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Report From Britain, 15 May 1950

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REPORT FROM BRITAIN
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Aberdeen, Scotland
May 15, 1950

Even the casual American visitor should be able to see that nothing short of a revolution in housing has been taking place in Britain in the last two generations or so. The amazing transformation is probably less evident to the Britisher than to the stranger somewhat acquainted with conditions as they still exist in the United States. Over here society has definitely taken on the responsibility of providing adequate housing for all the people, regardless of their income or status in life.

Since the end of the war, it has been next to impossible for a private individual to build a house in Britain. New construction has been rationed more severely than food and, obviously, blackmarketing in this field has been out of the question. The government has decided that acute and desperate needs must be met first, which means that a local moneyed group with plans drawn for a new athletic clubhouse is not too happy about the prospects of getting beyond the blueprint stage.

Even if he could build or buy a house, no one in his right mind would think of investing in real estate for rental purposes. For the profit has long since been taken out of such a business venture.

A friend of mine bought a house in Stirling some years ago for his mother to live in. She died and he rented the building. Though inflation has come to Britain as everywhere, he is still allowed a rental of only \$110 per year. Taxes and minimum upkeep cost him that and half again. He cannot sell the house because there is no market for it as long as the tenant remains. There is no way to get the tenant out as long as he pays his rent and does not damage the structure. So the owner continues to subsidize the renter and I suppose he is lucky to have an income which allows him to do so.

Everywhere it is evident that large houses are a drug on the market. The upper middle classes which used to inhabit them can no longer afford such luxury, and thousands of such former homes have been turned into small hotels and boarding houses. For instance, we are staying

in an elaborate massive granite mansion, complete with towers and turrets, set in a beautiful garden of several acres with a lovely stream running through them. It isn't too difficult, particularly at night, to imagine ourselves in the midst of Victorian splendor when the Empire was at its height and nothing was wrong with the world that couldn't be rectified by the British navy.

There is still a tremendous shortage of housing in Britain. That is not to say that building is not going on apace. As we have traveled about the country we have been struck by the immense amount of home construction going on everywhere. Private builders are doing the job, doing it on contract for local governments which are subsidized with parliamentary grants. There is nothing new about this socialistic program, for it has been developing for more than half a century.

Council houses have been constructed by local authorities since the passage of the Housing of the Working Classes of 1890. Parliament finally acted in this case because of public indignation aroused by the overcrowding of millions of humans into unsightly, unsanitary, disease-ridden tenements, a by-product of the industrial revolution. Conditions improved only slowly before World War I, but greatly enhanced powers granted to local governments, along with very substantial subsidies, brought public housing to a par with private building between the wars. Because of this long experience with state housing, the British do not quarrel with it on principle today.

At the end of World War II, the housing shortage in Britain was critical. There had been little building during the war. Tens of thousands of buildings had been destroyed in the air raids. Many houses already declared unfit for human habitation were still occupied. Earlier marriages by young people probably brought forward the demand for homes by five or six years. At the same time, the older folks were living longer. And mid-Twentieth Century living demanded more space than the poorer classes had been willing to put up with three-quarters of a century before.

Though politicians have pointed with pride to and have viewed with alarm Britain's efforts to house her people since the war, it seems to this observer that construction has gone ahead about as rapidly as could be expected, what with shortages in materials, money, and

qualified labor. It is probably true, too, that the building industry itself, made up as it is of large numbers of small enterprizers, is not too progressive. In the first two years after the war, six building workers were necessary to do the work done by four before the war. Now it takes five to do what four used to do. In any case, there has been less criticism here about old-fashioned building methods than there has been in the United States.

By the end of February, 808,918 houses (651,772 permanent and 157,146 temporary) had been constructed in the post-war period. Which means that since 1945 more than a million families have been rehoused. Cripps has made it plain that housing will be given even more preference in the government's capital investment program in the future. In the next three years, he says, 600,000 new houses will be completed. He is not one to exaggerate and, with new factory construction easing off, there is every reason to believe that the government will be able to achieve its objective.

It is difficult for the inexperienced to comprehend the national situation at a glance. For some time I have been looking into the housing problem in the city of Aberdeen and the surrounding territory. Next week I shall tell you what I have found.
