

Bad news for satisfied tenants: On the social construction of social rented housing as dreadful enclosures

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ABSTRACT

As long as the social rented sector - which comprised 6% of the housing stock - housed traditional families and the allocation procedures were rather loose, little commotion came about. A combination of changes in family structures (leading to the in stream of ethnic minorities), economic changes (leading to the in stream of poor people), and the strengthening of allocation procedures towards those most in need, did change perceptions. Marginalisation and ghettoisation became during the 1990s the buzzwords when talking and writing about social rented housing. In this article, we will explain the background of the scapegoat trends and the possible consequences for social tenants in particular and for the social rental housing in general.

RÉSUMÉ

Lorsque le secteur du logement social – environ 6% des logements – hébergeait des familles traditionnelles et allouait ces logements suivant des procédures peu rigoureuses, les commotions étaient plutôt rares. Cette perception a été transformée par une combinaison de changements dans la structure familiale (avec l'arrivée de minorités ethniques), de changements des conjonctures économiques (avec l'augmentation de la population pauvre) et de procédures d'allocation orientées pour répondre aux besoins des plus nécessiteux. Dans le discours et la littérature sur le logement social, *marginalisation* et *ghettoisation* deviennent des termes populaires dans les années 1990. Dans cet article, nous allons expliquer les origines des tendances « bouc émissaires » ainsi que les conséquences pour les locataires de logements sociaux en particulier et pour le logement social en général.

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INTRODUCTION

In a research of which the fieldwork was done in 1999, Pannecoucke et al. (2001) looked at the subjective appreciation of the living area and dwelling of a sample of social tenants in Flanders. This research was the first of its kind since the early 1980s. The most important conclusion is that there is no global liveability problem in the social rental sector. The results suggest that the level of residential satisfaction is relatively high. The majority of the tenants is positive about their neighbourhood: they feel well in their neighbourhood, they are not going to leave it very soon. A lot of occupants are also seeing their neighbourhood as familiar, agreeable, beautiful, well organised and safe. Despite this global positive attitude towards their housing situation, we should also pay attention to some differentiation. For example, the level of satisfaction differs along specific dimensions of the housing situation. Furthermore, the findings show that people's social system characteristics have an association with the level of satisfaction with public housing (see also Pannecoucke, 2001).

These positive conclusions contrast with the image of the social rental sector as problematic and uninhabitable. To big parts of the public opinion social housing estates are – to use Damer's image - '*dreadful enclosures*'², full of crime, vandalism, noise and waste. This other picture, and especially the creation of this image, is the core of this. It consists of preliminary results of a small research looking at the construction of the image of '*the incapable tenant*' by an analysis of the politico-institutional discourse during the 1990s. Thus, our article affirms the argument of Sahlin (1996) that "*the public definition of housing problems is partly independent of what residents think*".

Our text is structured as follows. After some short notions on discourse analysis and the state of the art of social rental housing in the early 1990s, we deal at length with the context of the discourse, the current state of the art, the proposed solutions and the effects. In a last session we deal with rights and wrongs³.

THE THINGS WE DO WITH WORDS

We deal, as said, with the discourse on social housing estates and the creation of the image of what Sahlin (1996) has called '*the incapable tenant*'. A discourse is, according to Van Dijk (as quoted by Hastings, 2000, p. 132), '*language use*' and discourse analysis is the study of '*talk and text in context*'. This implies that language is not simply a transparent communicative medium for talking about pre-existing reality. Rather, it is involved in producing or constructing reality, specifically our perception or knowledge of the world and the meanings we make about it (Hastings, 2000). Or as Norval (2000, p. 314) puts it: "*our language does not merely mirror the world, but is instead partially constitutive of it*".

² Damer, S. (1974) : Wine Alley : the sociology of a dreadful enclosure, in: Sociological Review, as quoted in Damer (1989).

³ For a more extended version of this text, see: De Decker & Pannecoucke (2002).

By discourse we think of “ways of wording, thinking and acting, which are historically situated and constrained by external as well as internal conditions” (Sahlén, 1996). Just as there are some actions which are justified or considered necessary, or, conversely, impossible in a certain time and context, there are self-evident, central, as well as unthinkable thoughts and ideas. Thinking and acting mutually affect each other and may change though the objects concerned remained the same.

Discourse analysis is then oriented at understanding how the use or development of language has social content and social effects. They ask questions about how language is used, why, by whom, in what circumstances and to what effects (Hastings, 2000, p. 132). Since, according to Spector & Kitsuse (1973), what is defined as a public problem at a certain time may not be due to changes in the “objective reality”, but rather to strategies amongst ‘claim-makers’.

Our analysis of the creation of ‘*the incapable tenant*’ and ‘*dreadful estates*’ is based on more than 250 (pieces of) text. They consist of relevant policy notes, reports, press texts and numerous articles in the written media collected since 1988. They add up to a selection of more than 150 pages of relevant quotations⁴ (De Decker, 2002). In order to illustrate the development of the discourse, we begin with a description of ‘social housing’ around 1990. This is followed by a summary of some events that are important in setting the tone. Next, are the current image, the players and their solutions, and finally the effects of the discourse. It shows that, if policy-making is a struggle over alternative realities, as Rochefort & Cobb state, “*then language is the medium that reflects, advances, and interprets the alternatives*”⁵.

