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The Slum Question: The London County Council and Decent Dwellings for the Working Classes, 1880-1914

R. Vladimir Steffel

The middle classes, seduced by the gospels of growth and of *laissez-faire*, abandoned the older areas of London to the artisans and laborers, to the thousands of migrants from rural England, Scotland, and Ireland, and to Jewish immigrants from Russia. By 1880 the middle classes in the suburbs were isolated from the working classes and ignorant of their poverty.¹ Then "The Bitter Cry of Outcast London" by Andrew Mearns, the *Pall Mall Gazette* edited by W. T. Stead, and the writings of others exposing the squalor of the laboring classes led to a rediscovery of poverty.² Many observers thought that charity would solve the problem, one went slumming or joined the settlement movement begun at Toynbee Hall. Others, like Octavia Hill, were determined to improve the lives of the poor through the proper management and gradual upgrading of their living quarters.³ The philanthropic and semi-philanthropic dwellings companies such as the Peabody Trust, Guinness Trust, Improved Industrial Dwellings, East End Dwellings, and Four Percent Industrial Dwellings constructed new housing suitable for the working classes.⁴ All these efforts were limited because of the attitudes of the affluent classes toward the

¹H. J. Dyos, "The Slums of Victorian London," *Victorian Studies*, XI (1967-68): 5-40; H. J. Dyos and D. A. Reeder, "Slums and Suburbs," in *The Victorian City*, H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, eds. (London, 1973), I, 359-86.

²For an excellent discussion of changing attitudes see Anthony Wohl, "The Bitter Cry of Outcast London," *International Review of Social History*, XIII (1968): 189-245; "The Housing of the Working Classes in London, 1815-1914," in *A History of Working-Class Housing: A Symposium*, Stanley D. Chapman, ed. (Newton Abbot, 1971), pp. 13-54.

³For a discussion of Octavia Hill's philosophy and program see Anthony Wohl, "Octavia Hill and The Homes of the London Poor," *Journal of British Studies*, X (1971): 105-131.

⁴For detailed discussions of philanthropic and semi-philanthropic working class housing see John Nelson Tarn, "The Peabody Donation Fund: The Role of a Housing Society in the Nineteenth Century," *Victorian Studies*, X (1966-67): 7-38; "The Improved Industrial Dwellings Company," *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*, XXII pt. I (1968): 43-59; *Working-class Housing in 19th-century Britain* (London, 1971), chapters 3-5.

poor. Many believed that improvidence, intemperance, and licentiousness caused poverty and failed to realize that crowded living conditions and underemployment encouraged these vices. Beatrice Webb, who recognized this problem, wrote in her diary: "The Drink demon...undermines the constitution of a family....There are times when one loses all faith in *laissez faire* [and] would suppress this poison at all hazards, before it eats the life of the nation."⁵

In response to the writings of Mearns and Stead the Government appointed the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, 1884-85. The commission's hearings brought forth evidence that substantiated the claims of substandard housing and depicted the depth and extent of poverty. This publicity brought the plight of the working classes to the attention of the middle classes. Then Charles Booth, in his seventeen-volume investigation of the *Life and Labour of the People of London*, bolstered the commission's conclusions when he disclosed that more than 30 percent of London's population hovered at the edge of or in poverty. The affluent classes began to realize that although philanthropy might be helpful in other areas it was an inadequate solution for the housing problem. Placing better housing within the reach of London laborers required higher wages, regular employment and regulated hours of work, as well as improved and cheap transportation. It required financial and legal resources which private enterprise and semi-philanthropic housing companies lacked. It required government grants-in-aid and compulsory legislation rather than permissive legislation⁶ which for forty years had resulted in confusion

⁵Beatrice Webb, "Diaries of Beatrice Webb," X (Nov. 1886), 69-70. (Unpublished typescript in the *Passfield Papers* at the British Library of Political and Economic Science.) Compare with Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (London, 1926), p. 278.

