June

8: David Cameron announces that forced marriage is to become a specific criminal offence. The existing civil remedy of forced marriage protection orders is to remain but the Government claims this gives victims the option of how to proceed.

15: Fatou Bensouda becomes the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. The Gambian had served as Luis Moreno Ocampo’s deputy since 2004 and becomes the court’s second chief prosecutor.

July

12: Downing Street confirms the appointment of Lord Neuberger as the next President of the Supreme Court. Neuberger is to be sworn in at a ceremony on 1st October 2012.

17: Two former Chilean military officials, Ramon Caceres and Edgar Ceballos, are arrested on charges of torturing to death the father of former president, Michelle Bachelet. General Alberto Bachelet was loyal to President Salvador Allende, deposed in a military coup in 1973.


This vindictive piece of Con-Dem legislation will raise concern across England and Wales. For some, it marks a long-awaited triumph for private landlords, but for many others it comes as a serious threat to their basic need for shelter and a home. The ‘consultation exercise’ that preceded its introduction saw 96 per cent of responses not wanting to see any action taken on squatting.

Out of 2,217 responses, 2,126 of those were from members of the public concerned about the impact of criminalising squatting, and only 10 people bothered to write in claiming to be victims of squatting.

Amazingly the Metropolitan police, The Law Society, The Criminal Bar Association and numerous homeless charities such as Crisis all came out publicly opposing its introduction.

In the middle of one of the worst housing crises this country has ever seen, up to 50,000 squatters who are currently squatting in empty properties across the UK face becoming criminals and this because they are occupying abandoned residential properties in order to put a roof over their heads.

Not surprisingly when squatting is reported in the media it often cites an example of the homeowner who ‘goes on holiday, and returns to find his home squatted.’ While sympathy can be extended in such cases, they are very rare and are often overplayed in the press for political gain. The reality is that for most people who squat it is because they do not have access to affordable accommodation, and it is in properties that have been abandoned for many years.

With a stroke thousands of ordinary working class people will possibly become criminals overnight, facing up to six months in jail and fines of up to £5,000. Yet questions need to be asked of this legislation, homelessness rates are rising, a hidden army of sofa surfers exist across the country, housing benefit caps are further placing the screw on many, and remember of course many of those receiving housing benefit are working.

Yet with the number of empty properties, according to the Empty Homes Agency, standing at 930,000 then we must ask – who is this law protecting? As socialists we can only see that it protects profiteering landlords and property speculators, properties are being kept empty to protect profits, and the new law does nothing but shore up this practice. In fact it can even be argued that the law is open to abuse by rogue landlords, which could mean trouble for even...
The end of civilised hearings

existing tenants – who may have a tenancy agreement that the landlord will deny. The legal process has been hijacked by an elite minority that has seen to it that criminalising squatting in residential properties be a priority. It is an ideological attack using rhetoric that has no basis in reality and is there with the sole reason to defend private property rights – usually affecting landowners who have left property vacant for many years.

The attack against squatting is a marked shift not only in the campaign against people now facing homelessness, but one to defend private property rights over the human right to shelter.

Paul Heron

17: The Crown Prosecution Service says it will not prosecute the three G4S security guards for manslaughter over the death of Jimmy Mubenga, an Angolan refugee who died after being escorted on a flight from Heathrow two years ago. Mubenga’s wife, Makenda Kambana, said the family were distraught at the decision.

Workers will find it harder to win unfair dismissal claims.

This ‘reform’ is a Government concession to the employer’s lobby, with its bogus argument that the majority of Tribunal claims are vexatious. In fact 60 per cent succeed, and only 9.5 per cent are so unreasonable as to attract costs.

The Government proposes to encourage settlement by introducing a new rule that cases may not be brought until the worker has submitted the claim first to the conciliation service Acas and received back from Acas a certificate that the claim has been lodged with them for a period of time without being settled. It is envisaged that a certain amount of information will be needed to be given to Acas. What that information will be is, the Government has not decided. Acas will be able to refuse to accept some claims. However there has been no real thinking about what would happen to time limits, e.g. if the refusal had been misguided.

As an inevitable by-product, this will mean that the limitation periods for introducing tribunal claims which are presently relatively simple – three months but the time can be extended, in certain exceptional circumstances – will become very complex indeed. It will be rich pickings for respondent lawyers, who will raise time defences in very many cases, but of no benefit to claimants or even to Judges who face lengthy, complex hearings on issues far from the real subject of the case.

Changes to the maximum compensatory award that can be made for unfair dismissal, will reduce the top award from its present £72,000 to a future £26,000. Only a minority of dismissal claimants are in fact awarded more than £26,000. This is in part because the highest value claims with the most extraordinary facts inevitably settle. The workers in this category will have the same outcome. Employers will be desperate to keep their bad facts away from the Tribunal. The chief difference is that managers who behave badly will be able to get rid of these cases by throwing less money at them.

David Renton

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