SOCIAL HOUSING IN THE EARLY 1990S

The discourse creating ‘*the incapable tenant*’ living in ghettos is a story of the 1990s. The ten years before, were very damaging years for social housing in Belgium. Due to (1) the restructuring of the State (including a redistribution of responsibilities between the federal level and the regions) and (2) the severe financial problems of the State, the housing situation became what later was perceived as a housing crisis, including a spectacular decrease in new construction (private as well as public), fast rising rents and the revival of slum landlordism (De Decker, 1990). Social renting stood then and stands now at approximately a market share of 5 to 6%. Waiting lists were and are long.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the image of social housing and her management were completely different than nowadays. We can detect two dominant ideas. The *first* is that of

⁴ See Appendix for major sources. See De Decker & Pannecoucke (2002) for the position of the different protagonists.

⁵ Rochefort, D.A. & R.W. Cobb (1994): The politics of problem definition: shaping the political agenda, University Press of Kansas as quoted by Callaghan & Schnell (2001, p. 185).

political favouritism. A lot of people thought that in order to get a social dwelling they needed to approach a politician, who, in exchange for a vote, would help them. So, around 1990, a lot of people and organisations are pleading to stop this.

The *second* image is in fact linked to the first. It is of social sector housing 'millionaires', people with incomes higher than the eligibility rules. A wide range of quotations among a broad spectrum of actors refer to that problem.

In these ruling ideas, we cannot detect complaints on a lack of social mix or a growing ghetto formation as issues going on in society. Contrarily, lots of the earlier mentioned actors - and also others - argued for more selective applications customs. This is - among others - illustrated by the Royal Commission on Migrant Policy when stated in 1991 "*that too little poor people, whether or not migrants, are living in social housing, while households who do not need support are housed*" and, "*that social housing discriminates the social weakest persons*". Striking is also a quotation from Hugo De Smet, secretary-general of the VHM, the umbrella organisation of social housing companies. He states in his term editorial that "*the global situation in Flanders is that social rental housing houses, next to a large share of low-income families, a whole gamut of families with incomes from low to average, leading to a financial solidarity between the poor and the better tenants. One cannot see this situation as rotten*" (De Smet, 1991).

Although the main thoughts on social housing in the early 1990s were that it housed a wide spectrum of the population, this does not imply that discussions on social mix or ghettoisation were totally absent. But we have to make a distinction between two tendencies, namely a polite and a vicious one. The polite one is more or less situated at an academic level and seen as highly hypothetical since no real problems occurred yet. The vicious one is situated at local level, and in particular in the city of Antwerp, where different voices are fuelling the gossip factory. We see two of them in this context as worth mentioning. The first is from Bob Cools (Socialist Party), who was at that time mayor of the city and chairman of a local social housing company. In various interviews he pleads for a concentration of migrants, since "*... uncontrolled spread means a spread of xenophobia across the total population. If I put one Moroccan in a social housing block, the whole neighbourhood will vote for the Vlaams Blok*" (Cools in *De Standaard*, 9 June 1990). Later on, Cools would change his opinion and become a diehard of the social mix and selective applications.

The second Antwerp voice is from Achiel Smets, a local councillor for the Christian Democratic Party and chairman of a large social housing company. Only the heading of a given interview, namely '*The ghettos of X. Objective application doesn't work. A plea for the segregation of migrants*' gives us an idea of his attitude. Already in the preceding year of this article, he shocked the man in the street by telling that the share of migrants in the social housing estates should be limited to 10%. In this interview he states, as a reaction to a report of the Royal Commissioner on Migrant Policy, that "*he is in favour of migrant ghettos on the outskirts of the city*". Furthermore, he said that "*only those who show 'willingness to integrate' should be allowed to mixed social housing*". Integrating for him stands for learning Dutch, being quiet after 10 pm and preventing children playing in the elevators. He

goes on by saying that “*the migrants are allowed to prepare their own dishes, but that they should be... a little bit decent*”. According to him, since we did not deal with the problems of the migrants in the past, we will have problems for more than 20 years and people will vote for the Vlaams Blok, an extreme right and racist party.

THE CONTEXT OF THE DISCOURSE

Discourses occur within a context. In order to understand the development of the discourse it is necessary to sketch the political context and some events and accidents.

Political level

At the political level, two things are important in this context. The first is the rise of the Vlaams Blok. They booked their first progress in the 1988 local elections in Antwerp. Ongoing electoral victories would cast a shadow over the 1990s and influence, even dominate, lots of political issues, including safety, security, urban policies (De Decker et al., 2002) and housing policies. In Antwerp for example, the rise of the Vlaams Blok is not only associated with living in the dilapidated 19th century quarters, with poor housing and deteriorated environments, but also with social housing, especially the high-rise blocks. A community worker told us that after the last election victory of the Vlaams Blok, there was a feast in the flat where he worked in⁶.