⁶The foundations for improving the working class environment were the Nuisance Removal and Sanitary Acts, the Shaftesbury Acts, the Torrens Acts, and the Cross Acts. At first the Nuisance Removal and Sanitary Acts dealt with drainage, removal of wastes and garbage, offensive trades, and industrial air pollution; in 1855 premises injurious to health and in 1866 overcrowding were defined as nuisances. Specific housing legislation had been enacted in 1851 under Lord Shaftesbury's influence. The Laboring Classes Lodging Houses Act empowered local authorities to erect housing for the working classes, and the Common Lodging House Act provided for better management and inspection of common lodging houses. The Torrens Acts, 1868-82, were concerned with single or small groups of dwellings that were dangerous to health due to structural defects. Property owners could be required to alter structurally or demolish a dwelling which was dangerous to the health of its occupants. If owners refused to implement a magistrate's order then the local authority could do it at their expense. The Cross Acts, 1875-82, empowered local authorities to clear areas in need of rearrangement and reconstruction. The Torrens and Cross Acts

as to authority and enabled the vestries and district boards to ignore their duties. Finally, it required a metropolitan government directly responsible to the electorate rather than the Metropolitan Board of Works (1855-1889) which was limited in power and responsible to the vestries and district boards.

For a decade there had been agitation to reform local government. The Royal Commission cited the Metropolitan Board of Works for failure to use its power when local authorities defaulted. George Goschen, E. L. Stanley, and Samuel Morley, in a supplementary memo to the Royal Commission's report, called for a reformed metropolitan London government which would be empowered to inspect housing and rigorously enforce sanitary laws.⁷ Similar arguments were advanced in newspapers and fortnightlies. In 1884 Parliament killed William Harcourt's local government bill because of powerful local pressures. Finally, in 1888 a bill passed Parliament which dissolved the Metropolitan Board of Works and established the London County Council.

Although another decade would pass before the congeries of unreformed vestries and district boards would be replaced by twenty-eight municipal boards democratically elected, London now had a government elected directly by and responsible to the electorate. Under Lord Rosebery's leadership the Council was organized like Parliament. Moreover, not only did the Council have a Parliamentary Committee and make representations to the Government, but several members of the Council were members of Parliament. The new metropolitan government made progress toward maintaining the existing stock of housing in decent condition and pioneered the movement for municipal housing. In 1890 it induced Parliament to consolidate the acts relating to working class dwellings.⁸ In 1891 the sanitary and nuisance removal acts for

were geared toward setting minimum structural standards and providing dwellings free from dampness and with sufficient natural light and ventilation. Amendments empowered local authorities to erect working class housing.

⁷*Parliamentary Papers*, C. 4402, XXX, 22 and 42, Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, 1884-85.

⁸London County Council, *The Housing Question in London, 1855-1900* (London, 1901), p. 19. (Hereafter the London County Council is cited as LCC.) Part I of the Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890) consolidated the Cross Acts (1875-82) and applied to large insanitary or slum areas; although reconstruction was mandatory it was assumed that private enterprise would purchase cleared sites. Part II consolidated the Torrens Acts (1868-82) and dealt with individual or small groups of insanitary or dangerous dwellings; reconstruction was at the discretion of local authorities. Part III incorporated the Shaftesbury Acts (1851-75) permitting the development of housing estates.

London were consolidated.⁹ Armed with strengthened legislation the LCC moved against inactive and irresponsible local officials. It censured local authorities who neglected sanitary responsibilities and who refused to apply for closing and demolition orders. It counselled and pressured local authorities to use their powers and to take the initiative rather than depend on the LCC. It published reports to inform and mobilize public opinion. Finally, it appealed to the Home Office and the Local Government Board to assist in implementing housing and public health acts.

One of the first acts of the LCC was the appointment of a medical officer of health, something the Metropolitan Board had neglected. In the first few years the LCC's medical officer maintained close personal contact with local authorities and impressed upon them their obligations. The LCC informed local authorities that they were accountable for uninhabitable and obstructive dwellings since it had residual powers granted by section 45 of the Housing of the Working Classes Act (1890) and section 100 of the Public Health Act (1891). Furthermore, local authority medical officers were required to inform the Council of their activities.¹⁰

Despite these obligations many local authorities responded reluctantly. A good example of local board evasion of responsibility is the Poplar District Board of Works. It gave immediate attention to insanitary property between East Indian Dock Road and High Street; but it refused to apply for orders to close the Arnold Buildings. Only after the LCC's medical officer informed Poplar that the LCC would invoke section 100 of the Public Health Act did the district board apply for and receive a closing order. Before Poplar assented to LCC demands its clerk declared that "no one can do their duty save the officers of the London County Council." Another decade passed before Poplar had the derelict building demolished. Meanwhile, the district board proposed a clearance scheme which included the Arnold Buildings and rejected the Home Office's offer to arbitrate its dispute with the LCC.¹¹

⁹The Public Health (London) Act (1891) consolidated the sanitary and nuisance removal acts. When Parliament consolidated these acts for England in 1875 it had omitted London.

