

PRIME MINISTER

Hawkins
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Mr. Heseltine's Statement on Right to Buy, Norwich

Mr. Heseltine did well in a thinly attended House. I attach the text of his Statement.

Gerald Kaufman tried to stoke up his anger, but was unconvincing. The action, he argued, was unjustified. Norwich had taken many steps to meet the Secretary of State's requirements. Offer notices were going out at seven times the earlier rate (cries of seven times nothing from Government benches). Mr. Heseltine was making a scape-goat of one of the most responsible and progressive housing authorities, at a time when 53 Tory controlled authorities had sold no houses, and 19 - including Mr. Stanley's - had made no returns under the Act. Norwich would test this decision in the courts.

Mr. Heseltine set the record straight about Tonbridge and Malling which was selling on a voluntary basis. He then drew attention to Labour's threat of retrospective legislation. From the Government side, a succession of speakers congratulated Mr. Heseltine on the decision to use his powers, which some felt was overdue. Support came from Charles Morrison, David Hunt, Brian Mawhinney, Michael Latham, Tony Durant, Christopher Murphy and several others. The last four speakers were all from the Government side, as Labour ran out of people with stomach for the fight, and the Liberal and SDP benches were empty.

Those Opposition Members who spoke seemed to be going through the motions. Mr. Heseltine's action was seen as vindictive/dictatorial/deliberate political vendetta against successful Labour authority. (John Garrett, David Winnick, Bob Cryer). David Ennals tried to defend Norwich's detailed record, and challenged Mr. Heseltine's figures. Mr. Heseltine dealt with him by pointing out that his job was to protect the rights of individuals under the law, and he could only do so on the basis of the figures provided by Norwich.

MA

3 December 1981

Council House Sales (Norwich)

3.57 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. Michael Heseltine): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the right to buy under chapter 1 of part I of the Housing Act 1980, which came into force as long ago as 3 October 1980.

I have today sent a notice to Norwich city council that I intend to use my powers under section 23 of the Act—[HON. MEMBERS: "Disgraceful".]—to intervene to assist secure tenants of the council to exercise their right to buy their homes. I have taken this very serious step with the greatest reluctance, and only after prolonged correspondence and discussions with the council over many months.

Complaints about delays and difficulties from individual Norwich tenants began to reach my Department in February this year. Accordingly, in April the council was formally asked for information on its past and expected future progress in dealing with right to buy cases.

Since May, as well as extensive correspondence, there have been three separate meetings with the council—one at official level, one with my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Construction and one with me. During this period complaints have continued to come in from tenants about delays and difficulties in exercising their right to buy. It appears that tenants currently have to wait a very long time, about a year, before they receive a section 10 offer notice, and delays can occur thereafter before completion is achieved.

On 28 July a formal warning was sent to the city council that I was contemplating using my powers of intervention under section 23 of the Act. Following the meeting with me on 5 November, the city council forecast that outstanding valuations, which are required before section 10 notices can be issued, should be completed by June 1982 but with the possible exception of some cases which it identified as difficult. One hundred and one cases were referred to at the November meeting as difficult.

At the end of October, the city council had admitted the right to buy in only 884 cases, a smaller number of cases than in many authorities, but still had 652 offer notices to send out. Notwithstanding adjustments that have been made to the monthly rate of issuing section 10 offer notices and the revision of some of its procedures, the city council's performance to date in issuing section 10 notices is among the worst of all authorities whose progress has been taken up by my Department. Moreover, its projected future performance, on which it has declined to give any assurance of further improvement, appears to me worse than that of any other authority which has been given formal warning that I am contemplating using my powers under section 23.

Having considered matters very carefully it appears to me, whether I have regard to Norwich alone or Norwich in comparison with other authorities, that secure tenants of Norwich city council have or may have difficulty in exercising their right to buy effectively and expeditiously, and I have accordingly sent them a notice of intervention.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Ardwick): Is the Secretary of State aware that this high-handed action is completely unjustified following the months of negotiations that have wasted the valuable time of his officials and

those of Norwich city council? The council has taken many steps to speed up its action under the Act, including several actions demanded by the right hon. Gentleman himself. Is the right hon. Gentleman further aware that offer notices are now going out at seven times the rate that was being achieved earlier in the year? Is it not a fact that the difference in time between the right hon. Gentleman's demands on offer notices and the ability of the council to comply now boils down to a mere four months? How does that justify his intervention as housing commissar? Why has he decided to pick as a scapegoat one of the most responsible and progressive of housing authorities when the latest figures, which he presented to the House three weeks ago, show that 53 Conservative-controlled local authorities had sold no houses and that 19 Conservative-controlled authorities had either made no return or nil returns under the Act, including the authority within the constituency of the Minister for Housing and Construction, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Mr. Stanley)?

Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that his statement is not the last word on this matter as the Norwich council intends to test his action in the courts? Does he accept that in two and a half years he has forced up council rents by 117 per cent., that mortgage rates are at a historic record high level, that unemployment in the building industry is higher than ever before and that the housing programme is at its lowest ebb since before the First World War? Why is he wasting time on this petty distraction when he should have been devoting all his energies to putting right the housing shambles that he has created? Why is he so worried about a pebble in his shoe in the middle of an avalanche that he has created?

Mr. Heseltine: I think that the House will appreciate that, far from being high handed, I have gone to considerable lengths at meetings, which in the end I have held myself, to avoid the need to intervene. The right hon. Member for Manchester, Ardwick (Mr. Kaufman) said that the rate of issuing section 10 notices is now seven times greater than it was earlier in the year. The House may ask legitimately what the rate was earlier in the year.

The right hon. Gentleman said that the difference between my demands on offer notices and the council's ability to comply is only four months. He has failed to take into account that that refers to straightforward cases only and that no timetable has been given for those cases which are not. As for a possible challenge in the courts, that is entirely a matter for the city authority. It must make up its mind.

The right hon. Gentleman always refers to the constituency that is represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Mr. Stanley), the Minister for Housing and Construction. The authority within that constituency is not selling under the right to buy because it is proceeding on a voluntary basis under the original arrangements that applied before the right-to-buy scheme. However, it may help the House to know the figures within my hon. Friend's authority. I understand that 385 applications have been received and that 28 have been withdrawn, leaving a net 357, which are still extant. Offers have been made in respect of 306, which is 86 per cent. of all inquiries.

The right hon. Gentleman pursues his characteristic denunciation of the approach that we have made. I must draw the attention of the House to the fact that he regards

Mr. Roger Moate (Faversham): Does not my right hon. Friend accept that we have already had years of consultation about heavier lorries? Is he not aware that there is a great deal to be said for the House of Commons reaching a decision on the matter at the earliest possible opportunity? Does he not also accept that it is a question that cannot be, nor should be, settled on party lines? Therefore, will he do what he can to encourage a free vote on the matter when it is debated next week?

Mr. Pym: The last point is, of course, a matter for my right hon. Friend the Patronage Secretary. The proposal of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport—that there should be two or three months for the White Paper to be considered—is reasonable. At the end of that time we shall come to a conclusion. I do not believe that that is a very long time for my hon. Friend to have to wait.

Mr. Christopher Price (Lewisham, West): Will the Leader of the House have less than a closed mind on the subject of Special Standing Committees? Is he aware, for instance, that last year the procedure radically changed the nature of the "sus" Bill after pressure from both sides of the Committee? It made it a very much better Bill. Will the right hon. Gentleman consider whether the forthcoming Criminal Law Bill is suitable for consideration in a Special Standing Committee? What are his criteria for the suitability of Bills?

Mr. Pym: The hon. Gentleman is fair about that, and the Bill to which he referred was a successful part of the experiment. However, as I said earlier, I do not envisage any particularly suitable Bill at present. I have an open mind, and there is no point in putting down the motion that I have been requested to put down unless there is a good prospect of using the procedure. If minds change and an opportunity of which we wish to take advantage arises, I shall be prepared to reconsider the matter.

Mr. Michael Latham (Melton): Is my right hon. Friend aware of the utter dismay felt by Her Majesty's loyal subjects in Gibraltar at the Government's decision—in answer to a highly unplanted question by me—to close the dockyard and to restrict the use of air space? I understood from Gibraltar this morning that the Chief Minister is coming here next week to see Ministers about it. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the House is properly advised on the matter and kept informed about what alternative provisions will be made for the people of Gibraltar?