A second political fact was the appointment of Norbert De Batselier as housing minister in 1991. After more than 40 years, he became, as one of the leading politicians of the Socialist Party, the first socialist minister responsible for housing. In sum, his policy on social housing was an allocation to the poorest and applying the rules. The heading of an article in the journal *De Gentenaar* (17 May 1993), “*De Batselier promises to end the favouritism of some local social housing companies*” is striking for his opinion. He also states that the rules, created to allocate social dwellings, should be refined so that “*social houses are going to those households for whom they were built and not to those knowing the way to a political friend*”.

With his principles he shook the sector. Politically this meant that the minister hit the Christian Democratic Party, a coalition partner, at her heart. Historically, the Christian Democrats, the major political force in Belgium and Flanders, were responsible for housing. They appointed most of the ministers and controlled the field by having ‘their people’ in the boards of the social housing companies. So, the introduction of ‘correctness’ in the allocation

⁶ Interview by Pascal De Decker and Inge Van Nieuwenhuyze with Eric Van Leuven, community worker at the Kiel high-rise estate in Antwerp, for UGIS, a research project financed by the EU and co-ordinated by OASes-Antwerp University.

of social housing was interpreted as an attack by the Christian Democrats. They reacted in taking a dominant position in the destroying discourse.

Events

Next to this political context, at least the following events are important. The *first* is the announcement of an unpublished report. In order to find out if the rumours were only rumours, at the end of the 1980s, De Batseliers' predecessor sent inspectors to check the ways in which the local housing companies applied the regulations. The results of this research were never published. Although De Batselier did not have the intention to publish, he did it in an interview with Chris De Stoop, a famous research journalist, of whom the minister thought he already had the report⁷ (*Knack*, 19 May 1993). Anyway, the results were that one third of the social housing companies followed the regulations; another third did not, but was verifiable. The remaining third could not even be inspected. Thus, the results confirmed the common image and the Minister decided to appoint new commissioners at the local social housing companies and introduced a new allocation system for social dwellings.

This new regulation, at work since the first of January 1995, is the *second* relevant event. The major features were (1) a general increase of the eligibility income, (2) an obliged reservation of 40% of the dwelling for low-income people, (3) a stronger control on allocations, including a report obligation and (4) a strive towards 'a social mix'.

This decision was clearly a compromise between the Christian Democrats (satisfied by the general increase and the social mix) and the Social Democrats (pleased with the 40% low-income people and a better control). Nevertheless, it would be this decision that became an eyesore due to its severe application rules and the sticking to the chronology of the inscriptions. When looking back, the introduction of the concept '*social mix*' for the first time in a social housing regulation became a Trojan Horse. Since then, and in combination with the absence of a specific definition of the concept, it became the core of the debates. In fact, the government proposed social mix as a goal and a tool, without ever defining what they meant by it.

A *third* major event was the installation in 1993 of the '*Vlaamse Wooncode Commissie*' ('*Flemish Housing Commission*')⁸ to prepare the first Flemish Housing Law. This commission was composed of a broad spectrum of representatives of all players in the housing field, including the local social housing companies and their umbrella organisations. After many discussions, a new law was finally voted in 1997, without really dealing with the wishes of the local housing companies.

⁷ He had just published a book on 'trade in women', which led to a scandal and a research-commission in federal parliament.

⁸ Of which Pascal De Decker was a member.

Incidents

The incapable tenant discourse was also influenced by numerous accidents, often widely covered in the press. We stick to only three of them.

The *first* one, we refer to we do so because of the professional position of the involved person. Piet Verbeke was a member of the local Christian Democratic Party in the city council of Gent, and more importantly he was working for the Royal Commissioner on Migrant Policies, appointed after the first Black Sunday to prepare proposals for the integration of migrants. Unfortunately for the newly appointed Commissioner, one of the collaborators caused one of the first public rows on the concentration of migrants. In the midst of 1990 Verbeke, living next to the large high-rise social housing estate of Nieuw Gent, wrote a letter to the local social housing company asking them to stop the housing of migrant families in the neighbourhood in order to avoid the formation of a concentration school (De Decker & Hubeau, 1991). His interference caused a row because of his request for (1) discrimination and (2) an illegal application of the regulations.

A *second* relevant incident was the placement of a camera in elevators in a high-rise estate in Antwerp. The following commotion was on privacy, but more importantly, led to the establishment of the '*Commission Social Safety*'. This commission was instructed to find out "*what can be done in social housing, and particular in high-rise flats, in order to reduce feelings of subjective and objective insecurity, and vandalism*" (speech by De Batselier, 9th June 1994). In order to achieve this, a committee of so-called field workers was put at work. Although the commission was composed of people from different fields (e.g. the administration and community work), it was dominated by the social housing companies. The commission would finally make up a report consisting of technical and architectural proposals, as well as suggestions in the social sphere, including the promotion of a social mix, the installation of mechanisms to combat nuisance, the participation of inhabitants etc. (Notredame & Claes, 1995). In the end, it would lead to a liveability code, with clear design proposals (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1998).