¹⁰LCC, *Housing Question in London*, pp. 19, 32, and 43; LCC, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 5 Nov. 1889, p. 863; 13 Jan. 1891, pp. 6-8; 17 Feb. 1891, p. 183; 28 July 1891, p. 879; and 3 Nov. 1891, p. 1106. For a discussion of nineteenth-century medical officers' attitudes see A. S. Wohl, "Unfit for Human Habitation," in *The Victorian City*, (London, 1973), II, 603-24.

¹¹LCC, Housing of the Working Classes Committee, *Minutes*, I (31 March 1890): 471; (13 Oct. 1890): 594; LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Minutes*, III

In addition to continuous monitoring by the LCC, local authorities were censured by the Mansion House Council on the Dwellings of the Poor, the Jewish Board of Guardians, the Charity Organisation Society, and newspapers for tolerating insanitary conditions. If local authorities were to comply with legal obligations and moral sanctions they needed more sanitary inspectors. To encourage local authorities to hire more inspectors the LCC agreed to pay one-half their salaries.¹² The LCC's policy together with public pressure produced results: for example, in the East End there were only twelve inspectors in 1887; by 1894 there were twenty-five inspectors; by 1901 there were thirty-six. The number remained around thirty-six until the First World War.¹³ Viewed in terms of population per inspector, the ratio improved from 48,400 residents per inspector in 1887 to 15,400 in 1914.

In the early 1890's, as the number of inspectors and the amount of public exposure increased, more closing orders were granted. In turn, more property owners corrected deficiencies in order to avoid summonses. By 1900, however, the number of requests for closing orders had declined. Both the LCC and the Home Office expressed concern. The LCC's investigation suggested that judicial reluctance to grant closing orders under the Housing Act led local authorities to ignore the law. It found that some magistrates were unwilling to close dwellings no matter how uninhabitable as long as the residents could not relocate. Also, that even though magistrates personally inspected premises, owners were warned of the visitations and had plenty of time to lavishly apply paint and whitewash to make dwellings look habitable.¹⁴ The LCC reported these findings to the

(19 March 1894): 641; LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Papers*, 1893-94, Bundle E49, LCC, Murphy, 19 March 1894; Poplar clerk, 24 March 1894 and 17 May 1894; LCC, Housing of the Working Classes Committee, *Papers*, 1901-02, Case 67, Poplar, medical officer, 12 July 1901; LCC architect, valuer, medical officer, and housing manager, 22 Jan. 1902; Poplar clerk, 18 March 1902; LCC clerk, 11 July 1902; Poplar clerk, 22 Oct. 1902; Case 35, Proof of report of Housing of the Working Classes Committee for year ending 1902; 1905-06, Case 67, Poplar clerk, 20 Dec. 1904.

¹²Under the Public Health (London) Act (1891) one-half of the salaries of sanitary inspectors was payable by the Council, which was reimbursed by the Exchequer. LCC, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 1 Aug. 1893, p. 890; Public Health (London) Act, 1891, 54 & 55 Vict., ch. 56, sec. 108.

¹³LCC, London *Statistics*, V (1894): 593-94; XIV (1903-04): 178-85; XVIII (1907-08): 106; and XXII (1911-12): 130.

¹⁴LCC; Housing of the Working Classes Committee, *Papers*, 1901-02, Case 36a, LCC clerk, 13 March 1902; Case 39a, Stepney clerk, 3 June 1902; Case 39b, Poplar clerk, 23 April 1902.

