

Accusations fly in war of words over double rents

By PATRICIA TSE

A war of words had broken out between pressure groups and housing officials, both accusing the other of misleading the public.

Two pressure groups reacted angrily yesterday to allegations by some housing officials that misleading and distorted messages and interpretations have been given to the public over the past few weeks by pressure groups.

A director of the People's Council on Public Housing Policy, Mr Chui Kim-ling, accused the Housing Authority people yesterday of giving the public a distorted message when it said five district boards had supported the controversial Green Paper on housing, with four opposed and two undecided.

Mr Chui said the five district boards have only given their support to the "spirit" of the Green Paper and not to detailed recommendations or methods proposed.

Mr Chui also said the council's workers were "quite angry" to read claims from housing officials that some pressure groups were misleading the public.

Although no pressure

groups were named, Mr Chui said the statements were "personal attacks," sidestepping the main issues.

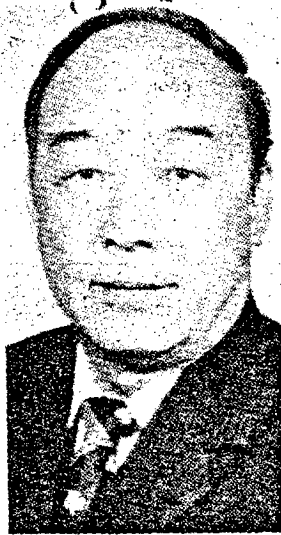
He said his council opposed the Green Paper's recommendations because even if double rents were received from well-off tenants, it would not solve the problem of a long list of people waiting to get public housing estate flats.

The Green Paper does not state that the extra income from doubled rents will go towards building more public housing estates which would cut the waiting list.

"The solution must be how to encourage these well-off tenants to buy flats under the Home Ownership Scheme and perhaps, as an alternative, the public housing cubicle they have been living in from the Government," he said.

"Furthermore, we feel that double rents would have had little effect on some of the really rich tenants in the estates."

They would, however, be a big blow to those families who just exceeded the proposed income limit. A so-called well-off tenant would be one whose income exceeded by 1½ times that of some-



Mr Chui

one on the waiting list.

Mr Chui said his council also believed some Housing Authority officials had little respect for district board members who had aired their views on the Green Paper. They had been accused of attacking the Green Paper as a political tactic to gain votes.

"The Green Paper is out for opinion gathering, for criticism and appraisal. Why should people who speak out

against it be attacked on a personal basis?" he asked.

A community organiser with the Society of Community Organisation (Soco), Mr Yan Siu-kit, said the housing officials' criticisms were ill-founded.

He did not know of any organisation which had told — or would tell — public housing residents that they would "all" have to pay double rents if the Green Paper became law.

"What created a lot of ambiguity was the way the Green Paper was presented. The inadequacy of the information and partial facts and figures presented are ways of misleading the public," Mr Yan said.

"It was like a game of numbers the Housing Authority people played and suspicions were inevitably raised that the Government was concealing vital information from the public."

Mr Yan cited some examples. For instance, the Housing Authority said the rate of rent increases in public housing estates has not been high in the past 10 years, although it did not break down the figure to a yearly increase ratio.

Mr Yan said the truth was

that from 1980 onwards rent increases at public housing estates were much steeper than between 1975 and 1980.

The Green Paper also stated that an independent survey done last year showed "a lot of people" supported the idea of rent increases for well-off tenants.

However, the results of the survey, the number of people or cross-section of the population interviewed, or the questionnaire itself were not publicised.

Also, the Green Paper listed in chapter three some general figures on rent calculations in public housing estates, the expenditure and the income of the Government, but it was vague as to which estate or estates they referred to.

"Not even the year was mentioned. Such information, and the way it is presented, is highly misleading," Mr Yan said.

The Soco was preparing a leaflet which would include important points raised in the Green Paper and also its interpretation of the possible consequences if the proposals were implemented, he said.

The leaflets will be made available to the public in a few days.

More support for housing paper

By DANIEL CHUNG and CHIU KIT-YING

Members of Mongkok and Yuen Long District Boards yesterday supported the spirit of the Housing Authority's Green Paper which suggests cutting housing subsidies to well-off estate residents.

But many criticised the methods proposed for calculating household income to decide whether a family should pay double rent.

In Mongkok, Mr Chan Kwok-ming was the only board member who totally objected to the Green Paper. He accused the Housing Authority of exaggerating the problem of wealth among tenants and alleged that the Green Paper gave "inaccurate" information to the public.

"It's inappropriate for the authority to draw comparisons in rent between private and public housing," he said.

However, the Green Paper got the full backing of Mr Ho Fei-chi.

He said public housing has been in existence for about 30 years, which means that in some cases the Government has looked after three generations of tenants. "That, to me, is a bit too much," he said.

Mrs Wong Yip Yee-ching said she agreed with points in the Green Paper as she believed many public housing tenants had improved their financial situation over the years.

"I hope public housing residents will understand Government should not

subsidise them with taxpayers' money permanently," she said.

However, she was against the suggestion that five per cent of the assessed value of the non-income-generating assets should be included when calculating household income.

Mrs Wong also thought it wrong that 60 per cent of the income of the tenancy-holder's children should be included. She recommended a figure of between 20 and 30 per cent.

Mr Jackie Chan said the Government should not indefinitely subsidise tenants who have become richer over the years.

He suggested that better-off tenants should pay higher rents, but not as much as

double.

Many of the Yuen Long District Board members were also against the inclusion of 60 per cent of the income of tenancy-holders' children in the calculations.

There were also strong feelings against the inclusion of non-income-generating assets, including precious metals.

Some members felt that tenants who were given public housing because of clearance work should be exempt from paying double rents.

Mr Chan Yat-tung said it would be too harsh to include non-income-generating assets in the assessment.

He also said the provision which puts the onus on residents proving their eligibility for continuing to paying

existing rents would be a "nuisance" to tenants.

But Mr Charles Yeung offered an opposite view.

He said as many people are waiting for accommodation in public housing it would be only fair to ask those who already live in housing estates to prove that they are still entitled to the benefit.

Mr Man For-tai said he could not agree that children would give 60 per cent of their income to their parents.

"Has the Housing Authority ever considered the possibility that some working children in fact ask their parents for money?" he said.

A chief housing manager, Mr Y.C. So, said the calculation methods used were in favour of the tenants.