The importance of this code is threefold. Firstly, it showed very clearly the negative attitude of social housing companies towards (some of) their clients. Some statements were so rude that the housing minister decided not to publish everything. Secondly, it legitimised the request of the social housing companies; it accepted that there were problems with some people, especially youngsters of a migrant origin. And thirdly, it had a proposal for social mix – and therefore for local deviations of general rules. So, in that way this issue was also accepted as legitimate.

The *third* incident is important since it obtained wide press coverage (including television) and highlighted the problems very clearly. It was the incident of a child that was hit and severely injured by a glass bowl thrown out of a window of a high-rise estate. The accident did not only lead to an exposure of the problems of living together, but also to the severe

complaints from the inhabitants feeling left alone by the local social housing companies, the police and the city of Antwerp. The following headlines are very illustrative of the created climate⁹: “Everybody is afraid”, “Are our children less valuable?”, “People complain that the police and the management are indolent”¹⁰, “Living in the Chicago block is a hell”, “Chicago building gets priority. Minister pleas for mix with higher incomes in problem estates”, “More control in Chicago block”.

The importance of the incident is manifold. First, there is the nickname of the flat, the Chicago block, a stigma referring to the fact that the building (or the tenants) is (are) seen as problematic. Second, it highlights the existence of management problems (which are never mentioned by the social companies themselves). For them, the tenants are bringing on problems, and if the management is in trouble, the tenants are the cause. Third, it is a good illustration of the typical way of press coverage of these kinds of incidents: large headings, dramatic texts and ‘spitting illustrations’. Photos are important here. They often show a high-rise flat with migrant children in front and dirt around. In this particular case, the typical photo had the following text: “There is always something with the Chicago block. Some weeks ago, some children made fire of the isolation material of the building. But what has happened today is beyond imagination. The tragic incident with the 12 year old girl illustrates that the situation is out of control” (Gazet van Antwerpen, March 17th, 1997).

No data

A last feature of the context is that the debate and discourse development occurred without any data. Never any of the protagonists could present any controllable proof of what was argued. So, they never gave information on marginalisation, ghettoisation, huge social fraud or rising rent arrears. A first try to put some data together was done at the minister’s cabinet 1997. Based on the application records (obliged since 1995) and some newly collected data, De Decker (1997) wrote a report, dealing with – among other issues - the figures and came to the following conclusions:

- ◆ for the social rental sector in general we can not conclude that a marginalisation process is going on since (1) the share of low-income households is decreasing and (2) the share of higher- income groups is increasing;
- ◆ urban estates house more low- income people than non-urban estates;
- ◆ largescale high-rise estate house more low- income people than the others;
- ◆ there are a few problem estates.

⁹ Gazet van Antwerpen, March 17th, 1997 (frontpage + inner page); March 18th, 1997; March 19th, 1997 and March 26th, 1997.

¹⁰ Gazet van Antwerpen, March 17th, 1997.

Finally, the government ordered a survey to look at the satisfaction of the social tenants. This report was finalised in early 2001 (Pannecoucke, et al., 2001). Thus, only after 10 years of discussion, the opinion of the tenants came to the front.

CURRENT STATE OF THE ART

Problem tenants

We are being confronted with an oversupply of opinions and quotations illustrating the current feelings about social housing and social tenants.

We start – any of the many from politicians - with very illustrative ones from the current Flemish Housing minister, J. Gabriëls, a conservative liberal. In the journal *Gazet van Antwerpen*¹¹, he says that the local social housing companies should have the option to refuse certain candidates: *“The income should no longer be the only criterion to allocate social dwellings. The social burden should also be taken into account. Flats with 80% of foreign people and 20% of locals – as in Antwerp – are bad for integration. (...) Housing should not be a feature causing jealousy among locals”*. A more limited allocation to migrants should – according to the minister – increase liveability (*Gazet van Antwerpen*, October 31th, 2001).

In a popular weekly *Dag Allemaal* (January 26th, 2002) he repeats: *“I want to scratch the concept ‘social housing’, since it has a negative connotation. It refers to isolated neighbourhoods, to ghettos. (...) Down with those ghettos. Certainly in Antwerp, only foreigners are living in them. The towers are for a lot of people annoyance creating obstacles, isolated towers of jealousy. As well for the people who live there – and who are unhappy – as for the people who have to look at them and see the towers of breeding places. We have to get rid of them. You integrate people by letting them live in a city, not through locking them in pity towers along congested roads.”*

A next series of quotations come from a different angle, namely from Victor Geerts, a pensioned manager of an Antwerp social housing company and currently secretary of the VVH, a syndicate of social housing companies. The quotations are linked to a tenants’ conference on social housing problems¹². According to Geerts, *“Antwerp social housing tenants are fed up with the ‘poor, mostly foreign risk groups’ who threaten the liveability of their dwellings. (...) Poor people have another culture, which the original inhabitants of social housing find it difficult to live with. These neighbourhoods have ceased to be a mirror of the social mix they were before. During the years, the income eligibility rules have*

¹¹ Front page, October 30th, 2001 and repeated in the *Financieel Economische Tijd*, October 31th, 2001.

