cent had got into severe difficulty with a first, second, or even subsequent mortgage, and had sold their houses before repossession or were doomed to ultimate failure. It is a challenging answer to the comfortable policy assumptions of the DoE who consider property ownership the natural state of affairs.

Tory axe falls again

Anna Coote writes: 'Cheer up', the ads say, 'Labour can't hold on forever.' As the NEW STATESMAN recorded last year, some cheering doses have already been administered to the citizens of Wandsworth, South London, by a Tory Council installed nine months ago after a long period of Labour rule. Its latest pick-me-up comes in the form of a decision to close a Community Centre which has been providing a unique service to residents of the borough's bleak high-rise estates.

Battersea Action and Counselling Service was set up five years ago with a grant from the Mental Health Trust, but that body funds only experimental projects, so once the Centre was established, it sought - and was granted - financial backing from the local authority. It is staffed by one psycho-therapist and two trained counsellors, and also subsidises a day nursery (with three full-time staff) and a food co-op. Last year, 600 people went there for help, mainly suffering from marital problems, depression or agoraphobia. It is the only such service in Britain which is free of charge and funded by local government.

Wandsworth Council's Finance Committee voted last week to withdraw its grant, which amounts to £15,250 a year. The official reason was that the centre was a 'low priority', but staff and management committee were able to show that in fact it saved the council some £60,000 a year, by taking preventative measures to stop families needing the attention of the social services. Such argument cut no ice with the Tories. What they really object to, apparently, is that the centre allows a community newspaper, *Pavement*, known for its left-wing flavour, to use its address for mailing; and that the Battersea Redevelopment Action Group, known for its stubborn defence of community interests, holds meetings there in the evenings. Though the centre offered to renegotiate these arrangements and to invite a Conservative councillor to join its management committee, the Tories stuck to their guns. An attempt by Labour councillors to defer the decision was lost by six votes to eight. Now the centre starts a desperate search for alternative funding.

No figs for data protection

Duncan Campbell writes: The general popularity of the recent report on Data Protection by the Lindop Committee was confirmed last week at the first major conference since the report was issued in December. 'Computers, records, and the right to privacy', organised by the National Computing Centre Ltd., and NCCL. It also served as a forum for the first government response to the committee's recommendations, as no discussion has yet taken place in parliament.

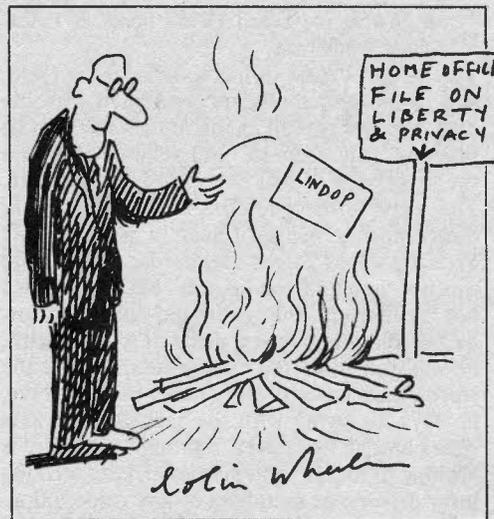
Owing to Merlyn Rees's absence in cabinet, his Home Office brief which was to open the conference was read instead by Lord Boston, an inexperienced and newly appointed junior minister. No discussion was thus possible on the wholly disappointing anodynes proffered. No legislation or even a timetable for legislation was mentioned; but the HO will soon be 'seeking the views of those affected by the report' by letter. This follows wideranging enquiry and evidence-taking by Lindop's committee. The Home Office will consult all the 'major users' of large personal data banks once again,

although the public interest will only be sampled through the views of organisations like the TUC, NCCL and Justice.

The brief stressed the constitutional complication of making the proposed Data Protection Authority - which would create and invigilate statutory codes of practice covering all personal data users - independent of the government. Some of Lindop's recommendations would be 'unnecessary or too expensive in relation to the benefits', the Home Office felt. The benefits, anyway, were 'intangible'.

Other civil service sniping at the report included an extraordinary concern over the cost of a staff likely to be as few as 40.