Mr. Pym: I shall convey my hon. Friend's representation to both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

Mr. Frank Haynes (Ashfield): Will the Leader of the House seriously consider asking the Secretary of State for Social Services to make a statement to the House about the hours that junior doctors are working, bearing in mind that there is an urgent need for a statement because patients are being put at risk?

Mr. Pym: I shall convey the hon. Gentleman's representations to my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Liverpool, Wavertree): May I direct the attention of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to early-day motion 1 in my name and the names of my hon. Friends?

[That this House believes that the pressing problems facing our cities can best be tackled by implementing some of the proposals contained in a recently published study 'New Life For Old Cities' endorsed by 62 Conservative honourable Members and Members of the European Parliament representing urban constituencies which offers new hope for the regeneration of our cities, by turning to people rather than Government and relying more on private enterprise than public bureaucracy; and notes that included amongst the recommendations are: (a) the rapid release by auction on the open market of hoarded public land surplus to requirement, (b) promoting city renewal through self-financing private enterprise agencies which would contract out to existing local businesses and professional firms the job of marketing the city's assets, (c) making urban renewal attractive to private investment by offering cheaper loans through issuing tax-exempt revenue bonds, (d) offering rate holidays not just in enterprise zones but to single-plant family firms elsewhere and inner city retailers who ultimately will pay full commercial rates but only if their businesses prosper, (e) encouraging private business to build new factories, offices and homes in the inner city thus reducing the 60,000 acres of agricultural land and green field sites lost each year to urban sprawl, (f) halting demolition and instead encouraging local authorities to sell off decaying property for £1.00 for those (homesteaders) willing to repair and live in them, and making similar arrangements for shopsteads to enable run-down shops scheduled for demolition to be saved, (g) encouraging building societies to lend on older houses and discontinue 'red-lining' (that is refusing loans for house ownership in run-down areas), (h) enabling sitting tenants of flats and maisonettes in outer council housing estates to purchase their freeholds for a nominal sum in return for a share in the block's management and upkeep thus saving local authority expenditure and (i) contracting out to private enterprise those local authority services which can be done better and cheaper by private enterprise; and calls on Her Majesty's Government to assume a catalytic role so as to enable public and private enterprise in partnership to realise their full potential, to reduce those checks and controls which militate against new development and to involve more fully those people living and working in cities in the total revitalisation process.]

It offers new life for old cities, not only the inner cities but the middle and outer cities, too, where the majority of the population now live. Will my right hon. Friend consider arranging a debate on paragraph (f) of the motion which suggests a policy of homesteading, shopsteading and flatsteading to replace compulsory purchase and demolition by local authorities?

Mr. Pym: That is obviously an important subject, but I cannot provide Government time to hold such a debate in the House. As my hon. Friend knows, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment has spent a great deal of time in the inner cities. The matter is high in his priorities and it is being fully and carefully considered. If my hon. Friend wishes to mount such a debate, he must enter the ballot—I know that he does anyway—and hope that he is lucky in the draw.

the right to buy as of such significance that he has now persuaded the Labour Party to promise to remove from all council tenants the right to buy. I understand that he has gone as far as to say that the Labour Party, if ever re-elected, will interfere with the existing contractual arrangements.

Mr. Charles Morrison (Devizes): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his excellent statement. Far from being high handed, is he aware that many of us have thought that it was high time that he made use of his powers of intervention? Does he understand that he will be given every encouragement from his right hon. and hon. Friends should he feel it necessary to intervene in respect of other local authorities?

Mr. Heseltine: I much appreciate my hon. Friend's kind remarks. He will know of my reluctance to use powers that are available, but I have to remember that in the end it is my duty to uphold the law and to ensure that tenants receive their legitimate entitlements.

Mr. David Ennals (Norwich, North): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that Norwich city council is implementing the right-to-buy provisions both efficiently and expeditiously? Does he know that some of the statistics contained in his statement are incorrect concerning the number of evaluations that have been carried out? Does he appreciate that last month the council completed 90 evaluations and that there have been 90 offers for tenants? Is he further aware that there are several Tory controlled local authorities whose records are substantially worse than that of Norwich city council? Does he remember that he told me that since 1 September there have been only five criticisms or complaints received by city council tenants? Why has he picked on Norwich? Is this not deliberate party political discrimination?

