



Public Housing – Building Toward a Great New Canada, 1965

By The Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson, Prime Minister of Canada

Speech to the Ontario Association of Housing Authorities, September 1965

Housing problems are not confined to cities. There is a great deal to be done in rural housing and in that of smaller communities. We are more aware now than we were that slum conditions are not peculiar to crowded metropolitan areas. But city and suburban life is increasingly becoming identified for better or for worse with the Canadian way of life, and we think mostly now of housing problems in that context.

Today, of the total population of Canada, about 70 per cent live in cities and towns, and this proportion — in Canada as in other countries — is increasing at a rapid rate.

So cities are now the centers of our society; the place for the great human experiences of most of us.

In the cities of today, squalor and luxury, sordid exploitation and unselfish service, skillful planning and hopeless disorder, exist side by side.

In contemporary civilization the city is the place of the most startling contrasts. I suppose it always has been so, but today a growing social conscience is insistent on doing something about the contrasts. We no longer accept the fact that Skid Row and Park Avenue should co-exist.

The city today represents the convenience of concentration, as the suburbs — and even more the country — represent the escape of dispersion.

Many people regret this concentration in huge packed urban communities, with all the social and economic problems involved. We still tend to couple the good life with rural virtues and simple rural living, and the city with confusion and corruption, the place where the “slickers” come from. The rural, small-town traditions, based on security, simplicity and conformity of life, seem to be destroyed completely in the metropolis.

The city seems, above all, to end all hope of a healthy good-neighbourhood life. There is, of course, suburbia, with its country-urban compromises and its tidy conventional organization of neighbourliness. Even for the city itself, planners are now hoping to escape

megalopolis by producing “towns within cities”. We are now getting a kind of self-contained vertical suburbia, though without the essential ingredients of a “back yard”. One development in New York is advertised as “Suburbia in the Heart of Manhattan”.

It is not going to work. These developments may be the last work in push-button technological living but, as one expert put it, they “steadily contract the boundaries of the self-sufficient person while expanding those of the public particle.”¹

Who wants to be a “public particle”, even in the most super-modern, ultra-efficient housing development?

An American city planner, complaining that everything was being sacrificed to streamlined utility and functionalism, wrote recently: “We need to worry much more about the ‘useless’ things than we do about the ‘useful’ things; to guard the air and the trees and the flowers and the birds and their metaphoric and more elusive counterparts in the realm of the spirit; to look upon the loss of an orchestra or an opera company or a resident theatre as a calamity as great as the removal of a shoe factory to some other region where wages and taxes are lower.”²

But who is going to do the worrying about — and the paying for — the “useless” things?

I don’t want to depreciate the importance of comfort and convenience brought about by the startling advance of technology. This has, I know, produced many and great benefits to human living. To those ivory tower intellectuals who complain about the deadening effect of material improvements on the soul, I think of my mother drawing water from a well in the woodshed, washing by hand over a corrugated tin board and struggling with the home production and repair of clothes via a needle and thread or an ancient sewing machine.

Yet I have to admit that technology, while it has eased many of the burdens of life, has not done much to increase man’s ability to control his environment, maintain himself in it, or adapt himself to its changes.

As Professor Burchard, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, puts it:

“The marginal gains experienced by those who have better housing may at some point not begin to compensate for the slow descent of the city to a uniform and dreary plateau on which every one, wise and foolish, alert and dull, sensitive and insensitive, young and old, unconventional and conventional, must in the end live and thereby become foolish, dull, insensitive, old and conventional!”

Cities and housing projects in cities — like countries — should, of course, have a character, an individuality that is more than structural. When they do, they usually owe it to the fact that at some time certain public-spirited individuals or groups, with foresight and vision, planned ahead; and looked ahead.

¹ Robert L. Heilbroner in “The Reporter” — “The Dilemmas of Abundance”

² “Man and the Modern City” — “The Limitations of Utilitarianism as a Basis for Determining Urban Joy” by John Ely Burchard

They were always a few — and they were often opposed by the majority. It is this kind of practical idealism that we need today. As housing authorities you have to be concerned with the practical side of planning, of course. But you are also concerned with its non-material aspect, so that shelter will mean more than a roof; will make its own contribution not only to living but to the good life.

