The minority tenures

The privately rented sector

The largest minority tenure, and the only one widely recognised in the government’s statistics, is the privately rented sector. This is a shrinking sector, from around 90 per cent in the early years of this century, to 61 per cent in 1947 and 15 per cent in 1976.

This is not a single form of tenure: the government statistics generally include those renting from a private landlord (both in furnished and unfurnished accommodation), with those in tied accommodation (that is, the renting or use of which is associated with a particular job) and with tenants of housing associations. (This category is now included with the public ownership category in official statistics.) According to the 1977 Green Paper on housing, there are currently about 1½ million unfurnished and half a million furnished tenancies, 700,000 units of tied accommodation and 200,000 housing association tenancies. This section considers the true privately rented sector; tied accommodation is discussed later in the chapter and housing associations were discussed in the last chapter.

The privately rented sector is a tenure without complicated rules of access and thus can provide for these who are unable to get through the obstacles to obtain the prize of a council tenancy or an owner-occupied house. But there are many landlords who impose rules of their own: no children, or no coloured immigrants, no students, no cohabitees. In fact, it provides for two major groups of people, at either end of their housing careers.

Numerically most important are older tenants in unfurnished accommodation, typically a whole house or floor of a house, but small, terraced and possibly lacking amenities if not statutorily unfit.
The occupier has probably lived there a long time, perhaps since the
days when renting privately was the majority tenure. Their rents are
generally fairly low and the tenants may never have considered
attempting to change to another tenure. These houses tend to be
located in the inner city, and this was the typical tenure of houses
cleared under the various slum clearance programmes. The remain­
ing houses are less likely to be cleared, with the swing of policy away
from wholesale clearance and in favour of rehabilitation and
improvement. However, houses are still being lost from this sector as
units are sold into owner-occupation or sometimes to local autho­
rities or housing associations. The role of landlords in these transfers
and in the sector as a whole will be looked at later.

The second main group to occupy privately rented accom­
modation are the young 'new households' either single people living
in bedsitters or shared flats, or newly married couples waiting for a
council tenancy or saving for a deposit on a house. This group often
occupies furnished rather than unfurnished accommodation. This
type of accommodation is also used by those who were once in the
above category, intending this tenure to be a temporary expedient,
but have become unable either to join the ranks of the owner­
occupiers due to poverty, or to become council tenants, due to
ineligibility. Thus it may accommodate the poor, the mobile, the rent
defaulters, the bad neighbours, the eccentric and the independent. It
may accommodate, perhaps in a single house, a middle-aged middle­
income bachelor, an overseas student, a prostitute and her children, a
migrant worker, a family evicted from a council house for failing to
pay the rent, a recently discharged mental patient or prisoner, a
homosexual couple.

The history of this sector, and the way that political attitudes to it
have changed over the years, were discussed in Chapter 2. We now
look at the conditions in the sector, the continuing problem of
insecurity of tenure, and then at the future of the sector and those
who use it.

Characteristics

Apart from tenures in an even smaller minority, such as squatting,
privately rented houses are the oldest and worst in the housing stock.
Two-thirds of them were built before the First World War, at a time
when the average house for manual workers was not expected to
have a bath or WC. In 1976 it was estimated that 15 per cent were