Mr. Heseltine: The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the statistics upon which I have to operate are those provided by the Norwich city council. He will be aware also that I have had to act in respect of Norwich because, when its performance is compared with that of other authorities, I consider it to be among the worst in delivering the right-to-buy scheme to council tenants. That is a fact that has been reinforced by the number of complaints that I have received from tenants.

Mr. John Major (Huntingdonshire): Is my right hon. Friend aware that I spoke at a public meeting in Norwich earlier this year to several hundred tenants who were bitterly angry about the way in which their applications to buy had been treated? Is he further aware that those tenants will welcome his statement? Would it not be for the general good if the right hon. Member for Manchester, Ardwick (Mr. Kaufman) were to say unequivocally and willingly from the Dispatch Box that he would request Labour councils throughout the country to comply with the present law?

Mr. Heseltine: I am sure that the right hon. Member for Ardwick would want all authorities in every political party to comply with the law. I am much more concerned that he should come to the Dispatch Box to remove some of the barriers to a better housing policy that his party is imposing on the housing scene. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the efforts that he has made to draw the attention of council tenants to the rights that are now theirs by

statute. He has given us a manifestation of the concern in one area that those tenants should be able to get their rights.

Mr. John Garrett (Norwich, South): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that this is nothing more than a vindictive action against a Labour authority with an incomparable housing record compared with the records of other authorities of its size? Is he aware that the rate of making offers has substantially improved, which shows the willingness of the council to co-operate with his Department? Why has he not picked on Tory authorities that have a slower rate of making offers than the Norwich city council? Will he accept that Norwich has been picked on for an authoritarian attack on political grounds, that that is part of his conscious destruction of the powers of local government and that, it is fundamentally undemocratic?

Mr. Heseltine: I cannot accept that it is fundamentally undemocratic when a Secretary of State intervenes to uphold the legal rights of individual citizens. I do not believe that it can be argued seriously that I am being vindictive. I have taken such care and such time to try to persuade the authority to try to improve on the performance which has been a subject of concern to me. This is not a matter of party politics. I should be prepared to move whatever the political complexion of the authority if the results of its sales efforts seemed to justify it.

Dr. Brian Mawhinney (Peterborough): Does my right hon. Friend accept that his decision will be noted and welcomed in Norwich and by council tenants within other authorities who are facing difficulty in buying? They may follow his suggestion, including my own constituents, and make their complaints known to him in the hope that he will take further action.

Mr. Heseltine: My hon. Friend will be glad to know that I am in contact with a number of authorities. I have had to issue warnings to a number of them in the hope that they will seek to remedy the matters of concern without its being necessary for me to intervene. I understand that my actions today will be seen as a step in the direction of the implementation of the right to buy on a wider basis than simply that of Norwich. However, I repeat what I have said and hope that it will not be necessary for me to widen the intervention that I have announced today.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is the Secretary of State aware that his disgraceful dictatorial action will be bitterly resented by local authorities throughout the country as an affront to local democracy? Would it not be more appropriate if the right hon. Gentleman worried a little about the hundreds of thousands of people on the waiting lists who are desperately waiting to be rehoused and who will have to wait much longer as a result of the Government's action which has meant that local authorities cannot provide the accommodation needed?

Mr. Heseltine: Before the hon. Member gets carried away with words such as dictatorial suppression, will he understand that as the Secretary of State I have to take into account the individual rights of citizens in the United Kingdom?

Mr. Michael Latham (Melton): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the determination to ensure that the law is enforced will be warmly welcomed on the Government Benches? Is he further aware that the Social Democratic

[Mr. Michael Latham]

and Liberal Parties are so interested in the rights of tenants to buy their homes that there is not one of their members in the Chamber?

Mr. Heseltine: I have heard my hon. Friend's comments but he would not expect me to consider party political matters in this situation.

Mr. Kaufman: As the Secretary of State has asked me about my attitude to the law, is he aware that throughout the passage of the legislation I have made it clear that the Labour Party is opposed to a breach of a law on this matter? Is he further aware that no local authority has broken the law and that there is no proof that Norwich has broken the law? The legal action taken by Norwich may prove that he has broken the law. The only person proved to have done that so far is the right hon. Gentleman, who was found in a recent High Court action, to have broken the law and he is doing nothing to rectify the position.