¹² De Morgen, November 30th, 2001.

decreased'¹³, which changed the social composition of the estates. These days, more poor people are living in social housing. They have another culture. And, I am not only talking about the foreigners. (...) Individualism is also in play: 'I do what I want to do and my neighbour has nothing to say about it.' So the radio plays loud, dirt is everywhere and the dog, locked up in the flat, barks all day. This is the mentality of especially young households. In this group, we find a lot of problems. Ah, I can understand it. Lots of them are single mothers, who ended up in social housing after a divorce because they cannot afford anything else.'

In order to illustrate the large range of these kinds of eruptions, we end with some quotations of the political centre and more leftist parties. In the preparation of the elections, the chairman of the Christian-Democrats, Marc Van Peel¹⁴, places the issue of social mix under the heading 'Security, tolerance and justice'¹⁵. The text defines so-called 'end terms for tolerant living together'. Statement 2 says: "The presence of ethnic minorities is a richness, not a threat. Nevertheless we should, by 2002, have realised the 'social mix' in the urban quarters. The concentration of vulnerable people, migrants and other social weaker persons should not be higher than 20%. A too high concentration of migrants and other socially weaker persons can be a major source of intolerance. Therefore, we should have a policy of spread and mix. (...) New construction of 'large blocks' should be decreased and replaced by a policy of small-scaled projects."

In a policy proposal note¹⁶, two members of the board of an Antwerp social housing company, therein appointed by the Green Party, call for 'a well-considered appointment by a screening of candidates in order to know his/her wishes and to avoid disturbance of existing equilibriums.' They also plea for a selective increase of the eligibility income in problem estates, the integrated dispersion of migrants¹⁷, the allocation of not integrated migrants into heterogeneous estates with different lifestyles but with social and technical accompaniment¹⁸, a child density index for complexes around an inner square, no new social housing near to existing complexes, the obligation of social accompaniment for problem tenants, who – at best – are not located in high-density complexes around an inner square.

¹³ This is a false argument: see further and see De Decker & Pannecoucke, 2001.

¹⁴ See also a recently updated point of view, signed up by an MP (Veerle Heeren) and the new chairman (Stefaan De Clercq) (Website CD&V).

¹⁵ Fax internal document that was widely covered by the media (journals, radio and television, 26th of March 1998) also because it provoked a young female and promising Moroccan politician working for a Christian Democratic Minister (Nanjri). There had already been dealt with the topic before and later the thesis would be repeated.

¹⁶ Document dated 29th of September 1997.

¹⁷ 'Integrated migrants (=with Belgian nationality, Belgian housing culture, talking Dutch, with little children) should be spread as much as possible over the whole stock'.

¹⁸ 'Different lifestyles cause resistance, rejection, resentment and prejudices. A well-balanced mix of different lifestyles give opportunities for living together'.

Finally, some Antwerp Social Democrats joined the discourse. The journal *Gazet van Antwerpen*¹⁹ refers to Robert Voorhamme and Patrick Janssens, who are respectively the local Antwerp chairman (and MP) and the national chairman of the Socialist Party. Concerning the income levels, it is stated that: *“The thresholds should go up. Every social housing company in Antwerp, with far the greatest number of social rental dwellings in the country, has now financial losses. In order to give them more breathing space, the thresholds should go up. (...) If the minister does not change them, then de facto he causes the tearing down of the large social housing complexes. A building like the ‘Chicago block’ is destroyed by the income eligibility rules, since you do not have a mix of social classes.”*

Although there are of course differences in nuance, these quotations nevertheless highlight the rise of a broad agreement on the existence of troubled social housing estates. In sum, the problem is the concentration of a wide range of what are seen as poor people: migrants, single parent households, singles, unemployed people and people with social and psychological problems. This concentration is, in combination with a so-called growing individualism, linked to vandalism, dirt, nuisance, crime and delinquency, bad schools, drugs, boredom etc.

Problem estates

In the debates, not only the tenants are seen as problematic. The conception of some estates, dominantly large estates often with high-rise flats, is also being put into question. Quotations of disgust are numerous. Among others, for the current minister living in some estates does not correspond with his dream of living: *“In some dwellings, I wouldn’t even house my rabbits”*. Furthermore, he has doubts about the renovation of (some) high-rise flats *“These towers should be empty within 5 years. I do not want to renovate them, since then I let them stay, these visual sites of pain”*²⁰.

On large high-rise estates, the Antwerp tenants organisation PASH lists, in a note to the Parliament (13th of June 2001), the following problems:

tenants are forced to live near each other: they have neighbours on the other side, under, up and next to them;

- ◆ tenants are forced to use the same common spaces (corridors, elevators, stairs, front doors) in order to reach their dwelling;
- ◆ tenants are forced to use the same infrastructure: underground garages, cellars, letterboxes, washing rooms...;
- ◆ old social dwellings are badly isolated concerning smell and noise;

¹⁹ It is not clear who said what (*Gazet Van Antwerpen*, 28th of January 2002). Pascal De Decker, being there, only heard the speech of Voorhamme.

