Swindon Tories vote in support of the 'bedroom tax'

Swindon Tenants Campaign Group's petition on the 'bedroom tax' was presented to, and discussed by Swindon Council at its recent meeting on November 7th . The petition, which collected 2,298 signatures, called on the Council to press the government to repeal the 'bedroom' tax and to make a commitment that they would not evict tenants thrown into financial difficulties by it. It also said that the housing crisis could only be addressed by Council house building rather than by policing tenants and bedroom numbers.

STCG Chair Brian Shakespeare spoke in support of the petition. Richard Hurley, Lead member for housing responded, after a fashion, for the ruling Conservative administration. Steve Allsop moved a Labour proposal that the Council write to the government calling for the repeal of the 'bedroom tax'. The two Lib Dems present supported Labour, but their proposal was lost by 2 votes – 25 to 27. In the absence of the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor voted for the Labour proposal. One independent who would have voted against the bedroom tax was absent, and one Labour Councillor left before the vote. If they had been present it would have been a tied vote. Which way the absent Liberals would have voted is anyone's guess.

A "sound principle"

The only coherent (though false) argument for opposing the demands of the petition was put forward by Russell Holland. The legislation was, apparently, based on "a sound principle". The taxpayer should not pay for a bigger house than is needed. It was unfair for tax-payers to be expected to foot the bill for tenants to have more bedrooms than they 'need'.

The 'sound principle' is neither sound, nor a principle. Determining 'need' is not such a straight forward judgement as Councillor Holland suggests. Consider this situation. A couple with a boy and a girl, both aged under ten, in a 3 bedroom house are 'under-occupying'. For housing benefit purposes, a boy and a girl under ten will be expected to share a room so the family will get stung for having a 'spare' bedroom. To avoid losing housing benefit they have to 'downsize' to a 2 bed house. Yet as soon as the first child reaches ten they would qualify for a 3 bedroom house, or else they would be deemed to be living in over-crowded conditions. What is the principle between judging 'need' based on whether or not one of them reaches the age of 10? This is a nonsense which serves only to disrupt the lives of tenants.

Supporting the rich

As Brian Shakespeare said in contrast with its treatment of working age housing benefit recipients, the government has just introduced a scheme, Help to Buy,[1] which offers state support of up to £120,000 to somebody rich enough to buy a house worth up to £600,000[2].

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1   http://martinwicks.wordpress.com/2013/08/16/help-to-buy-promoting-unsustainable-debt/
2   It's a loan, of course, which housing benefit isn't, but it's a very big loan.

As Kevin Small pointed out, the government has no problem supporting the rich, whether through schemes like Help to Buy or allowing them to get away with paying little or no tax.

If the 'sound principle' that Councillor Holland holds dear is that *nobody* should be supported in a house which is bigger than they 'need' why does he and his government support tenants who have (according to the 'bedroom standard') more bedrooms than they 'need': that is pensioners in receipt of housing benefit. Why are they not subject to the 'bedroom tax'? Probably for two reasons. Firstly, having worked all their lives and paid their taxes, it is difficult for the government to paint them as 'scroungers' and 'skivers'. Secondly, the government was concerned about the electoral consequences of being seen to be driving old age pensioners out of their homes.

Working age tenants, however, get treated differently. The government's overall welfare policy involves demonising working age benefit claimants, as 'work-shy'. They present an easier target than people who are retired. Yet most of the people who find themselves having to pay part of their rent have worked all their lives. They are not receiving 'something for nothing'. They have paid their taxes and national insurance for many years. If they are on Job Seekers Allowance they only have £71 to live on, or even less for those under 25.

"Heating or eating"

The 'bedroom tax' is a means of driving them into smaller homes of which there are insufficient numbers or into jobs which are hard to come by. If people in work are not turning their heating on because they can't afford the cost of energy, then those who are on the pittance which Job Seekers Allowance provides are even more likely to face the choice of "heating or eating". Most of the people receiving housing benefit do so not because they don't like working, but because they are victims of circumstance, having suffered redundancy, accident or ill health. Each person facing a cut in their housing benefit is being put under intolerable pressure, with the threat of losing their home hanging over them. Collecting the petition we met people who expressed shame at having to go to a Foodbank in order to be able to eat. We met many people who have literally been made ill with worry as a result of this legislation which has pushed already poor people to the edge.

In voting the way they did, the Conservative administration in Swindon voted in favour of punishing the poor and further impoverishing people already given the barest means of subsistence. They voted in favour of adding to the sum of human misery.

Of the 112 tenants who have 'downsized' thus far we know many have done so not voluntarily but because they felt they could not survive without moving. The prospect of rising arrears and the threat of losing their home weighed heavily upon them. *In reality they have been driven out of their homes by this iniquitous piece of legislation*. Then again there are other people who have said they want to move, in order to avoid being penalised, but the Council cannot as yet offer them a smaller property. Even though they have asked for a move they are still penalised for their 'spare' bedrooms.

The latest figure that we have for households in Swindon still affected by the 'bedroom tax'

is 999. What must be borne in mind, however, is that other people currently unaffected, *will* be affected in the future. When family composition changes, then other households will be deemed to be 'under-occupying' and have to pay at least 14% of their rent.

Supporting tenants under threat

Whilst the campaign around the petition is over, the campaign for repeal of the legislation will continue. Labour nationally has pledged to repeal the 'bedroom tax' if elected. Whilst that's a welcome commitment which we will campaign to hold them to if they are elected. We still have a job to do in the meantime. We need to support those tenants who may come under threat of eviction as a result of the arrears that they build up. We want, therefore, to ask tenants to let us know if they hear of anybody who may be facing threat of eviction. On our website we have reported on the human stories behind the statistics. Please let us know more.

Full of the milk of human kindness the Tory resolution passed by the Council committed them to write to the Swindon MPs to let them know of 'local concerns' over the legislation. Victims of the 'bedroom tax' will be duly impressed.

We know that some of those who 'loyally' voted for the Tory resolution are uneasy about the consequences of the 'bedroom tax'. Russell Holland himself has said he does not think disabled people should be affected. So why didn't their resolution propose writing to the government to say how the legislation should be changed? They could have called for the exclusion of disabled people and those who are prepared to move. But no, their defence of the 'sound principle' leads them to accept all the consequences of the 'bedroom tax' without challenging the government. They are prepared to sit back and watch the punishment of the poor whilst state support goes to the rich. That's what they voted for.

Martin Wicks

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