Mr. Heseltine: The right hon. Member is so anxious to defend himself that he misunderstands the situation. I am complying with the recent legal finding in a way that I believe will be totally within the law, as he would expect. I am delighted that he is keen on the maintenance of the law. He must understand that the law gives me certain rights on behalf of citizens, just as it gives rights to certain local authorities.

Mr. Tony Durant (Reading, North): Will the Secretary of State accept it from me that Conservative Members welcome this move with great enthusiasm? Will he remind the House that what we are discussing, despite the comments from the Opposition, is the desire of ordinary people to buy their homes? An Act to make that possible has been passed by Parliament and we should support it and implement it as soon as possible.

Mr. Heseltine: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am aware that my position means considering the rights of individual citizens. That is the purpose that the law envisaged when it gave me powers of intervention.

Mr. Bob Cryer (Keighley): Will the Secretary of State accept that his smarmy appearance at the Dispatch Box fools nobody? His proposal is an example of a deliberate political vendetta against a successful Labour-controlled local authority. He has repeatedly expressed concern for the rights of the individual citizen. Therefore, will he tell us what manpower in his Department is engaged in furthering the rights of those citizens who want the tenancy of a council house but are kept waiting by the inefficiency of his policies? We now have the lowest public sector house building starts since the war. What is he doing for the rights of individual citizens who are on the dole, who have building skills and who want to be put to work on building houses in the public sector? His rotten Government's rotten policies are preventing them from being put to work.

Mr. Heseltine: I shall answer the hon. Gentleman in the calmest voice that I can muster. The persecution complex which now riddles the Labour Party will do it no good; nor will it help to heap personal abuse on me. Before the hon. Gentleman gets carried away with rewriting history about the cuts in capital programmes of the sort he

describes, will he say why he supported the Labour Government who halved the capital expenditure of local government?

Mr. Christopher Murphy (Welwyn and Hatfield): Will my right hon. Friend consider action in the case of my Socialist-controlled district council, which appears disinclined to fulfil the spirit of the law, to the obvious frustration of the tenants who wish to exercise their legal rights as early as possible?

Mr. Heseltine: I know that my hon. Friend is concerned for his constituents and, under the law, I must consider representations on behalf of any tenants who cannot fulfil their legal entitlement. I should be prepared to do that whenever I felt that the law was not being fully implemented.

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): When the Secretary of State puts the commissioner into Norwich, will he also instruct him to take evidence from the Norwich people who are on the waiting list for a house? There must be evidence about the hardship under which they live. Why does not the right hon. Gentleman understand that such people cannot wait? They desperately need housing and it is the right hon. Gentleman's policies which are obstructing their desires.

Mr. Heseltine: I should be prepared to consider all the representations made to me provided that they were relevant to the discharge of my duties. However, I should have to make the point to anyone who said what the hon. Member just did that the revenue from the sale of council houses puts hundreds of millions of pounds for housing purposes in local authorities' hands.

Several Hon. Members rose—

Mr. Speaker: Order. I propose to call the four hon. Members who have been standing in their places.

Sir Anthony Meyer (Flint, West): Is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State aware that his demonstration of his readiness to use the reserve powers firmly will be noted with great pleasure by my constituents? He will be aware that the Secretary of State for Wales enjoys similar powers in relation to councils which appear to be experiencing extraordinary difficulties, at the very least, in implementing the Act.

Mr. Heseltine: I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales is here, and will share my admiration for the way that my hon. Friend advances the case for his constituents. I have no doubt that the Secretary of State for Wales is as determined as I am to carry out in full the duties that the law puts on us.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Woolwich, West): Has Norwich council been divorcing the garages beside the houses from the houses themselves and saying that tenants who want to buy cannot buy the houses? Will Norwich council do the same as Greenwich council in forcibly moving elderly people who applied with their more elderly parents to buy their homes—the council's grounds being only that the elderly parent died during the time that the council was not fulfilling the law? Will he consider intervening in Greenwich, as in Norwich, because the delays there are unacceptable to the tenants who want to exercise their right to buy their homes?

Mr. Heseltine: My hon. Friend's constituents will be grateful to him for putting their case today in the way that

he has done before. I am not satisfied with the position in Greenwich, and that is one of the authorities with which I have had discussions about the rate of progress. However, I have no further statement to make today.