²⁰ *Gazet van Antwerpen* (30th October 2001), *Dag Allemaal* (26th January 2001).

- ◆ the immediate environment (green spaces, playgrounds, parking spaces, footpaths, ...) has to be shared by a lot of tenants.

THE PLAYERS

So far, we have dealt with the content of the discourse. The question is now who steered the dance. We give a sketchy, and necessarily incomplete, review.

At first, local players, combining different relevant and often strategic positions during their career, fluttered the dovecote. Two of them, already mentioned in some foregoing quotations, are of major importance. The first is Achiel Smets, chairman of a large social housing company in Antwerp and a former member as well of the Parliament as of the city council for the Christian Democrats. The second is Bob Cools, who at the time the quarrels started, was either mayor of Antwerp or chairman of the local social service. Before he was a parliamentarian and aldermen of spatial planning and housing for the Social Democrats. He also presides a local social housing company. Furthermore, he had a very solid reputation among the professional world, since he was one of the few politicians who started an urban renewal policy.

These persons are important in setting the tune, because they have easy entrance to the (at least local) press. Moreover, they also have access to the top levels of their political parties (again at least at local levels, but in the case of Cools also to the national level).

Although we do not have the intention to sum up all the local agents being relevant in these debates, we find it necessary to refer to the manager of the Beringse Kantonale Huisvestingsmaatschappij, a local social housing company in the province of Limburg, an old coal-mining region housing lots of migrants. He is known by his '*assumably stubborn*' crusade to spread migrants. He organises – thereby backed by the chairman of his company - workshops and conferences on this issue and intervenes in meetings to defend his (illegal) approach. With his contested policy, he got and gets a lot of press. At this moment, a trial with complaints of racism is running against him²¹.

Until the end of 1994, the creation of '*the incapable tenants*' was largely a local matter, with some national press coverage. This changed completely when the new social housing legislation came into force on January 1st 1995. From that point on, the discourse went crescendo: more and more prominent institutions and persons became involved. We shall deal with their entrance on the field more or less chronologically.

²¹ Note that one of the employees of this social housing company would become a member of the Cabinet of Housing Minister Sauwens (then Flemish Nationalist, now Christian Democrat). Sauwens, who should change the social rental legislation (in 2000, see further) had to resign after he attended a meeting organised by a fascist organisation.

A first, the Vlaamse Vereniging van Huisvestingsmaatschappijen (VVH) would become a very important player. The VVH is an union of the local social housing companies. In order to combat the new legislation, the VVH deployed two kinds of actions. The first type was focussed on the creation of an internal consensus on the subject, being the increase of the incomes to be eligible and the lessening of the control. For the advancement of internal streamlining, the VVH rides on two tracks. Firstly, it is releasing its own information magazine (VVH Info), in which opinions and articles ‘on the right issue’ are being published. A special technique to streamline the opinions is the interview of local managers, local chairmen of social housing companies, local politicians and MPs, who always seem to agree with the point of view of the VVH. The second track on internal streamlining is intervening in all kinds of general meetings of the social housing sector. This is for instance the general VHM meeting. Sometimes this is covered by the press and the interventions are always printed in the journal of the VHM.

The VVH uses the strategy of press conferences, often held at strategic moments. Usually, their way of handling leads to a coverage, with the suiting headings and pictures, in the written press, and often also to comments on the radio and (the commercial) television. In between, other press notes – often reactions on ministers’ point of view - are being launched. Furthermore, the VVH uses incidents (see above) or wrong policies in other fields (e.g. on waste in high-rise estates) to convince the public of its opinion.

A second supra-local player is the Vlaamse Huisvestingsmaatschappij, the VHM. It has been, since its foundation in 1919, appointed by the government as an umbrella organisation. Next to its function as a bank (the savings are located there and the local housing companies can lend money in order to build new dwellings), she is a controller of technical and social issues (e.g. dealing with complaints from tenants or candidates). This organisation, now itself a subject of scandals²², has a reputation of being an old-fashioned, non-dynamic bureaucracy, and is not very popular nor with the local social housing companies nor with the politicians. For a while – and at least for the outer world – the VHM did not really commit itself in the discourse of the incapable tenant. Mostly, she held to the financial argument, to the system of communicating vessels. She argued that the sector needed to house higher income households paying a higher rent in order to compensate the low rents paid by poor people. Often there was being referred to the need for ‘a *sociological equilibrium*’ (her own words). But during the course of time, her position changed and the subject of ‘the incapable tenant’ and ‘troubled estates’ entered her meetings and writings, being her own journal (although it never became as aggressive as the VVH and others). Step by step, it became a demanding party, sending memoranda to the different ministers. By doing so, it legitimised the VVH discourse. And maybe even more important, it never made any effort to collect objective information on the subject, even when this was easy to do.

