

The Scots have got it. So have the French. But for the rest of Europe's people a right to permanent housing isn't a perk of their citizenship.

Attempts to change that are gathering steam. An EU-wide enforceable right to housing is a tantalising prospect for tenant activists across the continent, and on a pleasant autumn day they have headed to Brussels to argue for just that.

It's the first time the International Union of Tenants has elected to hold its annual conference - on International Tenants' Day, when else? - not only in Brussels, but in the European Parliament building no less. It first signalled its European intentions earlier in the year when it cut the ribbon on a new liaison office in the Belgian capital.

The IUT would certainly like to see the right to decent housing enshrined in a European constitution, and today's conference feels like a step in the right direction.

Finding directions to the conference proves a little harder. On the pavements outside the sprawling Parliament buildings, groups of nationals unfurl state banners before clustering around them for photographs. I follow a huddle of them into the enormous steel and glass oval of the Paul-Henri Spaak building, where the IUT conference is scheduled to take place, only to be told these are Hungarian businessmen - no one has heard of the IUT, and could I please leave.

Outside, a few feet around the corner is another entrance filled with queuing IUT members. But several of us are turned away because we aren't

wearing the right badge. We are directed to another building.

A cynic might describe the huge EU complex as a temple to bureaucracy. Poorly organised on the face of it at least, with competing views from the 785 MEPs from Lisbon to Lithuania; it is a wonder, that same cynic might think, that anything is ever achieved or even agreed upon here.

But the IUT delegates assembled in a sixth-floor conference room don't sound cynical, and they appear to have reached a consensus. For them, the greater the lead the EU takes in its member states' housing and other social policies, the better.

'We think it's very important that if you want a European treaty accepted by European citizens, you need to include social rights,' argues Barbara Steenbergen of the IUT's new Brussels office. 'Our aim is to have the right to housing as part of the European constitution.'

The last attempt to enact a constitution - which carried no mention of housing - failed in 2002, when voters in France and the Netherlands gave the idea the thumbs down. Last year, plans were put in place for a replacement document: the Treaty of Lisbon. Again, a right to housing failed to make an appearance. Bad news for housing campaigners, but an Irish 'no' vote against ratification this year has afforded them another chance.

'Whatever the power of the EU, Europe has to cover housing policy,' says Dr Franz Georg-Rips, president of the German Union of Tenants. 'I hope Ireland will revisit its position. If so, we can perhaps include this [housing in the treaty].'



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Hence today's conference hall is full of tenant delegates pushing MEP Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, president of the Party of European Socialists and former Danish prime minister, for his thoughts on cementing housing's place in Europe.

### Some hope

After Mr Rasmussen's keynote speech, a delegate leans into her microphone to ask him whether it might be possible to put a right to housing on the European agenda. 'I believe we have a little door open,' he replies. 'In the Lisbon Treaty, you have the phrase “social market economy”. This has never been in the treaty before. For me, this is a phrase for the welfare state, including social housing. This is an entrance for us to place social housing on the EU's agenda.'

In fact, he goes on to say, social housing should be at the core of new economic development across the EU. Mr Rasmussen argues that the provision of affordable housing is intertwined with such fundamental European ideas as the mobility of labour, and that member states' economic interdependence can only be improved and strengthened by an increased focus on social ►

# Continental cause

Tenant activists are pushing for a right to housing to be enshrined in a European constitution. From Brussels, *Simon Brandon* seeks reasons to be optimistic



housing throughout the Union. ‘We cannot isolate social housing from other elements in the welfare society,’ Mr Rasmussen says. ‘We will be weakened.’

It’s not quite the same as inserting an unambiguous right to housing within the Treaty of Lisbon, but it would be a start. Listening to some of the speeches given by tenant association delegates from across the continent, it seems that kicking at least some responsibility for housing provision upstairs to the EU could help improve the lives of many thousands of its citizens. Edward Kavniesky, representing the Latvian Union of Tenants, describes the denationalisation of around 78,000 apartments - home to 250,000 people - since 1991 as a ‘tragedy’ of which the ‘severity and heavy consequences many times exceeds Stalin’s repressions’.

He describes how the new private owners have forced tenants out by cutting off amenities, raising rents and changing locks while ‘the rulers of Latvia remain deaf to [their] complaints’.

A Polish tenant representative, Janusz Ruggiero, claims that house building in his country is now subservient to big business. ‘There is virtually no social housing construction,’ he says. ‘Instead, only very expensive condos are built, while the developers and banks make huge profits. Substantial rent and groundless dismissals interrupt the basic human rights of tenants.’

But while Latvian and Polish tenants might be suffering from poor domestic housing policies, tenants in other countries are more fortunate - and they would like to stay that way.

‘Housing policy will remain national policy,’ says Ms Steenber-

gen (see box, right). ‘Housing policies are old and traditional. Financing affordable housing in France is very different from financing housing in England, or Sweden. All these national differences have to be accepted.’

And they will be fiercely defended from European interference by some countries. According to delegate and German tenant activist Knut Unger the Swedes, for one, ‘want to protect their system’, in which municipal landlords have a market advantage (*Inside Housing*, 11 July).

One of the Swedish delegates agrees. ‘It’s not because we don’t want Europe to take care of people, it’s because we think it will make it worse - not just for Swedes but for others,’ she says.

So although some Europeans are keen on a universal right to housing, disagreement remains even among IUT members about how involved the EU should be in practice. And despite the positive noises at the conference from Mr Rasmussen and, later, Czech MEP Libor Rouek, who tells delegates of the need for an integrated European approach to housing - ‘remember the new member states’, he implores - there are still apparently some very different voices within the Parliament itself.

Following Mr Rasmussen to the podium is Professor Peter Boelhouwer, a Dutch housing policy specialist. ‘We’ve had letters from Brussels telling us to get rid of our social rented sector to make it 2 or 3 per cent of our housing stock,’ he says, to a few resigned chuckles. ‘That’s not very sensible. Mr Rasmussen has a lot to do in Brussels.’

It seems the cynics might have the right idea after all - for now, at least.

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**The IUT meet in Brussels (top), where MEP Poul Nyrup Rasmussen (above) provides hope**

### What if?

Most of the EU’s areas of competence - those aspects of its members’ laws and policies in which it plays a part - in social matters affect the movement of people, goods and services, according to Samuli Miettinen, a lecturer in law at Salford Law School.

Social entitlements such as health care or housing can be linked to these, but purely domestic issues tend to remain domestic.

‘Europe has had difficulties making member states take on purely domestic [European] rights,’ he says. ‘It would be difficult to find agreement among member states. I’d be sceptical about [a right to housing] entering official texts.’ And there’s no guarantee it would be legally binding, either.

But still, what if? Hypothetically, a right to housing enshrined in a European constitution would give any citizen the power to appeal to the European courts if they felt this right was being denied them. Practically, however, it would be far more tortuous than it sounds.

‘One of the problems is the European Commission doesn’t have the resources to police member states, and access to European courts is not direct,’ explains Mr Miettinen. Petitioners to the European Court of Justice have to go through their domestic courts first, and some countries take this recourse less seriously than others.

‘How does one enforce it if it’s not respected?’ asks Mr Miettinen. ‘That would be a problem.’