

# Priory Hall housing scandal impacts Irish government

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As the Irish Dail (parliament) resumed business at the end of September Taoiseach Enda Kenny announced that the government will now take action to help the former residents of the disastrous Priory Hall development.

Kenny was not specific about what type of help will be forthcoming, but he has been forced to intervene in what has become an ongoing scandal that encapsulates the corrupt nature of Irish capitalism, its state, and banking institutions.

The Priory Hall apartment complex was built in 2007 by developer Tom McFeely at the height of the housing bubble, which directly contributed to the financial and banking crash one year later.

The 189-apartment complex targeted first-time buyers and newly married couples. Situated in North Dublin, it was one of a number of new developments advertising apartments at exorbitant prices. Bankers and developers got rich while the political establishment and local politicians turned a blind eye to the shabby building methods and shortcuts used in the construction of apartment complexes and housing estates, which placed the maximisation of profits above the needs of the residents that were about to move in. Little or no regulation meant that it was left up to the developer to ensure the materials used in the constructions were up to standard.

When the 249 residents of Priory Hall, Donaghmede moved into their homes in 2007 they began to notice paint peeling off the walls and cracks appearing in the ceilings and floors. The main balconies were badly constructed and plastered. The basement car park flooded and dampness and mould began to affect the electrical wiring.

It then emerged that McFeely had disregarded fire regulations and the apartments were a fire hazard and a

threat to the lives of residents. In 2009 this forced Dublin City Council, which had bought 26 of the apartments for social housing, to evacuate a small number of the tenants. The council ordered McFeely to carry out repair work on the complex, but he refused to foot the €7.3 million bill and was declared bankrupt by the Supreme Court.

In October 2011 the remaining 180 residents were given 48 hours notice to evacuate the apartment complex. When the judgement was made by Justice Nicholas Kearns, he demanded that a fire engine should remain at the development in case a fire broke out before the residents moved out.

Residents found themselves living in temporary accommodation, but still harnessed by the banks and forced to repay inflated mortgages on their apartments. Lives were destroyed.

On July 15 Fiachra Daly, a resident, took his own life. In a recent television interview his partner Stephanie Meehan said the pressure from the banks, the failure of the state to intervene, and the nightmare evacuation of the residents from Priory Hall was the main reasons for his suicide. She explained that even though she and her children had been evacuated from the apartment complex two years ago, she had received a letter from the KBC bank demanding €17,000 in repayments after his death.

The brick wall of financial dealings the residents have come up against testifies to the ongoing corruption which dominates Irish society. Homebond, the building insurance agent for the apartments, cancelled its block insurance as soon as it became clear the residents were to be evacuated. The main banks involved, AIB and Bank of Ireland, postponed some monthly repayments after the residents were evacuated from Priory Hall but the residents were left with mounting interest rates on

the loans. The residents have up till now refused to pay mortgage repayments for apartments that now lie derelict and uninhabitable.

Enda Kenny's right wing Fine Gael/Labour government has left the residents of Priory Hall in a deplorable situation for the past two years, faced with mounting debts and immense emotional pressure. It was only on September 16 this year that Environment Minister Phil Hogan instructed his department to initiate "dialogue" with the banks, the residents, and Dublin City Council.

The on-going housing crisis has been devastating for families and individuals. Prior to 2008 sub-standard housing became the norm rather than the exception. Since the banking crisis and the economic meltdown, so called "ghost estates" have appeared as developers have went bust, leaving houses half completed and with little infrastructure for the basic needs of residents. The use of the pyrite mineral in housing foundations in order to cut costs has exasperated the crisis, causing cracks and crevices in walls and—eventually—houses to sink and come apart at the seams. The use of pyrite by developers is estimated to affect some 20,000 homes in Ireland.

On September 27, the Priory Hall scandal took on a bizarre twist when it was reported that over €200,000 had been found in the bathroom of McFeely's former luxury mansion in Ailesbury road in Dublin. The house which was valued at 15 million euros in 2007 had been sold on by the National Assets Management Agency (NAMA) when McFeely went bankrupt two years ago. The money was found by a plumber renovating the house.

McFeely was a former hunger striker and member of the Irish Republican Army. For Irish workers now suffering continued depredation, this will come as no surprise.

The one big lie propagated by republicans is that the whole Irish people are in the one boat. According to republicans the interests of the nation state must take precedence over the class interests of workers. Notwithstanding the heroism and self-sacrifice demonstrated by McFeely and others at the time, the republican and nationalist politics expounded by Sinn Fein was rooted in an attempt to advance the interests of the small and medium business classes among Catholics suffering discrimination.

These layers ultimately sought to overcome their exclusion from personal advancement under the Protestant loyalist ascendancy on which the six counties in the north was based and to achieve the privileges enjoyed by their counterparts in the south. Even though nationalist organisations such as Sinn Fein often used fake left-wing rhetoric which attracted young people and workers, these organisations were never interested in breaking with capitalism but in securing a place for themselves within the ruling elites.

McFeely first gained a reputation in 1976 as a member of the IRA after a shoot out with the Royal Ulster Constabulary when he was charged with attempted murder. Sentenced to 26 years, he became a senior organiser in Long Kesh prison.

In October 1980, along with a group of other Republican prisoners, he began a hunger strike in an attempt to force the British government to grant them the status of political prisoners. He was released from the Maze prison in 1989.

His release coincided with the beginning of the process which would see Sinn Fein and the IRA make their peace with the British and Irish establishments and their incorporation into mainstream bourgeois politics. McFeely himself made the transition from IRA militant to property developer. Beginning with investments in smaller housing schemes, he was a key player in the inflated property market by 2000.



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