



Report of the Lieutenant-Governor's Committee on Housing Conditions in Toronto, 1934

Herbert A. Bruce, Chairman

FOREWORD

In proposing a toast to “The City of Toronto” at a luncheon given on the occasion of the city’s centennial celebrations on March 6, 1934, His Honour Dr. H. A. Bruce, Lieutenant-Governor of the Province of Ontario, spoke in part as follows:

“The health of Toronto must necessarily mean the health of its citizens. It must mean, too, the continued progress and development of Toronto along desirable lines. We have a great and beautiful city that has been blessed by honest and efficient government. It is a city enviably situated, a city of fine residential areas, of beautiful buildings, of high standards of citizenship. That is how we see it; but I fear, in all candour one must confess that this city, in common with every large city, has acquired inevitable ‘slum districts’.

“These areas of misery and degradation exert an unhappy environmental influence upon many of our citizens. You will probably say: “But Toronto has few such areas and they are not of great extent!” I say, and I think you will agree with me, that Toronto wants none of them, and that the Toronto of the future which we like to contemplate will have none of them.

“It seems to me that the only availing remedy in Toronto is a planned decentralization which will take the outmoded factory away from our congested central areas and substitute for it in the outskirts a new modern building. That would permit workers to establish their homes convenient to their work in surroundings where their children would learn by experience that grass is a green, living and loving carpet, and that there are really and truly other and lovelier flowers than those of the lithographed calendar that hangs on the cracked, crumbling and soiled wall of a murky room into which the sun’s rays have never penetrated. It seems to me, also, that as we evacuate those factories and hovels, we must raze them and bury the distressing memory of them in fine central parks and recreational centres. These parks and recreational centres would be devoted to the physical and mental improvement of our people—they would be community centres for ennobling uses of leisure, which to-day hangs heavy on the hands of thousands of our citizens, both employed and unemployed.”

Shortly after this speech had been made, the Board of Control conferred with His Honour and accepted his suggestion that a committee be appointed to investigate the housing conditions of Toronto. Special attention was to be paid to the construction of the houses, their sanitary facilities, and the overcrowding and other conditions detrimental to health that might exist in them. The rentals paid by the tenants were to be investigated and the surroundings of the undesirable areas surveyed. Finally, remedies were to be recommended. The exact terms of reference of the committee may be found in the minutes of the Toronto Board of Control for March 14, 1934.

The first meeting of the Committee was held at Government House, Toronto, on March 17, 1934, chiefly for organization purposes. Professor Urwick was elected vice-chairman, Professor Cassidy, secretary, and Mr. Gibson, treasurer. These officers, together with Mrs. Plumptre and Professor Wasteneys, were elected an executive committee. Mr. Heighington presented his regrets that he would be unable to serve on the Committee. Mr. Macdonnell informed the Committee that he would find it impossible to attend the meetings; and requested that Mr. David Shepherd, of Campbell and Shepherd, Engineers, be allowed to attend in his place and keep him acquainted with its progress. The Committee accepted Mr. Macdonnell's suggestion, and Mr. Shepherd kindly consented to associate himself with the Committee.

Weekly meetings were held until July. The Committee then adjourned to meet again in September for consideration of a draft report. An interim statement of progress was presented to the Mayor on May 31. In June, Professor Cassidy, the secretary, was appointed Director of Social Welfare in the Province of British Columbia. His place was taken by the assistant secretary, Miss Helen Spence, who ably continued the work of preparing the material for the final report.

The Committee's task was to discover what slum conditions existed in Toronto, what advice competent Toronto authorities could offer regarding the alleviation of such conditions, and what remedies had been applied to similar conditions in Canada and abroad. In order to cover this wide field in the shortest possible time, sub-committees were formed to deal with specific problems and various members undertook to report upon the solutions of slum problems which had been devised and applied in countries other than Canada.

Among the most important sources of information regarding conditions in Toronto were two special surveys carried on under the auspices of the Committee. One of these was extensive, the other intensive. The object of the extensive survey was to locate those districts where physically unsatisfactory or overcrowded houses were present and to secure a rough inventory of the "substandard" dwellings in the city and their typical defects. The intensive survey was intended to give a detailed picture of the housing conditions over the whole of a particular area and to gain an understanding of the related recreational, social and traffic problems. For the purposes of the extensive survey the Committee enlisted the aid of the principal social agencies in the city whose work brings them into close contact with the poorest families. With their assistance and that of several other organizations and private individuals, a list of nearly two thousand addresses of unsatisfactory dwellings was compiled. These houses were then visited by our investigators. For each house some seventy specific points relating to the type of house, the sanitary facilities, the state of repair, the number of persons in the household, etc., were recorded. The tabulation of these cards and the analysis of the results of this survey led to the selection of the districts known generally as Moss Park and the Ward as the areas

for further detailed study. There an intensive house-to-house investigation was carried on. In this work a simplified form of record was used for each house and more information was secured on the general environmental conditions. Some results of this survey—which will surprise many of Toronto's more complacent citizens—will be found in the following chapter. An accompanying photograph illustrates the crowded conditions of housing in downtown Toronto where the intensive surveys took place.

