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The House of Lords' phoney victory

Monica Ferman writes: The House of Lords amendment to the Housing Bill forced on the government in the final hours of the last parliamentary session has been widely misunderstood and its significance greatly exaggerated. It has been presented as a significant concession by the government and as a victory for the House of Lords. It is neither of these things.

It will be recalled how, on Wednesday 6 August following lunch in a St James's hotel, Michael Heseltine and Roy Hattersley agreed that the government would accept a Lords' amendment restricting a council's right to sell old people's housing. This ensured that the bill, once passed in the House of Commons, was not again sent back by the House of Lords with further amendments — an event which would have seriously threatened its prospects of becoming law given the limited amount of time available before the end of the session. This victory for the House of Lords made Baroness Birk — the proposer of the amendment about old people's housing — confess that she was 'starry-eyed' about the effect the House of Lords could have on legislation.

However, she does not seem to have noticed that the amendment which came back to the House of Lords — and which it approved — was not the same as the one which they had sent out. The original Birk amendment proposed to exempt from the statutory Right to Buy all housing 'designed or specifically adapted' for 'persons of pensionable age'. After the Hattersley-Heseltine bargaining the amendment was altered so that no automatic exemption was provided. The Right to Buy this type of property was restored but, as a concession, the local housing authority could 'within six weeks of service on it of a notice claiming to exercise the right' apply to the Secretary of State for exemption. The Secretary of State can, if so minded, grant exemption. Little wonder that Mrs Thatcher at the end said that the government had got nearly all it wanted. Only Lord Hylton, a rebellious Tory peer on the back benches, pointed out that this was not the same amendment at all and, what's more, there was no time limit set for the Secretary of State to reply to the local authorities' application.

To gain this small concession, the Opposition Front Bench and Lady Birk gladly sacrificed more useful amendments. These included the proposal that if the price of a house rose during the two years in which a tenant's option to buy was outstanding (this can be secured by paying a £100 deposit) the ultimate purchase price should reflect half of this increase in value. The second significant amendment to bite the dust was the proposal that local housing authorities — and not the minister — should have the power to designate Rural Areas — in which the council always has first refusal to re-buy a council house, as an attempt to discourage such properties becoming second homes.

Dundee v. MoD

Duncan Campbell writes from Dundee: Dundee City Council have taken grave exception to the contents of recent reports in the *New Statesman* concerning international telephone tapping by US intelligence agents. The particular object of their concern has been the presence in the Dundee district of a Post Office microwave radio station at Craigowl Hill, a dominating peak overlooking the city, which was identified in the report on America's 'Big Ear' (NS 18 July) as the Scottish terminal of a special communications network which feeds into the National Security Agency monitoring station at Menwith Hill, near Harrogate.

At an emergency meeting of the District Council called last Thursday, Lord Provost James Gowans invited a 'delegation' — consisting of myself and Scottish regional executive of the Post Office Engineering Union Mike Ronaldson — to brief the

council on the background to Craigowl Hill and unsupervised British and American telephone tapping operations.

Local concern has built up rapidly after questions were put by Bob Cryer MP to the Secretary of State for Scotland concerning the role of the Craigowl Hill installation two weeks ago. The next day council leader Charles Bowman contacted the local telephone manager to voice their concern. He was told that the Post Office would gladly show councillors round the station, and was invited to a meeting last Monday.

The following day, both the meeting and the tour were cancelled. The Post Office said that Ministry of Defence permission would now be required; 'this is a high security installation'. Further questions were referred endlessly to different government departments. Police began stopping weekend visitors to the hill — a popular walking and hang-gliding venue. However, local MP Ernie Ross successfully led a group on an external tour of the station.

The emergency council meeting voted unanimously to demand access to the station, and deplored the abrupt Post Office turnabout. They also suggested that the Scottish Secretary should provide — if he could — assurances that the station was not used for unauthorised tapping. The minority Tory group had, however, walked out *en masse* half way through the debate claiming there was no evidence to support the allegations, despite their leader's lengthy questioning of myself on the evidence.

The *New Statesman* has obtained further information on the tapping connections to Menwith Hill. The link into Scotland is code-named 'Northern Backbone', and although ostensibly provided for civil defence purposes, actually carries 3,840 telephone lines from Dundee to Hunters Stones PO tower in Yorkshire. The Post Office now admits that a 'private' underground cable links from there to the Menwith Hill eavesdropping station.

Stopping the NF

Judith Cook writes: The National Front march in the small manufacturing town of Nuneaton, which took place there because six towns and cities banned the demonstration, cost over £100,000 to police. No chief constable has yet tried an alternative to the system of using thousands of police to protect small numbers of NF demonstrators except for John Alderson, Chief Constable of Cornwall and Devon. In May 1979 the NF planned a march through Plymouth's dockyard area. When John Tyndall and his mob arrived in coaches and asked where their

