

## WHO'S GOING TO ADDRESS OUR GROWING HOUSING, HOMELESSNESS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DISASTER?

David Hulchanski

Wouldn't it be nice if we had a national plan for addressing Canada's growing housing problems?

It would have chapters on the human right to adequate housing, on the plight of Canada's homeless population, on the urban and rural living conditions of our Aboriginal people, on tenants and the lack of new affordable rental housing, and on the difficulties low-income homeowners face.

It would say things such as: "The federal role in housing must not be a residual one" because the "connection between housing and other aspects of both social and economic policy means that the federal government must take a lead role."

It would note that "affordable housing has become an increasingly unattainable goal for too many segments of our population."

It would argue that our "market housing system has not responded adequately to all of society's needs," that "all Canadians have the right to decent housing, in decent surroundings, at affordable prices," and that there "is currently a vacuum in federal policy and direction."

It would make a number of very specific recommendations — 25 should do it.

It would call on the federal government to be the "vigorous leader of [these] comprehensive efforts" because "only the national government has the financial resources to address the full dimensions of the needs of this country."

These quotes are in fact from an excellent 50-page national housing blueprint to which many CHRA members contributed.

The report, co-authored by Paul Martin — yes, that Paul Martin, our current Minister of Finance — and MP

Joe Fontana, is *Finding Room: Housing Solutions for the Future, Report of the National Liberal Caucus Task Force on Housing*.

It was released after an extensive high-profile national consultation process in May 1990. Its analysis and the 25 recommendations remain an excellent basis for a comprehensive housing strategy for the country.

In it Mr. Martin complains that "the primary goal of Conservative housing policy has been to cut the deficit" and that "the Conservative government is unable or unwilling to address the issue in a meaningful fashion."

Even before enough time had passed for his report to gather much dust, the Liberal government made Canada the only western nation — perhaps the only national government — to totally withdraw from playing a role in social housing.

The federal government ended its spending on new social housing at about the same time as the United Nations condemned Canada for failing to make progress on decreasing poverty and addressing housing problems — the 1993 report on Canada's compliance with the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Canada signed this UN treaty and agreed to implement it in August 1976.

Even worse, the attempt to pass down to the provinces and territories all responsibility for the existing stock of social housing began in earnest. All this is the exact opposite of what the federal Liberal party called for in its pre-election housing task force.

We now have a much larger housing problem. Shocking indicators are easy to catalogue.

There is virtually no new private sector rental housing construction in the country; only a couple of

provinces are building a few social housing units per year; and the real income of renters has dramatically fallen during the 1990s.

One inevitable result is more, many more, homeless people. The fastest-growing populations using emergency shelters are youth and families with children. Women with children are now about 40 per cent of Toronto's emergency shelter users. About 5,000 different children use Toronto's emergency shelters each year.

Adequate housing and housing-related support services for all Canadians are well within our nation's financial means. The combined annual spending on housing assistance by all levels of government in Canada is about one per cent of their budgets. Spending another one per cent would not affect the well-being of taxpaying Canadians.

Let's dust off all those copies of *Finding Room: Housing Solutions for the Future*. The future is here. The scope and scale of homelessness is now a national health, housing and human rights disaster. Our nation's housing problems are the predictable result of private- and public-sector policies. We can and must do the opposite.

The process can only start, as Mr. Martin noted eight years ago, with a commitment by the national government. Let's begin by implementing recommendation #14: the federal government "convene at the earliest possible date, a National Housing Forum to discuss the development of a national housing policy and related strategies ... aimed at alleviating the housing crisis in Canada." ■

*David Hulchanski is a professor of housing and community development at the University of Toronto and a former member of the CHRA Board of Directors.*