

International Tenant´s Day, European Parliament, October 5 2009

Right to Housing

by Barbro Engman, President of the Swedish Union of Tenants

Members of Parliament, honored guests, ladies and gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to have this opportunity to address you and speak about an issue that is of such great concern and importance for millions of people all over the world. Housing, or rather the lack of it is an enormous challenge for every government to tackle and solve. No government can claim that they have succeeded in giving every individual in their country roof over their head and it is certainly not easier today when a worldwide financial crisis has taken a grip over the economy.

In Sweden we like to talk about the Swedish model. There is a Swedish model for almost every important aspect of the Swedish society. As President of the Swedish union of tenants I can´t be an exception, I have to take the Swedish model as my starting point. The labor market has a Swedish model, we have a Swedish model for our alcohol policy and there is of course a Swedish model for the housing market. The common denominator in all these cases is negotiations. In Sweden we are convinced that compromises are the only way to reach long term solutions. The ability to compromise is an important and necessary skill for everyone who is engaged in these areas. We have seen no reason to change this attitude and standpoint. We continue to fight for our negotiations- and compromise model which also means that the politicians have little to say; the responsibility to make the rental market work is in the hands of the tenants themselves and the landlords. I know because I live it and see it every day as a citizen, as the president of the Swedish union of tenants and as a tenant myself.

Maybe there is a reason and a good one for thinking that we are different from other countries in Europe and therefore need to have our own model. It gives us the right to do things differently and in our own manner, and we continue to fight for that right even after the entry into the European Union. It can also be a very healthy way to mark the importance of independent member states. Many Swedes voted for membership because they were told that a membership would have very little impact on their daily life. Ten years ago, we were convinced that

the membership in the European Union would not include the Swedish housing policy and housing market. Today we know the opposite; the question about decent and affordable housing is of great importance and high up on the Swedish political agenda. This is due to the European Property Federations complaint to the EU commission. The issue is about the public owned companies in Sweden receiving financial aid in conflict with the European competition law and that the Swedish government therefore treats the private companies unfairly. The complaint has led to a sweeping investigation and debate in Sweden about the role of the public utility companies and the relations to the European Union. Another significant difference is that the European Commission and the European Parliament take greater part in housing related issues than ever before, the opening of the structural funds is one, and the energy efficiency directive is another.

Housing is a social right and housing policy must create the conditions for everyone to live in decent dwellings at reasonable costs as well as in stimulating and safe environment. The housing environment must contribute to equal and dignified living conditions and in particular promote a good climate for rearing children and for young people. In Sweden “right to housing” is written in the constitution. But still we have the problems with segregation, homelessness and over crowdedness, just like other European countries. In other words, the law is not sufficient enough. The first recommendation in Mr. Hammarberg’s report “Recommendation of the commissioner for human rights on the implementation of the right to housing” states the following: “Enact specific legislation which clarifies how the housing rights guaranteed by international law are to be made effective in a national jurisdiction without discrimination. National laws should set out in detail housing rights, identify those who are responsible for their implementation at different levels, and provide for effective remedies when they are violated” It is clear that Sweden has more to do before right to housing is fully supported and protected by Swedish law.

However, the sitting government in Sweden has changed the housing policy and it is now evident that it also means big changes in reality. Today’s focus is set on financial markets and profit and not on real people, more on supply meeting demand than on goals such as integration, social inclusion and decent and affordable housing. The government has set foot on the

same path as Margaret Thatcher did when she formed the “right to buy policy” in the eighties when thousands of homes in council estates were sold. The Swedish sitting government’s policy is of the kind that people should own their homes. As a result the government is willing to sell out public companies to private companies or transform them into tenant-ownership. The Swedish Parliament has introduced a new form of housing, a mix of tenancy and ownership. Still we don’t know the outcome and the results of it and how it will affect the tenants in the future. The current owner oriented policy forces people to borrow money in order to finance their homes, leaving them in the hands of the financial market and interest speculators. Why can’t the Swedish government realize the possibilities of the rental system and recognize the beauty of it? Why should the rental market be an option only for the deprived and the poor when we have an excellent opportunity to make it available for everyone? Bear in mind that it is in difficult financial downturns that you as a tenant are standing firm and safe. You don’t have to mind the fluctuations of interest rates, or the borrowed money or the market value of your house. You have none of these concerns. The tenancy is a stable and comfortable way of living in difficult times.

Let us look at America which economy has a great impact on the European economy. In 1983 Barack Obama decided to do good for the society although it would not make him a fortune and abandoned money making. After six months Barack Obama had no money, no job and ate canned soup. Despite of the troublesome situation Barack Obama went to Chicago where he met a group of single teenage parents who had no power or influence to make their life situation any better. Barack Obama writes about this meeting in his book “Dreams from my father” and he describes in it how he helped them to establish an independent tenants union. Together the teenagers would gain strength and influence. And they did. They managed to remove the asbestos from their homes; they sacked the manager and by smart planning and media coverage they improved their living conditions. All this thanks to the initiatives of Barack Obama. When things are wrong and you want to make them right; working together is an excellent method to overcome injustice and poverty.

Today Mr. Obama is the President of the United States and has recently taken an impressive step to introduce a right to rent policy. His fight for tenants’ rights continues. Recently I heard

a man on the radio saying that he was extremely happy because he had left the homeowner market and succeeded in getting a rented apartment instead. He felt safe both financially and socially. It is my sincere wish that this policy will make it to Europe to safeguard the tenancy and help those who suffer from the homeownership policy. I, myself have recently moved from a small town up in the north of Sweden to Stockholm and I can feel the changes in government policy. My neighbours knock on my door to tell me that they want to buy their apartments. And of course they inform me that the majority of the tenants in the building wishes to do so.

In Sweden we have had discussions about markets rents for many years. The Swedish union of tenants has challenged it and fought against it very hard and with severity. It seems like we have won that current battle but the war is still to be won. Maybe this financial crisis will lead to the increase of the rental sector and put an end to social differences and poverty.

I have high hopes for a better future.