Home Office. The Home Office disagreed. It concluded that local authorities, not magistrates, were responsible for the decline in applications for closing orders; moreover, magistrates had to issue an order if there was cause.¹⁵ The positive result of these inquiries was a simplified procedure for getting closing orders under part II of the Housing Act; the 1903 Housing of the Working Classes Act authorized boroughs to apply to magistrates for orders without first serving a notice on the owner to abate the nuisance.¹⁶

Another aspect of the Council's program to improve the metropolitan environment was slum clearance. The Council picked the most obvious cases. The first and most notorious slum cleared by the LCC was the Boundary Street area in Bethnal Green; it had a recorded history of substandard housing for over fifty years.¹⁷ However, the Council realized that it would be impractical and fiscally improvident for it to deal with all the dilapidated areas. To eradicate most of the black spots quickly and to avoid bearing the total financial burden for clearance schemes, the LCC sought to invigorate local initiative. It agreed to contribute up to one-half the cost for clearance if local authorities devised schemes under part II of the Housing of the Working Classes Act.¹⁸ Local authorities disregarded the incentive and continued to submit proposals under part I of the Housing Act; the Council had no alternative but to reject them. Among proposals returned with recommendations for clearance schemes under part II were one's for King John's Court and Queen Catherine's Court in Limehouse and London Terrace in St. George's in the East. After the Council suggested that it would resort to its residual powers and after protracted negotiations, local authorities devised schemes and cleared the areas.¹⁹ Other part II

¹⁵LCC, Housing of the Working Classes Committee, *Papers*, 1901-02, Case 39b, Charles Murdock, Home Office, 31 July 1902.

¹⁶LCC, Housing of the Working Classes Committee, *Minutes* VII (3 Feb. 1904): 750.

¹⁷Fourth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners, *PP*, 1837-38 [147] XX-VIII, App. A; Hector Gavin, *Sanitary Ramblings* (London, 1848), p. 42; *The Sanitary Condition of Bethnal Green*. Verbatim Report of the Government Inquiry, 7 Nov. 1887. p. 75. (In the Tower Hamlets [London] Library.) LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Papers*, 1889-92, Bundle A3-1, Bethnal Green, Bate, 3 April 1890.

¹⁸This contribution was not covered by the Exchequer. LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Papers*, 1889-92, Bundle E7, Memo on future policy, Beachcroft, 20 Oct. 1890; LCC, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 13 Jan. 1891, pp. 7-8.

¹⁹For King John's Court: LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Papers*, 1889-92, Bundle A10-1, Limehouse District Board clerk, 14 Jan. 1891, 3 June 1891; LCC draft, 13 June 1891, 2 Dec. 1891; LDB clerk, 7 Dec. 1891; LCC arch., 10 Dec.

schemes were even more difficult to resolve. For several years the LCC badgered the Poplar Board of Works to clear the Ann Street area. Poplar abdicated its responsibility and the LCC brought Poplar to account by using its residual powers and by submitting its own scheme to the Home Office. The Home Office approved and ruled that Poplar contribute one-half the cost.²⁰

Slum clearance therefore turned out to be more difficult than originally conceived because the LCC and the local authorities lacked a sufficient tax base; moreover, local authorities expected the LCC to do the work, were often controlled by men who had "vested interests in filth," and had no experience in planning. In 1898 the County Council decided to accept responsibility for all clearance schemes which involved rehousing and to provide housing sufficient for the number of displaced families. An advantage of this decision was that Parliament could be assured that housing would be made available since most cleared sites were too small to reaccommodate the original number of inhabitants. Despite its good intentions, the LCC rarely cleared slums after 1900. Consequently, in a quarter of a century the LCC together with local authorities cleared only 65 acres, which is comparable to the Metropolitan Board's 50 acres in the 14 years from 1875 to 1889.

In addition to trying to prevent slums as well as to clear slums, the Council launched a program of municipal housing. At first municipal dwellings were replacements on site for those demolished; the decision to develop housing estates came a decade later. The Council cautiously approached the question of municipal housing. Although it had authority to build, the Council could exer-

