

Housing blueprint moulders in the archives

By J. David Hulchanski

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Imagine for a moment that Canada had a national plan for addressing its growing housing problems. It would assert the human right to adequate housing, recognize the plight of Canada's homeless population, comment on the urban and rural living conditions of our aboriginal people, analyze the lack of new, affordable rental housing and its effect on tenants, and describe the difficulties of low-income homeowners.

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

It would acknowledge 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 - let's say 25 - of specific recommendations.

There is no need to imagine it. It exists already, in a 50-page national housing blueprint written by Paul Martin - yes, that Paul Martin, our minister of finance - and MP Joe Fontana. It is called Finding Room: Housing Solutions For The Future, Report Of The National Liberal Caucus Task Force On Housing.

It was released after extensive national consultation in May, 1990. Its analysis and 25 recommendations form an excellent basis for a comprehensive national housing strategy.

In it, 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."

Yet, within a few months of taking office, the Liberal government withdrew completely from its role in social housing, making Canada the only Western nation - perhaps the only nation anywhere - to do so.

At about the same time, the United Nations condemned Canada for failing to address poverty and housing problems in a 1993 report on Canada's

compliance with the U.N. Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Canada had signed and agreed to implement this covenant in 1976.

Worse yet, the Liberal government began in earnest to pass to the provinces and territories full responsibility for the existing stock of social housing, directly contradicting the recommendations of its own pre-election housing task force.

Canada's housing problems are now much worse than they were in 1993. The indicators are easy to catalogue. There is virtually no new private sector rental housing construction in the country. Only a couple of provinces build a few social housing units each year. The real income of renters has fallen dramatically during the 1990s.

The result? More and more homeless people. Young people and young families are filling emergency shelters. Women with children now make up about 40 per cent of Toronto's emergency shelter users. About 5,000 individual 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 1 per cent of their budgets. Spending another 1 per cent would not affect the well-being of taxpaying Canadians.

The scope and scale of homelessness is 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 reverse the trend.

The process can only start, as Martin noted eight years ago, with a commitment by Ottawa. Let's dust off those copies of Finding Room: Housing Solutions For The Future. We could begin by implementing recommendation No. 14, which requires the federal government to "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."

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