

Landlords and Tenants

If one used only the Guardian as a guide to reality, one would imagine that, where property rental was concerned, only landlords were dishonest and exploitative, never tenants. There are a score articles easily available on its website about the evils of landlords, but not one about the evils of tenants. Indeed, in a certain worldview, the very word landlord is synonymous with evil. As capitalist means a corpulent man in a top hat smoking a fat cigar and clutching a bag marked dollars, so landlord means someone who charges exorbitantly for a family to inhabit a poky, mouldy, rat-infested cubby-hole.

I have little doubt that terrible landlords exist. In fact I know that they do; and among the worst of them, as I learned from listening to my patients in my medical career, were councils. I don't know how many times I had to intercede on my patients' behalf with the housing department, though experience soon taught me never to deal with anybody at a lower level than the director. But, also given the nature of human nature, tenants are no angels either.

My next door neighbour, *ex officio* not a hugely wealthy man, rents a few properties that he owns. He does his best to keep them in good repair and does not charge as much as he is able. Recently one of his tenants, a small businesswoman with a drinking problem, did a bunk owing him £3000 in rent. A quick investigation established that she had done this all her life: that she had cheated and swindled landlords for decades. She had many court judgments against her, but not one had ever been executed. Obtaining such a judgment only added to the losses incurred by her successive landlords.

Needless to say, not all tenants are like this. Many keep their rented property immaculate and pay their rent religiously; but there are others, not a few, who turn their rented properties into sties, make unreasonable demands, withhold payment and regard any ill-conduct towards their landlord as justified ipso facto. Landlords in practice have little redress against ruthless or dishonest tenants and you don't have to speak to many landlords to learn that this is so.

Why, then, landlords as the only villains of the piece? The Guardian tends to the view, widespread but dangerous as well as wrong, that only the rich or powerful can do evil. Original sin is a much more realistic view of the matter.

First published in