While the surveys were being carried forward, a mass of information on the housing problem in general, both in Toronto and elsewhere, was being collected. Statistics regarding dwellings, population, land area, vacant lands, park space, assessment figures, incidence of certain diseases, and a host of other matters were received and tabulated. Interested groups were asked to submit their views for consideration by the Committee. A great number of private individuals were interviewed by different members of the Committee in an effort to secure first hand reliable information from those in close touch with the many aspects of the problem.

In the work of the surveys volunteer investigators were supplied by the following:

- The Department of Social Science, University of Toronto.
- The Local Council of Women of Toronto.
- The Junior League of Toronto.
- The League for Social Reconstruction, Toronto Branch.
- Toc H, Toronto Branch.

Useful information and aid was gladly given by a large number of social and other agencies in the city, including the following:

- Big Sister Association.
- Big Brother Movement Incorporated.
- Board of Education of the City of Toronto.
- Catholic Welfare Bureau.
- Central Neighborhood House.
- Children's Aid Society of Toronto.
- Federation of Jewish Philanthropies.
- Jewish Big Brother Movement.
- Jewish Big Sister Movement.
- Jewish Family Welfare Bureau.
- Neighborhood Workers Association.
- Poppy Fund.
- Social Service Department of the General Hospital.
- St. Christopher House.
- St. Elizabeth Visiting Nurses' Association.
- University Settlement.
- Toronto Housing Company, Ltd.
- Victorian Order of Nurses.
- Visiting Housekeepers Association.

A committee of the Toronto Chapter of the Ontario Association of Architects rendered valuable aid. A small group of architects performed a multitude of services, to which many pages of our Report bear record. This group consisted of Professor Arthur, of the School of Architecture in the University of Toronto, Mr. R. A. Fisher, Mr. Gordon Culham, Mr. J. H. Craig, and Mr. Anthony Adamson.

Special thanks are also due to Mr. N. Cauchon of Ottawa, whose expert knowledge of town planning and housing was made available to the Committee. In another field the contributions of Dr. FitzGerald, Director of the School of Hygiene of the University of Toronto, and of Dr. Defries, the Associate Director, were equally useful. Mr. W. F. Prendergast also rendered valuable aid in a variety of fields.

To Miss Irene M. Biss, of the Department of Economics of the University of Toronto, we are indebted for expert assistance in framing and testing the questionnaires used in our surveys.

The final arrangement and editing of the Report were undertaken by Mr. A. F. Wynne Plumtre of the same Department whose assistance was invaluable to the Committee.

Space does not admit acknowledgment of the services of many more individuals and groups. We trust that they will not consider us ungrateful: and we feel confident that they, like ourselves, will feel amply rewarded for any efforts they have taken in this Report, to which they have lent assistance, contributes to the future health and happiness of the least fortunate citizens of Toronto.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. CONCLUSIONS

Our survey of Toronto housing conditions reveals that there are thousands of families living in houses which are insanitary, verminous, and grossly overcrowded. The Committee confidently estimates that the number of dwellings which for these and other reasons constitute a definite menace to the health and decency of the occupants is certainly not less than 2,000 and may be more than 3,000. In addition there are probably half as many houses again which, while not in the same sense menacing, nevertheless lack the elementary amenities of life.

Bad houses are scattered all across the city; but they have clustered in down-town districts, conspicuously in Moss Park and the Ward. Here the evils of the houses themselves are aggravated by the incessant traffic and by the proximity of factories and warehouses. Here the problem of reconstruction is most urgent.

Bad houses are not only a menace: they are active agents of destruction. The Committee is satisfied from its investigations and enquiries that they destroy happiness, health and life. They destroy morality and family ties. They destroy the basis of society itself by their destruction of self-respect and their promotion of delinquency and crime.