Of course, as already widely illustrated, politics is also involved. Although this is an ongoing story and thus a very complex matter, we can point to three core moments. The first is a

²² Brought to the public by De Morgen with a multi-day reportage in the midst of 2001 and confirmed by an audit commission.

parliamentary action in 1997, supported by *all* political parties, except the Greens. Basically, all political fractions asked, less than two years after the implementation of the social housing legislation, the Minister (and the Government), (1) to evaluate the income thresholds, (2) to define the concept of social mix and (3) to implement the Liveability Code (parliamentary session of 23rd of October 1996). Since then, this debate has not left the Flemish Parliament anymore. At regular times, it came back to the foreground, including hearings with e.g. social tenants on the liveability of their estates.

A second important political fact was the earlier mentioned intervention of Marc Van Peel, the chairman of the Christian Democrats. Basically, he asked the same as the representatives of his party in the Parliament. But what is of particular importance here is at first that he was the chairman of the largest political family of Flanders and the most important coalition partner (the Flemish government was a coalition of Christian and Social Democrats – the minister being a Social Democrat). Already Van Peel's intervention '*as such*' is important. But it tells more. Housing policy in Belgium and Flanders are historically dominated by the Christian Democratic parties. This has influenced legislation, but also the control of the sector. It is public knowledge that the Christian Democrats (or its pillars) control financially and through mandates the majority of the local social housing companies, the VHM and the VVH. Thus, by his intervention Van Peel – and thus not one or the other anonymous [MP] – was communicating to different audiences. At first he gave a sign to the coalition and the Minister (who was not in favour of changing the legislation at that time). But he also gave a sign to the sector by supporting their discourse. '*You are right*', he said, '*Proceed*'. And to the public (and the press) he legitimised the ongoing – often vicious – discourse: '*They are right*', he said.

As we already mentioned, the current minister Gabriëls takes, in contradiction to his predecessors, over the discourse. So, finally, the person who has to decide, is convinced of the malfunctioning of social rental housing.

We can state that the discourse evolved from a local and dispersed theme through a wide consensus on problem tenants, problem estates and the mechanism causing the problems. The consensus is that even welfare workers takes many points for granted, such as the false argument of the too restrictive income thresholds²³. In all this, the press functions as a megaphone with sensational headings, front-page scandals and cliché photos.

THE SOLUTIONS

Basically, there is a general consensus on the manner of construction of new dwellings: they should be small-scaled, mixed tenure estates. Social housing should become '*invisible*' as Peeters & De Decker (1997) wrote.

²³ See e.g. Bie Bosmans in De Morgen, October 15th, 1997.

On the solutions for the existing large estates, the consensus is also large. At first, they should be eligible for higher income groups. Their role is that of a reference group for the poor. Their entrance should also re-introduce the lost social control. Above that, the local social housing companies should have the right to (1) use a tailor-made application, (2) have the possibility to refuse problem tenants, (3) have the possibility to evict problem tenants and tenants with rent arrears and (4) improve the liveability through renovation and rehabilitation. If there is any discussion on these points, it concerns the range: for a lot of people, these new measures should be general, for others – e.g. the Social Democrats, the Green and welfare workers – only limited to the real problem estates.

THE EFFECTS

Did this discourse finally result in some effects? Certainly, they are numerous. Of course the most important consequence is the instalment of a right to buy. The first step in that direction was set with the law dealing with the 2003 budget, when at the same time the brand new 1997 Flemish housing law was changed in order to give the government the permission to execute a right to buy. Then, the implementing order was finalised early 2004.

Before this ultimate decision, pottering on the social housing legislation was an ongoing story. Thus, the current state is that the discourse – accompanied of course by effective lobbying – has resulted in (1) a general modest increase in the income thresholds in order to appoint social dwellings to higher income groups, (2) a larger increase of the threshold for the so-called poor housing companies and (3) for these latter, a larger discretionary power. Although the latter provided many opportunities – such as the re-starting of the old methods of excluding some categories²⁴ -, the sector²⁵ still was not satisfied and the new minister announced an evaluation and adaptation in his policy note.

Next to these legislative changes, other effects of the discourse can be detected. A direct and particular one is that, through the creation of a bad reputation, social housing is not popular anymore. At fairly all levels, being the neighbourhood or the municipality, people and politicians do not want to construct new social housing (a complaint referred to by the VVH, the VHM, different MP and social housing companies).

Linked to this observed contra-productive effect on the popularity of social housing at local level, there is a decreasing interest of people in housing need for social rental housing. At first, the saviours, being the 'higher groups', do not apply²⁶. And above that, one can even

²⁴ Although the Administration is, according to grapevine information, fighting back and opposes 'categorical allocations'.

²⁵ Memorandum VHM referred to in her journal (VHM Info nr. 44, 2001). See also a discussion note of some urban social housing companies made up in the middle of 2001 (Stedelijke Sociale Huisvestingsmaatschappijen, 2001).

²⁶ This is illustrated by an answer of the Housing Minister to a recent question in parliament. In his answer, written early May 2002, he stated that since the new legislation came into force (1th of

fear for what Friedrichs (1991) called a middle-class leakage – a process that was tentatively illustrated by De Decker (1997). And finally, the discourse effects the tenant-landlord relationship. It is observed by Pannecoucke et al. (2001) that, due to the ongoing contempt, the confidence between the social tenants and the landlords is shaken.