1891; Bundle A10-II, LCC arch., 21 Mar. 1892; LDB clerk, 4 July 1892; LCC arch., 18 July 1892; LDB clerk, 12 Oct. 1892; 1893-94, Bundle A10, LCC valuer, 12 July 1893; LCC, 8 May 1894; LCC, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 28 April 1896, pp. 442-43. For Queen Catherine's Court: LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Papers*, 1889-92, Bundle A10-II, LDB clerk, 18 Dec. 1891; LCC draft, 19 Jan. 1892; LDB clerk, 26 April and 10 June 1892; LCC, 6 Dec. 1892. For London Terrace: LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Papers*, 1889-92, Bundle A15-I, St. George in the East medical officer, copy, 20 May 1889; LCC, Murphy, 26 Feb. 1890; St. George clerk, 15 Nov. 1890; LCC, Murphy, 22 Jan. 1891; St. Geo. clerk, 5 Feb. 1891; LCC draft, 11 Mar. 1891; St. Geo. clerk, 13 July 1891; LCC Northeast Subcommittee, *Minutes*, 30 April 1891, p. 126; LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Papers*, 1889-92, Bundle A15-II, St. Geo. clerk, 5 Feb. 1892; LCC, Blaxland, 22 Feb. 1892; LCC, 27 Feb. 1892; LCC arch., 21 Mar. 1892; LCC, 6 Dec. 1892; LCC, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 5 June 1894, p. 612, and 21 Nov. 1905, p. 1711.

²⁰LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Papers*, 1889-92, Bundle A13-I, LCC, 1 Feb. 1892; Poplar clerk, 11 Mar. 1892; LCC, Murphy, 9 May 1892; 1893-94, Bundle A13, LCC, 12 May 1893; Home Office, 23 June, 1894.

cise it only with the Home Office's permission. The Council's first request for municipal housing was for Hughes Fields, Deptford. It was forced to withdraw the proposal under the combined pressure of the local authorities and the Home Office.²¹ After this rebuff the Council returned to the Metropolitan Board of Works' policy and offered cleared sites to private developers to construct working class dwellings. Nevertheless, the Council was unsuccessful in auctioning to builders and negotiating with the semi-philanthropic East End Dwellings Company or Guinness Trust the land for decent prices. Hence, these sites remained vacant and in the hands of the LCC.²²

The breakthrough for municipal housing came, not with slum clearance, but with rehousing obligations arising from a Thames tunnel scheme. The construction of the Blackwall Tunnel, connecting Poplar and Greenwich, necessitated the demolition of working class housing. Parliament had included a clause in the Blackwall Tunnel act which required that a new dwelling be constructed for each one that was demolished. Although sites for new housing had been provided, private enterprise was not interested. The Council had been rehousing the displaced inhabitants, but Whitehall insisted that either new housing be provided or else further demolition had to cease. Thus, on February 2, 1892, under pressure, the LCC committed itself to building housing if there were no sales at the next auction. A few weeks later when the housing committee was informed that there were no buyers it initiated construction plans.²³

After the Council had committed itself to municipal housing for the Blackwall Tunnel scheme, decisions for municipal housing on other sites were easier to make. It proceeded carefully, however, because Home Office officials were not convinced that municipal housing was the alternative to commercial or semi-philanthropic development; in fact, they scrutinized each housing proposal sub-

²¹Public Record Office, HO 45/10198/B31375. pp. 45-47; LCC, *The Housing Question in London*, pp. 177-79.

²²East End Dwellings Co., *Minutes*, II (1 June 1891), 179; II (29 June 1891), 187; II (20 July 1891), 193; II (4 Aug. 1891), 198; LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Papers*, 1889-92, Bundle A8-I, LCC arch., 16 July 1891; LCC Corporate Property Committee, 20 July 1891; A9-I, Guinness Trust, 30 April 1891; *LCC valuer*, 11 May 1891; *LCC arch.*, 28 May 1891; *LCC arch.*, 11 June 1891; *LCC valuer*, 22 June 1891; *LCC draft letter*, 25 June 1891; *Guinness Trust*, 24 June 1891; *Guinness Trust*, 30 Oct. 1891.

²³LCC, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 2 Feb. 1892, p. 69, and 29 Mar. 1892, p. 273; LCC, Housing of the Working Classes Committee, *Minutes* II (29 Feb. 1892): 368.

mitted to them so as not to establish precedent.²⁴ Furthermore, public opinion feared that cheap municipal housing would drive private enterprise out of the market and was still convinced that semi-philanthropic dwelling companies could adequately supply the needs of the poor. Even the Fabians, who favored municipal housing, were convinced that it would be and must be as efficient as private. Within this framework the Council decided that municipal housing not only had to avoid a charge on the rates but had to earn three percent profit on capitalization.²⁵ In its official histories the Council advanced a defensive interpretation for entering the housing market; it argued that it had inherited “derelict sites” from the Metropolitan Board of Works and had been compelled to fulfill the rehousing obligations.²⁶ These claims were only partly true. Earlier when the Council had tried to provide municipal housing it was forced to retreat. Another reason for the Council’s restrained posture was public opinion and political economy. No matter how progressive politicians might be, they can seldom get more than a few steps ahead of their constituents. In a milieu where conservative and *laissez-faire* liberals argued that competition from municipal housing would drive out private enterprise, the Council could only gradually expand its housing program.