Housing conditions are bad because there are many families which cannot earn enough to pay for decent and healthful dwellings. In the lowest income group of society the insecurity of employment and the inadequacy of wages do not permit the payment of rentals much in excess of \$10 to \$15 per month in good times. In bad times unemployment may throw the whole burden of their rent, together with other relief, upon private charity or the

public purse. On the other hand, such are the costs of land, construction, maintenance and, above all, interest, that reasonably decent dwellings of a suitable size cannot be provided on a commercial basis for less than \$25 to \$30 per month. It is even less possible for the poorest group to buy, than it is for them to rent, adequate accommodation. Home ownership is impossible.

There are various ways of controlling city development and minimising the extent of bad housing. The easiest, and, in the case of all modern cities, the earliest method is the imposition of regulations regarding the location, structure and amenities of new and existing buildings. Such regulations exist in Toronto. But they have been inadequate to prevent the abominable housing conditions which our Report has detailed. They have been inadequate to prevent the general decay of whole areas, the reduction of city assessments and revenues, the wasteful use of street space, the insufficient provision of play spaces and community parks, and the intrusion of industry into residential areas. The inadequacy of these regulations is thus made plain. It is even a matter for surprise that they have achieved any degree of effectiveness, because the responsibility for their formulation and execution is dispersed among a variety of civic departments. No unified control exists. It would be most difficult either to secure the comprehensive planning and zoning of development which a modern city requires, or to carry out a farsighted plan if one were devised. A city planning authority is an urgent necessity. Its existence would greatly facilitate positive measures of housing control, for it would educate the public to consider and support projects of slum clearance, outskirts development, and general civic reconstruction.

Not only were bad housing conditions discovered, but the presence of a serious housing shortage was also detected. A surplus of households is at present absorbed by doubling-up and overcrowding. If reasonably full employment were to return and marriages delayed by depression were to take place it is probable that a shortage of some 25,000 dwelling units would become apparent.

The community is responsible, we believe, for the provision of satisfactory dwellings for those who are too poor to afford them. This principle is widely if not universally accepted by European countries; and has been the basis of low-cost housing development in Great Britain since before the war. Toronto must follow the example of the leading British cities. The responsibility must be shouldered. The time for reconstruction is here.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions of our investigation are very briefly outlined above. Our recommendations follow inevitably from them.

Specifically, we recommend

1. That a City Planning Commission for Toronto Be Established Immediately.

It is essential that a City Planning Commission be established forthwith. This would be desirable even if there were no problems of housing in existence. The lack of a single body to plan and guide urban development should be a matter of concern to all the citizens of Toronto. It is remarkable that property owners, industrialists, business men, taxpayers and voters, should so long have permitted their interests to remain unguarded.

For there is no citizen who does not stand to profit, in the long run, from a beautiful, orderly and conveniently planned city: there is none who does not stand to lose from the waste of a city which sprawls haphazard at its outskirts and which decays in congestion at its heart. But when we add to the need for a body to plan and guide future development the immediate necessity for reconstructing certain areas, where housing conditions are beyond the toleration of civic conscience and civic pride alike, then the case for a City Planning Commission becomes overwhelming. To undertake the reconstruction of these areas, at considerable trouble and expense, without ensuring that the development of the city would be such as to improve, rather than degrade, their surroundings or that equally obnoxious conditions would not develop elsewhere, such a policy would be to reject the light which is available and to leap wilfully into the dark.

The detailed composition and powers of such a Commission are matters which are not strictly within our terms of reference. We would, however, suggest that a chairman and seven other competent, disinterested and independent citizens should be appointed by the City Council. These Commissioners should hold office without remuneration for a period of three or four years, and retire in rotation. The Commission should appoint an expert in city planning who would be a full-time, salaried official and the head of its paid staff. The powers of the Commission should be investigatory and advisory. Executive functions must remain vested in the elected representatives of the citizens. Part of the work of the existing Town Planning Department should be taken over by the Commission.

2. That the Civic Departments Should Eliminate the Existing Unfit Houses as Soon as Possible.

Our investigation indicates that 2,000 to 3,000 houses in Toronto are a menace to the health of their inhabitants. It is very difficult, under existing regulations and legislation, for the Department of Health or the Department of Buildings to condemn a dwelling as dangerous: for legal proof of danger must be forthcoming. Our fourth recommendation concerns the necessary changes in legislation. But whatever their handicaps, from lack either of legislation or of popular support, the aim of these Departments should be to improve or replace all houses which fall below the Minimum Standard of Health and Decency which this Committee has used, and to raise as soon as possible the lowest level of Toronto housing to the Minimum Standard of Amenities.

