



Minister for Housing and Construction

Department of the Environment
2 Marsham Street London SW1P 3EB
Telephone 01-212 7601

The Editor, The Times

3 January 1985

*cc Press Office
(This was cleared with
us)*

Dear Sir

In his letter (2 January) Mr John Perry made a number of points about the backlog of repair of the housing stock.

The 1981 English House Condition Survey was one of a series. A judgement about the condition of our housing stock is best made against the background of the earlier surveys in 1971 and 1976. Ten years after the 1971 survey, the number of dwellings lacking one or more basic amenity - which include an inside WC, a fixed bath or shower, and a hot and cold water system - had fallen from 2.8 million to 0.9 million. The number of unfit dwellings remained at about the same level of just over 1.1 million and those requiring repairs costing more than £7000 (in 1981 prices) increased from 860,000 to 1,050,000.

Since 1981, substantial progress has been made in tackling disrepair. The main problem is in the private sector, where individual owners are responsible for maintaining their homes. The Government helps those in greatest need by making grants available to carry out essential repairs and improvements. In 1980/81, before the latest house condition survey, expenditure on repair and improvement grants was £129 million. In 1983/84 it was £910 million. This year it is likely to be about £750 million.

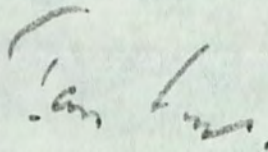
Even this increased expenditure carried out with the aid of grants is a small part of total spending on maintaining the housing stock. It is estimated that owner-occupiers and private tenants and landlords spent about £8 billion in 1983/84 on maintenance, repair and improvement of their houses. In the same year, capital investment by local authorities to repair or improve their existing stock was £1.1 billion and they spent a further £1.2 billion of current expenditure on maintenance and repairs. All of these figures have been increasing, not decreasing, as Mr Perry implies.

Patrick Jenkin's announcement in the Commons on 18 December did not affect the planned level of public investment in housing in 1985/86, which remains at £3055 million, as set out in the autumn statement on 12 November. The purpose of the measures announced on 18 December was to reduce the risk of a breach of the local authority cash limit for next year.

The Building Research Establishment has carried out a series of studies of prefabricated reinforced concrete houses and has begun a major investigation of problems affecting large panel systems of construction.

The Government expects the next house condition survey to be carried out in 1986.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Ian Gow", is written above the typed name.

IAN GOW

3 JAN 1985

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Minister for Housing and Construction

Department of the Environment
2 Marsham Street London SW1P 3EB
Telephone 01-212 7601

Note: Cleared with Mr Kingham
by telephone.

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3/1

2 January 1985

Dear David,

REPAIR OF THE HOUSING STOCK

We spoke earlier today about the letter in this morning's Times from Mr John Perry.

My Minister gave an interview to BBC Radio 4's "World at One" programme on the subject at lunchtime today and now proposes to respond to Mr Perry by sending the enclosed draft letter to the Editor of The Times.

I understand that if the letter is to be published on Friday, it should reach the newspaper by 2 pm tomorrow. I would therefore be grateful to know if you, or the others to whom this letter is copied, have any comments on the draft, by mid-morning tomorrow.

I am copying this letter to Janet Lewis-Jones (Lord President's Office), David Morris (Lord Privy Seal's Office) David Peretz and Richard Broadbent (Treasury).

Yours sincerely,

Neil Kingham

N KINGHAN
Private Secretary

David Barclay Esq



DRAFT LETTER TO THE EDITOR, THE TIMES

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Soviet reaction to SDI programme

From Mr Gerald Frost

Lord Kennet asserts (feature, December 19), as if it were a self-evident truth, that the introduction of an SDI (strategic defence initiative) system would upset deterrence without putting anything in its place. This may be very far from the truth: deterrence is likely to be strengthened if Soviet military planners know that a significant portion of their missiles will be destroyed in flight, but not which

they will also be obliged to take account of the likelihood that, to ensure the protection of America's strategic arsenal would have a priority, the prospect of a massive US response to a Soviet strike would be much greater in the absence of ballistic missile defence.

Lord Kennet also errs in overrating the considerable political and diplomatic importance of the SDI programme as a factor in the conduct of East-West relations and in ignoring the argument in favour of the SDI programme which is most likely to recommend itself to the public: that, if feasible, ballistic missile defence would lend a greater stability to the US nuclear posture to this Continent because of the risks to America which would be significantly diminished.

The assertion that the pursuit of an effective missile defence system is incompatible with the goal of nuclear limitation is only an assertion which appears to rest on the dubious supposition that if we displease the Soviets they will not wish to do us with us. Recent experience attests that military strength and nuclear deterrence provide a much greater inducement to the Soviets to negotiate settlement.

In any event, it may well be that the relative utility of the nuclear missile a layered defence system would have the effect of increasing the readiness of each side to accept reductions in nuclear armaments in return for corresponding verifiable reductions by the other.

These are complex matters and it can be asserted with the force of dogmatism which characterises Lord Kennet's remarks, at least until the SDI programme is more about the technological and limitations of the system envisaged. Those who, like Lord Kennet, grandly seek to advise others on "their duty to the public" cannot be excused the usual effort and patience in working out how that

Backlog on repair of housing stock

From Mr John Perry

Sir, In 1981 the Government carried out a major survey of the state of the nation's housing stock. The results were disturbing. Nearly a quarter of the stock was in disrepair. Over one million houses were unfit for human habitation. Many of the occupants of bad housing were found to be poor owners who could not afford repair costs.