ON THE RIGHTS AND WRONGS: DISCUSSION

We started this article with the results of a survey looking at the housing satisfaction of social tenants and confronted them with the public discourse. What for an ever larger group of actors from the politico-institutional sphere are a kind of dreadful enclosures or horrible quarters seem to give satisfaction to the tenants. How can we explain that?

The tenants' side

Let us first look *at the tenant's side*. How can we explain their high satisfaction? It is in fact obvious: social housing in general (!) offers good, affordable housing. The rent is income-related and thus half of the rent of an average private rental dwelling, which often is of a poorer quality. Moreover, the social rental tenure is secure, which is not the case in private renting (De Decker, 2001).

With these conclusions we do not want to deny the existence of problems in some estates, since it will be true that tenants survive in spite of any obstacle: bad or indifferent housing, social exclusion, poverty, illness or depression (Blackwell, 2002). Thus, the satisfaction will partly be due to the intrinsic quality of social rental housing. But it will also be due to the very fact that the social tenants are well aware of their position on the housing market and that social rental housing is the best value for the money they can spend on it.

The institutional site

The broad institutional side is right on at least two points. *First*, it is right on the profile of the social tenants. It is true that the social tenants have a very weak profile: only one third has an income out of work; the others are either pensioners or living on benefits (Pannecoucke, et al., 2001). And since the criteria are adapted, more and more political refugees are entering. *Second*, the sector is right on the financial consequences: the more low-income families they house, the more difficult it will be to cope financially. This can introduce a deterioration cycle.

January 2001), only 60 higher income households obtained a social dwelling (Gabriëls, 2002). On yearly basis approximately 10,000 social rental housing contracts are concluded.

However the institutional site is wrong and, and even demagogic to other points. The *first* and crucial fault is on the selectivity of the income eligibility rules. Constantly, it was and is said that due to these rules only poor people can enter and that ordinary, two-income households are excluded. This is simply not true. *First*, since 1988, when the decision was taken to couple the income thresholds to the index of consumption prices, and later the decisions of 1995, 1999 and 2000, eligibility rules always became less restrictive allowing more people to apply. *Second*, the target group is not selective, on the contrary (De Decker & Pannecoucke, 2001): if we take all households into consideration approximately 61% to 77% of the households are eligible²⁷.

Resulting from this, the sector is *wrong* in positioning itself in the housing market (De Decker, 1998). In searching solutions for their problems, the sector refers to the households with two modest incomes as the saviours. But when we look to reality, these people do not only have the money to become homeowner, they really take the step leave poor housing. So, it is not realistic to say that they will come back.

This fault position leads to a *third* 'wrong': a lack of formulating constructive proposals. During the whole 1990s, the sector and her defenders only held to an increase in income-level as solution. Hardly ever they made a proposal for co-operation with the welfare sector in order to deal with the problems of poor people since, at the end, poverty is the main reason why people are in social housing.

For a *fourth* wrong, we can refer to Jenny Backwell, director of the Brighton Housing Trust in the UK, who puts the bad image of social housing in question. She pleads for a robust defence of the people in social housing: Where are the public statements about the real reasons why people are in social housing? Where are the complaints about a society where poverty is as such that people cannot afford to come into town from an out-lying estate? Where are the statistics that show how many excellent tenants they have for every bad one? But what the social housing sector in Flanders has done for the last 10 years was just the opposite: they have devalued the people living in social housing and thereby also the '*product*' itself. When people say they do not want social housing in their neighbourhood, they mean that they do not want the tenants...

Social sustainability

What does this discourse imply for sustainable housing? Concerning the construction of *new social housing* the discourse implies at least two things: first, there is even further decline of the legitimization of social housing in general and second, as said, a growing opposition against new social housing. The consequence is – in a context of urgent need for more than 100,000 extra social rental dwellings – that poor and vulnerable people are convicted to the unregulated private rented sector and for the poorest and weakest among them to 'grey

²⁷ The 61% refers to the general eligibility level; the 77% refers to the eligibility level for so-called poor social housing companies. In both the basic levels are used, so not counting the (higher) levels when households have children or other incommode persons.

housing' (rooms, camping sites...) - where they have to pay a lot more money for less quality (Pannecoucke et al., 2001), without security.

Concerning the existing stock – and especially large-scale and high-rise estates – it implies, first, doubt whether renovation should be done when necessary, and second, further marginalisation. Anyway, both imply a further deterioration of the stock. If sale, renovation or demolition is at stake, it implies again a shrinking of the social rental stock and an exile to rent privately.

At last and in the long run maybe the most important feature, is the fact that the discourse is fuelled by the politico-institutional arena, thus by the decision makers and by the managers. If things are not solved – and they will not be (De Decker & Pannecoucke, 2002) -, next following step is putting to question the role of the Government in housing, since social rental housing is the most expensive and the visible stake of housing policy.

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