In urban development, you have to worry, in other words, not only about plumbing, but about philosophy. As the President of the Carnegie Corporation has put it:

“We must have respect for both our plumbers and our philosophers, or neither our pipes nor our theories will hold water.”

At the moment, however, I suspect that this philosophic aspect is not your primary worry as you contemplate current housing problems.

Your immediate problem is not so much the right of the soul to expand, but the necessity for everybody to have a decent dwelling; not to make all homes mansions, but to ensure that none of them will be hovels. It is only a very rare soul that can expand in a hovel.

This objective of decent housing simply has to be achieved in our democratic society. Thanks to men like you, we are making good progress in this country toward that objective.

I hope and believe we can make much further progress by developing and strengthening the procedures we have worked out in this country, which are based on a combination of public and private enterprise, of group planning and individual initiative. That is the best way.

The chairman of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, Edmund Bacon, asked recently:

“Should housing become a public utility with the whole city defined as an operating unit for which we can establish specific requirements of performance with the regulation and inspection we now have for public utilities? This would mean organization and control of the whole urban complex.”

God forbid. And for the very reason given by Mr. Bacon himself when he added, to the words I have just quoted, the caution:

“How can we then provide for the kind of individual freedom which has been characteristic of urban living?”

Do we have to organize everything today by state action in the interest of a mechanical efficiency which will ultimately reduce us all to cyphers in an equation? I hope not.

Voluntary and private action, however, will be quite inadequate without governmental support and assistance. In Canada this means support from different levels of government. This, in its turn, means co-operation between those levels.

The co-operation of the federal and provincial and municipal levels of government on housing is only one example, but a very important example, of the necessity of working together, and of what can be done by it.

As it happens the federal government's contribution to such co-operation often takes the form of providing the money — which it has to raise from Canadian taxpayers — which the provincial governments spend.

As has often been pointed out, there is something objectionable in principle when one government raises money and another government spends it. But it is necessary in our federation, where wealth and resources are unevenly distributed between provinces and where there can be equalization only by federal action. So federal assistance will continue to be necessary. The federal government, however, while recognizing its obligations in this matter, has also three other responsibilities that should go with financial assistance:

1. To interest itself in helping to ensure that the assistance that is given achieves the results that are desired.
2. To set up national standards which will be objectives for the provinces to achieve.
3. To make sure that the poorer provinces get the special help necessary to reach these objectives.

That the federal government — even in matters for which it has no constitutional responsibility — is increasingly discharging its political responsibility for financial help — especially to poorer provinces — is shown by the following figures.

The total value of federal government payments to, and tax arrangements for, the provinces in the current fiscal year will be, it is estimated, \$2,600 millions — an increase of almost 40% in the last three years.

This is part of the answer to the question from the federal taxpayer: "Where does the money go?"

Of this amount, equalization payments and special grants to the less wealthy provinces account for \$311 millions.

The largest amount is for unconditional grants and tax abatements which now reach \$1,462 millions.

Federal housing assistance, as you know, has not been overlooked and now reaches many millions of dollars per year.

I have been very conscious today of the non-political nature of my appearance here. But I am also aware that your work, your interest, is — like mine — "political" in the broad and best sense of that broad word. I really do not know how people who work for the best interest of their country and of the public can be described at any time as being "non-political". And it is the widest possible extension of this type of political interest and political work that we must encourage in our country.

Thus, your effort in the field of public housing is both vital to, and part of, the overriding Canadian interest and Canadian effort today: that of building a great country — of building toward a great new Canada.

The foundation of this great national project was the work of our forefathers, of the Fathers of Confederation. Their foundation was for all ages. It envisioned our national “house” as being one for multi-family use, and that use was incorporated into the foundation.

Today and tomorrow, it is for us to build the superstructure — and to build it as solidly as the foundation we inherited; never to forget our forefathers’ commitment to multiple-family dwelling in this great national structure; and never permit even one brick or one plank of it to be jerry-built.

This building of Canada that we are undertaking together is our biggest housing project. Like you, I am confident that the national home that results will be greater even than the dreams of those who will dwell in it.