With a government due to terminate soon, it is all too evident that the Home Office mandarins have filed the Lindop committee's work alongside every other important proposal on privacy or liberty in recent years: Franks on Official Secrets, Younger on Privacy, and so on. It is equally clear that there will be no enthusiasm for measures to protect personal data, or provide rights of access, when the next government moves its appointees into the Home Office.



Employer's revenge

Denis MacShane writes: In Nottingham a cruel and old-fashioned revenge is being inflicted on twenty seven members of the National Union of Journalists who took part in the recent provincial newspaper strike. All twenty seven have been told by the Nottingham Evening Post that they will never work as newspapermen (and women) in Nottingham again. It is a threat the paper can carry out as it enjoys a monopoly in the area.

Among those dismissed is a blind journalist with eighteen years service and a pregnant woman. The sacked journalists went on strike to support lesser-paid colleagues elsewhere in provincial newspapers and stood to gain nothing personally. Now while other provincial journalists are returning to work, they are having to organise pickets, and are producing their own weekly newspaper - including contributions from Nottingham Forest manager Brian Clough, who has cut links with the NEP in protest.

The NEP is, unusually, still very much in the control of a local family, in particular Nottinghamshire worthy, Col. Tom Forman Hardy. An ex-submarine commander is NEP's managing director, and a former squadron leader is his deputy. In 1973 the NEP had a major confrontation with the print unions over the introduction of direct input new technology, and won. It is now the only daily newspaper office in the United Kingdom with journalists operating video display terminals, dispensing with NGA compositors. The unions had been unprepared for the 1973 coup.

The crudeness of the journalist sackings has however outraged many in Nottingham. The provincial newspaper employers federation - the Newspaper Society - is now faced with a problem of exerting pressure on its recalcitrant Nottingham member to

FREE SPEECH

Crying Wolf

Crisis 1975 found Harold Wilson and Anthony Crosland preparing for public-spending cuts by being beastly to local government. 'Too many chiefs and not enough Indians', said Wilson. 'The party's over' said Crosland, plucking his red braces resoundingly.

Labour's representatives in local authorities were rather startled by accusations of profligacy from men just elected on a programme of large spending in the social-policy areas which town halls control. Still, a national crisis is a national crisis, and the Labour movement values loyalty. Councillors throughout the country started trying to finance new developments by redeployment and redistribution: there was a search for ingenuity instead of spending, and a new emphasis on cost-effectiveness.

There was little practical advice from on high. *Public Expenditure to 1978-9 (Cmnd 5879)* promised a total 13 per cent growth over the period, with suspiciously precise figures in particular areas (9.1 for health, 9.2 for education). *Priorities for Health and Personal Social Services* (from the DHSS) went, theoretically, into even finer focus - 2.6 per cent, residential day care; 5 per cent, day care; 2 per cent on home helps, meals-on-wheels and field social work - but concluded that local factors would probably determine the real outcome.

Indeed they did. The amateur army of 27,000 elected representatives, consuming much late-night oil, worked on myriads of close-grained decisions, most of them awkward. Naturally - because the chairman of the local education committee is a handier hate-figure than the Prime Minister or the Permanent Secretary to the Treasury - they took a lot of stick for it.

And now it turns out that it was the macroplanners down in Whitehall (operating, presumably, on just the right balance of chiefs and Indians) who were making the real, monumental mess with public expenditure. They presided over national underspending (£7 billion, NS last week) which made all the careful savings of the local authorities quite beside the point. And now, on the political circuit, Ministers are to be heard telling local authorities to spend, spend, spend again.

No doubt the local authorities will gear themselves up again, and start using what money they can get hold of either to do something about their rates, or to restore some flesh to their overstrained services, after the considerable slimming exercise they have all been through. But next time the government starts another panic about overspending, or starts to make noises about the next 'party' being 'over', there won't be the same response as there was last time. Until central government opens up its own systems, and produces a coherent explanation of how it got its 1975-9 sums wrong, there won't be any more local-authority co-operation in response to squawks about 'national crisis'. People just won't believe it.

Anne Page