

Credit Squeeze Comes To Public's Rescue

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CHRISTCHURCH Town Hall controversy this week reached a critical stage. The over 660 strong Christchurch Ratepayers' Association on Monday made a last minute bid, in the form of a shock resolution, in their long fight to prevent demolition of the Town Hall. Then on Tuesday the local Chancellor of the Exchequer, Coun. K. L. Smith made a further important reference to the new Town Hall scheme in a crisis statement on the town's economic position.

C.R.A CALLS FOR RESIGNATIONS

The shock resolution which swept the C.R.A. into a lively start to their winter session called for the resignations of all aldermen and councillors who had voted in favour of the demolition of the Town Hall.

Receiving almost unanimous support, it was made by newly elected Labour councillor Mr. Tom Staniforth and stated:

"Believing that Christchurch Council's decision to demolish the Town Hall is contrary to the wishes of the overwhelming majority of the Townspeople this meeting of the C.R.A. invites all those Aldermen and Councillors who voted in support of the demolition to resign their seats and test the feelings of electors in the ensuing elections to fill the vacancies caused by their resignations".

A proposal by Mr. Basil Druitt that the appropriate authority should be urged to preserve the Town Hall as a building of historical and architectural importance was also accepted by the Ratepayers. These move were sparked off by a letter from the Minister of Housing and Local Government to the Executive Committee of the Association telling them that the Minister's consent to the demolition would only be required if the Town Hall were listed under section 30 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 as a building of historical or architectural importance it was not so listed nor was it the subject of a Building Preservation Order.

The letter went on: "You will appreciate that if a private developer undertakes at his own expense the building of premises which may (or may not) be let in part to a local authority and has planning permission from the Local Planning Authority, he requires no consent on the part of the Minister. Furthermore it seems unlikely that the Borough Council will lose their Town Hall before alternative office accommodation in the privately developed building is available to them. It is understood that the Town Hall site is required only to provide access to the proposed new buildings.

"In these circumstances the Minister has no power to hold an inquiry or to direct the Council in any way".

C.R.A. SAYS

Mr. R.W. Arnold chairman of the C.R.A. issued the following statement yesterday: "It is unlikely that we shall press the new steps decided upon at Monday's meeting before we have an opportunity to consider the full implications of Coun. K. L. Smith's statement at our next full membership meeting in October." "Coun. Smith has done nothing more than renew one of the main points in our case against the new scheme; that it could not be developed without cutting right across capital expenditure restrictions imposed upon local authorities by the Chancellor many weeks ago. "The immediate threat to the Town Hall has now been taking care of. Its future use must now hang on the outcome of Boundary Commission recommendations. This will give the C.R.A. adequate time to prepare any case members may still require us to prepare to have the Town Hall registered under the Buildings Preservation Order.

FIRST LOYALTY

Moving his resolution Coun. Staniforth said he would no doubt be accused of dis-loyalty by his fellow councillors, but his first loyalty was to the ratepayers of Christchurch and particularly the ratepayers of Somerford ward. He thought that the wave of public opinion against the council on the question of the new

Town Hall would have discouraged them from thinking about pulling down the existing one. He believed that the people of Christchurch were as opposed to the new scheme as they had been to the old one. The ratepayers were given a full report on the Town Hall controversy by their chairman, Mr. R. W. Arnold, who was thanked by Mr. Stanley Kermode, Mr. Gordon Palmer and others for the tremendous amount of work he had done for the association. Mr. Arnold said the Executive had referred to a Local Government Act of 1933 which laid down that a council seeking to sell land or property publicly owned no longer required for the purposes for which it was acquired could only sell it with the consent of the Minister.

CASE TO MINISTER

"The case we put to the Minister was that as long as this council had not obtained his sanction to build a replacement it could not be logically upheld this was no longer required for the purposes for which it was acquired.

"The second point to the Minister was that the demolition of this Town Hall was in our considered opinion a big step forward in progressing the civic centre plan which had been rejected by the Minister.

"Our final point to the Minister was that if the need shows itself to build a new civic centre around 1967/68 after the Boundary Commission had given its findings on the future of the borough, the ratepayers had the right to accept that the present Town Hall site should be sold then at 1967/68 land values in order to offset to the maximum figure the 1967/68 building costs.

"We are in sympathy with the desire of many to see this building kept because its demolition would seriously break into the character of the High Street. We have confined our objections to economic weaknesses of the latest scheme and the obvious way it sets out to ignore the demand of the ratepayers last November and the decision of the Minister last February."

1959 ACT

The chairman referred to a 1959 Act under which local authorities were allowed to sell property publicly owned without the consent of the Minister in certain specified cases; but none of the restrictive clauses made any reference to the unique type of situation created at Christchurch. There was not a word to authorise the Council to dispose of its own municipal buildings as a part of a yet to be approved development plan before it had obtained consent to build a replacement.

"My executive claim that this is a case without precedent, we challenge the Council to say that this action has a precedent anywhere in the United Kingdom since Town and Country Planning Acts came on to the statutes in 1947. We suggest that this Council has been provided with a neat legal loophole through which to progress to a very decisive degree, plans previously rejected by the Minister with a single-minded objective of netting its own way in the end no matter how long it will take."

Mr. Stanley Kermode, who took the chair for this part of the meeting, said that it seemed to him that it might well be the Council could prove it would be a financial saving to the ratepayers to sell out and become tenants of private enterprise, but opposition to the previous scheme for a new Town Hall had made it clear to the Council that the ratepayers did not want them to make such a decision before the outcome Of the Boundary Commission's deliberations were known.

C.R.A. CANDIDATES

"It seems to me that the time has come when it really comes back to us as ratepayers and electors and that this association should issue an ultimatum to the Council and say to them that unless they are prepared to await the outcome of that inquiry before committing themselves in any way this association will do all they can to put candidates in the field to contest every seat where the person standing for that seat will not support the ideas of the ratepayers association".

Amongst the three Borough Council members present was Ald. J. W. Richardson, chairman of the Town Centre Development Committee, and he told the ratepayers that the question of rentals and values involved in the scheme was with the District Valuer and only in the event of it being an economic proposition would the scheme proceed at all.

"In other words it is at the present moment a proposal depending on the facts and figures made available to us whether we will take the next step or the scheme will have to go by the board."

THE FUTURE

The Council realised that the building of a new Town Hall could not come about until the Boundary Commission had sat and decided the future of Christchurch. If it were decided that the future of the Borough was in with Bournemouth then the town would not get a new Town Hall and would give up the occupation of the rented premises.

Referring to Mr. Druitt's resolution to have the Town Hall listed as a building of historical or architectural importance, Dr. J. Cantlie secretary of the Christchurch Preservation Society, thought that it was unlikely that such procedure would save the building—but he thought it worth a try