

Finance minister should recall own words from past – Martin needs to heed the homeless

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Many eyes will be on Finance Minister Paul Martin as he rises in the House of Commons on Monday to deliver the federal budget. But few will look with more intensity than will homeless people and their advocates.

The reason? There is a disturbing new trend in Canada's homelessness disaster. Hostels for the homeless are opening palliative-care facilities to help an increasing number of homeless people die with some measure of dignity.

The latest to open a place for the dying is an Ottawa hostel, which provides shelter beds for 135 men, with another 20 crowded onto mats on the floor. Ten homeless people died in this shelter during 1999, prompting workers to open a special unit to care for the dying.

In Toronto, a downtown hospital provides palliative services to shelter residents. Death is no stranger to the homeless.

Stephen Hwang, a University of Toronto professor of medicine and epidemiologist at the F.K. Morrow Inner City Health Research Unit of St. Michael's Hospital, tracked 9,000 homeless men from 1995 to 1997. He identified more than 200 deaths - about three deaths every two weeks.

Since homeless men represent fewer than half of those using shelters, and there are more homeless people today, Hwang concluded: "These numbers would be expected to be higher today."

As Martin rises in the Commons, Canadians should ask themselves:

Why is this human crisis of homelessness not treated in the same way as other crises in which people lose their housing and have their lives disrupted? For example, the icestorm in eastern Canada or the Manitoba flood?

Why are governments not responding to the physical and mental harm, including death, caused by being homeless?

Why are they ignoring the spread of diseases, such as tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and hepatitis?

Why is it that our public officials fail to recognize that tens of thousands of people without housing, adequate food and health care constitute one of the largest and most serious national disasters that Canada has ever faced?

Homelessness is the most visible manifestation of a bigger problem: a nation-wide housing crisis among lower-income Canadians.

At a time when economists say Canada is witnessing strong economic growth, a growing number of households are caught in a vicious squeeze between rising rents and falling incomes.

There is a dwindling supply of affordable housing and growing need. In Toronto alone, hundreds of people are evicted every week because they can't afford to pay the rent. Across Canada, more than 830,000 tenants (that's at least 2.2 million women, men and children) are paying more than half their income on rent, putting them dangerously close to the streets.

None of this is news to Martin.

Ten years ago, as housing critic for the then opposition Liberals, he produced a detailed blueprint for a national housing strategy.

Here's what he said in 1990: "Canada is presently confronted with a major housing crisis . . . The federal government has abandoned its responsibilities with regards to housing problems.

. . .

"The housing crisis is growing at an alarming rate and the government sits there and does nothing; it refuses to apply the urgent measures that are required to reverse this deteriorating situation."

On the role of the federal government, Martin concluded that "leadership must come from one source; and a national vision requires some national direction."

Is there anything wrong with the logic of his argument 10 years later? If our federal government does not respond to this national crisis, who will? In December of last year, the federal government announced it would spend \$753 million over three years on a homelessness strategy.

Claudette Bradshaw, federal minister responsible for the homeless, and federal Housing Minister Alfonso Gagliano called it a "first step."

Almost all the money will help to improve shelters and services for people who are already homeless. Some of the homeless will be more comfortable, but they won't be any less homeless. There will also be more homeless Canadians.

Homeless people and their advocates are looking to Martin to take the next step: a national housing strategy. A massive investment is needed to deal with the massive crisis sweeping our country.

The so-called "One Percent Solution," calls on the federal government to invest \$2 billion a year in new housing and services for the homeless. It's a

modest investment, when set against the deaths and devastation of homelessness.

For that amount, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) estimates that 20,000 households could find new homes, another 10,000 could see their substandard housing repaired and an additional 40,000 households would get subsidies to help them afford the rent. The federation wants the federal government to help 70,000 households a year for an entire decade.

On Monday, will Martin deliver a truly comprehensive housing strategy or simply offer cold words of comfort to the nation's homeless population?

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