Nearly one-third of our housing was built before the first world war and half of it needed more than £2,500 of repairs. If anything, the survey underestimated the scale of the problem in newer housing where widespread structural faults associated with prefabricated building systems are increasingly evident. The backlog of repair work is now estimated at £30 billion.

Presumably the purpose of surveys of this kind is to influence policy. Local authorities had already belatedly encouraged their housing resources overwhelmingly to repair work. For a time - the period before the election - they appeared to receive belated encouragement from Whitehall. Even the Prime Minister exhorted authorities to "spend, spend, spend". Their protests that it was the Government's own rules that inhibited spending programmes were dismissed as excuses.

Now of course, it is as if the *English House Condition Survey* had never been published, as if Michael Heseltine (as Environment Minister) had never promised "to reverse the decline in the rate of attack on substandard housing". The Treasury dogma which sought out housing as the soft underbelly of public

Prescription of drugs

From Dr Philip R. Evans

Sir, Your leader on prescribing (December 13) fails to understand the genuine professional concern of many general practitioners about the Government's plans for implementation of a limited drug list. A considerable number of doctors are sympathetic to the idea of a limited list and some who have worked abroad, e.g., in Australia and New Zealand, know that it can work.

I suggest the present dispute between the Government and the medical profession should be used constructively in the following ways: 1. Following adequate consultation, a limited drug list should be set up and monitored by a committee made up of experts in pharmacology, therapeutics and pharmacy, with full representation of practising doctors, both hospital and community based.

2. The DHSS must ensure that no

expenditure has returned with a vengeance.

Not content with cuts that have reduced spending by two-thirds since 1979, the Government is now introducing rule changes that restrict authorities from reinvesting money which they were encouraged to obtain by selling council houses (report, December 19). Many authorities will have so little money that they will be unable to enter any new contracts at all next year. Housing investment in 1985 will plummet to a new low. It is already less than half that of any of our EEC partners.

Surely the Government cannot believe that its brief pre-election spending spree was sufficient to make inroads into the backlog of repair work? Of course not. The plain fact is that the Government no longer cares whether poor owner-occupiers get grants, council tenants are in disintegrating tower blocks or 400,000 building workers are unemployed.

Everything is sacrificed before the Treasury's cash limit. Everything, of course, except mortgage tax relief, which soars ahead of new investment, unconstrained by Treasury rules. It is tax relief which now gets the Prime Minister's personal endorsement.

The insanity of the Government's houses policy will be demonstrated by the 1986 house condition survey. Unless, of course, it becomes another convenient victim of the cuts.

Yours faithfully,
JOHN PERRY, Chairman,
Housing Working Party,
The Royal Town Planning Institute,
26 Portland Place, W1.

substandard drugs might be received by patients.

3. It has been demonstrated (*Prescribing - A Suitable Case for Treatment* - RCGP, Jan, 1984) that if general practitioners are given full and accurate information about their prescribing, their attitudes and habits in this area can alter to the benefit of the patient and the Exchequer.

It is naive to suppose that cheap prescribing is necessarily good prescribing. The technology to provide such information for individual doctors is available. The profession should ask for this facility; the DHSS should provide it.

Some of the anger about the Government's action is due to the lack of consultation, a rather sad failing of this Administration in a number of different areas. The present period of consultation until the end of January is clearly inadequate.



JANUARY 2 1800

During the Napoleonic Wars the price of corn rose considerably. The Government attempted to alleviate the consequent distress of the poor with "every expedient".

Among the various expedients which experience has shewn to be adopted to afford substantial relief none seems to deserve so much attention as *Soup Establishments*. These excellent institutions, which have existed in the Metropolis for more than two years, have incontrovertibly proved how much can be attained in economising the food of man, by the necessary preparation of meat and vegetables upon a large scale, in instances where a design of this nature is properly methodized, and conducted with attention and regularity.

The unparalleled success of these useful establishments, thus clearly manifested by attaching the lower classes of the people to a cheap, substantial, and wholesome food, none of the least of the advantages which have resulted from this frugal and beneficial mode of relieving the Poor. The numerous applications of the Labouring Poor, particularly at *Spitalfields*, has not only occasioned an increase of boilers of very large dimensions at most of the old establishments, but has also excited a general disposition among the benevolent and humane to erect new Soup Houses in every part of the Metropolis, and also in the villages in the neighbourhood; and it is not doubted when the whole of the new institutions are sufficiently prepared to issue soup, that above 40,000 meals or pints will be delivered daily to the Poor at half price.

A relief so salutary and extensive, and offered (in proportion to the number of persons who will be thus fed) at so very inconsiderable an expense cannot be too highly acclaimed, since it is evident that through this medium the means are at length discovered of effectually assisting the Poor in severe seasons when the necessities of life are high, in a manner by which the benevolence of the Opulent and Humane embraces a wider field and extends infinitely beyond what the most sanguine mind could have conceived to be possible: since a single guinea subscribed actually affords a hearty meal to 504 persons! and that too of food, which from its nourishing quality, strength and thickness, cannot be considered as an improper substitute for bread, the consumption of which must unquestionably be diminished wherever this aliment forms a part of the food of a labouring man's family.

The advantages resulting from the Soup Houses in the Metropolis being thus explained, it may be necessary to state that their success is alone to be attributed to the unwearied gratuitous attention of their Conductors, who in systematizing these designs and extending their benefits in a manner not only to feed, but also to improve the habits, and in some degree, the morals, of so many