The question of whether the County Council would anticipate housing needs had been raised in 1890 when the LCC applied for and was granted permission by the Home Secretary to adopt the Shaftesbury Acts; yet there was very little consideration of this question until 1898. By then the Council had begun a municipal housing project in central London on the old Millbank prison site in Westminster which Parliament had set aside expressly for this purpose in 1885. Also by 1898 overcrowding in central London had become critical and would grow worse before the housing situation eased. Faced with a housing shortage, with overcrowding, with ever-increasing costs for slum clearance and rebuilding in central London, with parliamentary rehousing obligations attached not

²⁴Public Record Office, HLG 1/17 file B1184A/47.

²⁵LCC, *Housing Question in London*, pp. 43, 47-48; John Simon, *English Sanitary Institutions* (London, 1890), pp. 434 and 441; The Mansion House Council on the Dwellings of the Poor, *The Present Position of the Housing Problem in and Around London* (London, 1908), p. 25; Liberty and Property Defence League, *Land* (London, 1885), p. 48; *The Times*, 3 Aug. 1885; Fabian Tract 101, *The House Famine and How to Relieve It* (London, 1900), p. 18.

²⁶LCC, *Housing Question in London*, p. 47; LCC, *Housing of the Working Classes in London, 1889-1912* (London, 1913), pp. 26-27.

only to slum clearance schemes but also to public improvement schemes and to sites cleared for educational purposes, the Council redirected its strategy to developing housing estates as permitted by part III of the Housing of the Working Classes Act. Just before Council elections in 1898 this problem reappeared in committee; it was immediately whisked away for administrative review. In May, after an overwhelming victory for the Progressives, the housing committee earnestly reconsidered the question of dwellings for the working classes. In December the Council accepted the committee's report recommending development of suburban housing estates.²⁷ It approved development so long as there was no charge to the rates. This was the wedge which eventually changed the Council's housing policy. Then in 1900 Parliament empowered local authorities to build beyond their boundaries.²⁸ The LCC now redirected its housing efforts. It built major suburban estates in Totterdown Fields, Tooting (38 3/4 acres); Whitehart Lane, Tottenham (177 acres); Norbury near Croyden (28 1/2 acres); and Old Oak, Hammersmith (46 1/2 acres). These estates totaled nearly 300 acres and were planned to house about 42,000 Londoners. The development of these estates and the encouragement of workers to move out to them were facilitated by workmen's trains and LCC trams serving the suburbs.²⁹ By the outbreak of World War I all these estates were well under way or completed.

The Council hoped that suburban estates would solve the housing shortage of central London even though it was aware that poverty had closed the door to the poor on its estates in central London. It failed to realize that as long as it demanded that municipal housing earn three percent on capitalization, rents would be too high. Another factor which placed rents beyond the reach of the poor was the interpretation of the principle that rents would not exceed "those ruling in the neighborhood." In practice this meant rent per room rather than rent per tenement or family. So when the Council charged 2/7d. to 2/9d. or 4/- per room, statistically it ap-

²⁷LCC, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 22 April 1890, pp. 312-14; LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Minutes*, III (31 Oct. 1892): 13; and III (14 Nov. 1892): 66; LCC, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 6 Dec. 1898, pp. 1457-59.

²⁸Housing of the Working Classes Act, 1900, 63 & 64 Vict., ch. 59, sec. 1.