Mr. Harry Greenway (Ealing, North): Will my right hon. Friend care to compare the record in the sale of council houses of the Conservative-controlled London borough of Ealing, which has now sold about 2,000 houses with a smaller staff, with that of Norwich? Will he comment on the fact that some of my constituents who live in Northolt, but in council houses belonging to the London borough of Brent, cannot buy them because that council has reversed the decisions which it previously made?

Mr. Heseltine: I am always glad to hear the achievements of authorities which are enthusiastically applying the right to buy. I am aware, as the House will be, that there have been about 400,000 applications under the right-to-buy provisions, which shows the wide benefits that council tenants see in the policy. I am therefore grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing my attention to the problem. I shall keep that point under surveillance, as I do with all the other responsibilities that I have under the Act.

Mr. Geoffrey Dickens (Huddersfield, West): Despite the comments by hon. Members on both sides, does my right hon. Friend agree that what is happening in a major way at Norwich is certainly happening in nearly all constituencies under Labour-controlled councils? We applaud your actions and are relieved that at long last you are doing something about it.

Mr. Heseltine: I am not sure that you have taken action of the sort to which my hon. Friend referred, Mr. Speaker. If you had, I should of course have appreciated it. Following my hon. Friend's comments, and drawing the attention of the House to the fact that the right hon. Member for Ardwick said that all authorities should stay within the law, I hope that that message will be widely heard.

2 pm shift and then had to return for the 10 pm to 6 am shift. In winter time, when the weather and road conditions were difficult, the journey would sometimes take even longer than an hour.

Because of Mr. Green's wife's fear of the dog, and the fact that no arrangements had been made for him to come off dog handling, the dog had to sleep in Mr. Green's van outside the house. He fed it, he cared for it and he exercised it properly, until such time as the strain became too much and he began to worry about the effects on the dog and, of course, on himself. Accordingly, he made arrangements for the dog to be looked after at Risley by the other dog handlers who were resident there.

Mr. Green tells me that he assured himself regularly and continuously that the dog Major was fit and well. He also tells me that any of the dog handlers who were at Risley at the time would bear witness to that fact. Indeed, Mr. Green tells me that he received several compliments from his colleagues and others at Risley on the way in which he was coping with his domestic and his job difficulties at this time of remarriage, and with the move and the difficulties with the dog.

In the meantime, Mr. Green had heard from a recently trained dog-handler at Risley, who had been on a subsequent course at Preston, that this dog-handler had met another trainee from the Isle of Wight who stated that he was taking over Mr. Green's dog, Major, in due course. Not unnaturally, my constituent made contact with that prison officer and offered, at his own expense to take the dog direct to the Isle of Wight. The distance from Preston to the Isle of Wight is, of course, considerable. The offer was refused by the prison service.

Incidentally, following Mr. Green's eventual transfer from the dog-handling section he has maintained contact with the Isle of Wight dog handler, and has on many occasions seen the dog Major since he left the section. The dog has been brought to Mr. Green when the dog-handler from the Isle of Wight has had cause to travel north. Mr. Green has kept in contact with the dog on a regular basis.



2 MARSHAM STREET
LONDON SW1P 3EB

My ref:

Your ref:

2 December 1981

Dear Willie

PROPOSED STATEMENT ON RIGHT TO BUY, NORWICH
THURSDAY 3 DECEMBER

I now attach a revised copy of the statement on right to buy which I circulated on 1 December. This version takes into account the points made by the Attorney General.

I am copying this to the Private Secretaries to the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales, the Lord President, the Leader of the House of Lords, the Paymaster General, the Chief Whip, and to the Chief Press Secretary at No 10.

D A Edmonds

D A EDMONDS
Private Secretary

Willie Ricketts Esq - No 10

RIGHT TO BUY: NORWICH

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT
THURSDAY 3 DECEMBER 1981

With permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the right to buy under Chapter 1 of Part 1 of the Housing Act 1980, which came into force as long ago as 3 October 1980.

I have today sent a notice to Norwich City Council that I intend to use my powers under section 23 of the Act to intervene to assist secure tenants of the Council to exercise their right to buy their homes. I have taken this very serious step with the greatest reluctance and only after prolonged correspondence and discussions with the Council over many months.