We recognise that a sudden general condemnation and demolition of 2,000 dwellings is impracticable; for it would lead to an intensification of the existing housing shortage and would increase the widespread hardships of overcrowding. The process would indeed be intolerably slow were it not accompanied by vigorous projects of rehousing.

3. That the City Should Initiate Extensive Projects for the Demolition of Slums and the Provision of Low-Cost Houses.

The existing conditions of overcrowding, combined with the prevalence of insanitary and structurally defective houses, make the need for new dwellings most urgent. In Chapter VI we presented three schemes, one of them in some detail, for the reconstruction of one of Toronto's worst blocks of houses. Some such plan should be undertaken without delay. In addition to its immediate value it should prove a most useful experiment for the

guidance of future policy. This policy should be based upon the principle that when reconstruction is carried on in areas which are adjacent there is a mutual increase of effectiveness.

The execution of all such proposals as may be adopted should be placed in the hands of a Board of Directors responsible to the City Council. This Board would of necessity cooperate closely and continuously with the City Planning Commission. The administration of the rebuilt areas must be in the hands of persons of such a calibre and temperament as will gain the confidence and co-operation of the tenants in the payment of rents, the preservation of the property, and the promotion of community activities and pride.

4. That the City Should Seek the Necessary Co-operation of the Federal and Provincial Governments in Achieving These Objectives.

The Province must enact certain legislation if the programme outlined above is to be fully effective. First, it should extend and improve the existing town planning legislation in order to give full powers to cities to carry on broad, effective schemes of town planning. An amended Act, we think, should provide for a Provincial Bureau of Town Planning and Housing, which would promote the development, all over the Province, of adequate policies regarding planning and housing.

Secondly, the Provincial Health Act should be amended (or special housing legislation should be passed) to set up standards of fit housing and to give full powers to municipal health officers to order the repair or the demolition of dwellings that do not measure up to them.

Thirdly, new legislation is necessary in order that extensive properties for housing schemes may be purchased at fair prices. Three principles, new to the Provincial code, should be accepted in such legislation. First, following British precedent, no compensation should be payable for a building which has been condemned by the local Medical Officer of Health. Secondly, in any other case one of the main guides to compensation for expropriation should be the net rental of land and buildings during the past seven years, capitalised at the prevailing rate of interest paid by private builders. Thirdly, the maximum compensation payable should be 150 per cent. of the local assessment of land and buildings.

No doubt the Provincial government would hesitate to take action on these important matters solely for the benefit of the City of Toronto. But this is not implied in our proposals. Other communities in the Province have housing problems. If our proposals for Provincial legislation are good for Toronto they are probably good for other places as well. The new legislation should, we think, be so framed that it may be applicable to all urban communities and that it may give Provincial leadership in matters of town planning and housing.

From both the Provincial and Federal governments financial assistance for projects of reconstruction should be sought. Both governments have in the past given aid to public works as a means of unemployment relief; and further expenditures may be forthcoming under the Dominion Relief Act, 1933, and similar legislation. Both governments stand to gain from the decreased burden of unemployment relief and from the increased prosperity and public revenues which all such expenditures promote; and they stand to gain

more especially from the works which we recommend because better housing increases health and happiness and diminishes delinquency and crime.

It should be urged on the Dominion government particularly that no public works grants are so urgently needed as those for the rehousing of the poorest members of the community; further, that in order to make such grants most effective, a National Housing Commission should be appointed to assist Provincial and municipal housing authorities in the formulation of plans, in the choice of materials, and possibly, if a nation-wide housing scheme can be initiated, in securing economies by the large-scale purchase of such materials.

In summary, then, we recommend a serious and sustained public attack on the problem of bad housing in Toronto, by means of a modern and efficient system of town planning, a vigorous policy of repairing or demolishing unfit dwellings, and the building of new low-cost houses as rapidly as possible. While the City of Toronto would be the leading governmental body concerned in this programme, it would require generous co-operation and assistance from the Province and the Dominion. Beginning at once with an experimental scheme of new building, such as that outlined in Chapter VI of our Report, reconstruction should proceed at an accelerating rate so that within a few years thousands of good, new houses may replace the present unfit buildings and meet the housing shortage which we now face.

The immediate initiation of this programme would have the great merit of stimulating employment and reducing the need for relief. Over a period of years it should do much more than this. It should eliminate a serious reproach to the city. It should produce a healthier, happier, more civilized community. It should make Toronto a better place in which to live, not only for the poorer people immediately benefited, but also for the more prosperous citizens. It should make Toronto worthy of the name, "A City of Homes".