²⁹For discussion of transportation and its impact on working class housing see H. J. Dyos, "Railways and Housing in Victorian London," *Journal of Transport History*, 11 (1955): 11-21, 90-100; "Workmen's Fares in South London, 1860-1914," *Journal of Transport History*, 1 (1953): 3-19; H. J. Dyos and D. H. Aldcroft, *British Transport: An Economic Survey* (Leicester, 1969), p. 222.

peared low. But in the Boundary Street estate, for example, only 15 out of 1,069 tenements were single rooms and they were let at 3/6d. while the cheapest rent for two rooms was 5/9d. A poor family with children which was formerly housed in a single room at 3/6d. was unable to rent a single room because LCC occupancy rules forbade more than two persons per room and two rooms were more than they could afford. Finally, the County Council deemed that municipal cottages and tenements be of the "best description." This meant high quality in construction, more than the minimum requirements in sanitation, and aesthetic facades.³⁰ As construction costs rose the Council gradually lowered the building standards in order to keep the rents from rising higher and still comply with its financial rule of three percent profit. These lowered standards, especially smaller room dimensions, were criticized by the Home Office. In 1896 the LCC, under Home Office supervision, increased living rooms to 160 square feet and bedrooms to 110 square feet. However, the necessity of keeping rents down in central London compelled the LCC in 1898 to revert to 1889 minimum dimensions which provided for 144 square-foot living rooms and 96 square-foot bedrooms.³¹ Even this failed to put rents within the reach of laborers. Thus, as long as Londoners believed municipal housing was a quasi-commercial enterprise and refused to subsidize it, little could be done for the poor.

Another reason why the London County Council vacillated on the questions of rebuilding slums and developing new housing estates was the political composition of the Council. During its first three years the LCC operated on a non-partisan basis. Both the Progressives (Liberals and Labour) and the Moderates (Conservatives) showed an interest in housing proposals but tried to keep them from becoming a political question. The need for slum clearance was the most upon which the parties could agree. By 1892 the Council was organized on a party basis and the Progressives, with an increased majority, were able to push their program for public housing. From 1895 to 1898 the LCC was equally divided

³⁰LCC, *Housing Question in London*, pp. 47-50, and 306-332 *passim*; LCC, Housing of the Working Classes, *Minutes* VI (12 Nov. 1902): 447-48; LCC, Public Health and Housing Committee, *Papers*, 1893-94, Bundle E3, LCC arch., 10 Jan. 1893 and 20 Oct. 1893.

³¹LCC, Housing of the Working Classes Committee, *Papers*, 1896-97, Case 39, LCC arch., 29 Sept. 1897; LCC, *Housing Question in London*, pp. 48-51; LCC, Housing of the Working Classes Committee, *Minutes*, III (29 June 1899), 143; Public Record Office, HO 45/10198/B31375, pp. 316 and 398.

between Progressives and Moderates. Then in 1898 the Progressives gained a handsome majority and held it until 1907. With their landslide victory the Progressives opted for providing working class dwellings in excess of parliamentary obligations. This reorientation of policy led to gradual phasing out of slum clearance programs and to emphasis on building new suburban estates. From 1907 to the war the Municipal Reformers (formerly the Moderates) held the majority; after re-examining the housing question they continued the policy of building in the suburbs. Their innovative proposal to try to break down the homogeneity of the working class estates by developing a section of the Whitehart Lane estate on the garden suburb model for middle class ownership was rejected by Whitehall.³²

The LCC has received credit for its vigorous approach to the housing question, only part of which is deserved.³³ The efforts of the Mansion House Council on the Dwellings of the Poor, the Jewish Board of Guardians, the Charity Organisation Society and newspapers in exposing substandard living conditions and in demanding improvement created a climate of opinion which facilitated the Council's work. Moreover, the Council scarcely cleared more slums than the Metropolitan Board of Works, and when it redirected its housing programs in 1898 it curtailed both slum clearance and redevelopment in slum areas for about 30 years, except when absolutely unavoidable; neither did it provide a viable solution to housing the poor. On the other hand, the Council accepted the responsibility to redesign and rebuild slum areas; it educated the public; it made local authorities act responsibly; it initiated a large scale housing program for the working classes. Moreover, it illustrated that a workable slum clearance program could not be based solely on the rates but required Treasury grants-in-aid. Finally, it demonstrated that decent dwellings for the working classes required government intervention, and it proved that municipal housing could be administered efficiently.

³²LCC, *Minutes of Proceedings*, 18 May 1909, pp. 1183-84, and 29 June 1909, p. 1609.

³³Percy A. Harris, *London and its Government* (London, 1933), p. 131; I. G. Gibbon and R. W. Bell, *History of the London County Council, 1889-1939* (London, 1939), pp. 105-107; Wohl, "The Housing of the Working Classes in London, 1815-1914," Chapman, ed., in *History of Working-Class Housing*, p. 40.