Complaints about delays and difficulties from individual Norwich tenants began to reach my Department in February of this year. Accordingly in April the Council was formally asked for information on their past and expected future progress in dealing with right to buy cases.

Since May, as well as extensive correspondence, there have been three separate meetings with the Council - one at official level, one with my hon Friend the Minister for Housing and Construction and one with myself. During this period complaints have continued to come in from tenants about delays and difficulties in exercising their right to buy. It appears that tenants currently have to wait a very long time, of the order of a year, before they receive a section 10 offer notice and delays can occur thereafter before completion is achieved. On 28 July a formal warning was sent to the City Council that I was contemplating using my powers of intervention under section 23 of the Act. Following the meeting with me on 5 November the City Council forecast that outstanding valuations (which are required before section 10

notices can be issued) should be completed by June 1982 but with the possible exception of some cases which they identified as difficult. 101 cases were referred to at the November meeting as difficult.

At the end of October the City Council had admitted the right to buy in only 884 cases, a smaller number of cases than in many authorities, but still had 652 offer notices to send out. Notwithstanding adjustments which have been made to the monthly rate of issuing section 10 "offer" notices and the revision of some of their procedures, the City Council's performance to date in issuing section 10 notices is among the worst of all authorities whose progress has been taken up by my Department. Moreover, their projected future performance on which they have declined to give any assurance of further improvement appears to me worse than that of any other authority who have been given formal warning that I am contemplating using my powers under section 23.

Having considered matters very carefully it appears to me, whether I have regard to Norwich alone or Norwich in comparison with other authorities, that secure tenants of Norwich City Council have or may have difficulty in exercising their right to buy effectively and expeditiously and I have accordingly sent them a notice of intervention.

1 Mr Patten
2 Prime Minister

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Content
with Mr
Heseltine's
draft
Statement on
the Right to Buy
in Norwich?

2 MARSHAM STREET
LONDON SW1P 3EB

My ref:

Your ref:

(December 1981

Dear Willie

wm 1/12

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PROPOSED STATEMENT - THURSDAY 3 DECEMBER

I attach a copy of the statement which my Secretary of State proposes to make on Thursday, 4 December. I should be grateful for comments from you, and those to whom this is copied, by midday tomorrow, Wednesday, 2 December.

I am copying this to the Private Secretaries to the Secretaries of State for Scotland and Wales, the Lord President, the Leader of the House of Lords, the Paymaster General, the Chief Whip, and to the Chief Press Secretary at No 10.

overtaken

wm 3/12

D A EDMONDS
Private Secretary

Willie Ricketts Esq - No 10

CONFIDENTIAL

RIGHT TO BUY: NORWICH

DRAFT ORAL STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement about the right to buy under Chapter 1 of Part 1 of the Housing Act 1980.

I have today sent a notice to Norwich City Council that I intend to use my powers under Section 23 of the Act to intervene to assist secure tenants of the Council to exercise their right to buy their homes. I have taken this very serious step with the greatest reluctance and only after prolonged correspondence and discussions with the Council, and exhaustive attempts to try to persuade the Council to make an expeditious rate of progress.

Correspondence with the Council goes back over 7 months to last April.

There have been 3 separate meetings with the Council - one at official level, one with my Hon Friend the Minister for Housing and Construction, and one with myself.

Despite the fact that by the end of October Norwich have admitted the right to buy in only 8847 cases, a smaller number of cases than in many authorities, the best date they can offer for completing the issue of most of their Section 10 Notices is June, which will be 21 months after commencement of the right to buy. Even this timetable is qualified by the Council declining to give a timetable that covers all the cases which they regard as difficult and for which no complete timetable has been given. Furthermore, the issue of the s.10 offer notice does not of course complete the right to buy process; a further period will elapse between the tenants receipt of the offer notice and legal completion.

CONFIDENTIAL

On 28 July a formal warning was sent to the City Council that I was contemplating using my powers of intervention under section 23 of the Housing Act 1980.

Having considered very carefully all the representations that have been made to me both by the Council, and by and on behalf of tenants, it does appear to me that secure tenants of Norwich City Council have or may have difficulty in exercising their right to buy effectively and expeditiously and I have accordingly sent the Council notice of intervention today.

-1° DEC 1981

