

Homelessness, poverty and neglect - in Ontario

NDP Socialist Caucus – January 27, 2007

Homelessness must be our struggle today. It is what is downwind from poverty; it is what is downwind for *ordinary* people, from Ottawa, to Kingston, to Belleville, to Cobourg, to Peterborough, to Oshawa, to York Region, to Toronto, to Guelph, to Hamilton, to Windsor, to Sarnia-Lambton, to London, to Sudbury, to Kenora, to Thunder Bay. These are the places where I have visited and I have seen it.

What I have seen in these communities is:

- *long* waiting lists for housing,
- essentially *no new* social housing being built since 1994,
- wonderful and good people proudly putting together *emergency but band-aid responses* – food banks, the opening of church basements called “In from the Cold” where ‘the guests’ are invited in. Who are the guests? Displaced people – who are invited in usually around 6 pm, cared for well, – given a hot meal and a mat on the floor, but asked to leave by 7 or 8 am. The next night the pattern repeats itself at a new church or synagogue. Oh – I should add this only occurs in the winter months. Imagine yourself sleeping 7 nights at a different friends’ house each night. It might be hard after a while.
- in every community there are *not enough shelter beds*,
- in every community there is the *use of crummy motels* that municipalities are using for emergency shelter for families with children because they do not have enough shelter space and they won’t open more shelters,
- in almost every community *no emergency shelter that is specifically for families with children* and that’s why the motel use – and people are not enraged at that!
- in every community *growing hunger*;
- in every community people dying homeless and in some cases receiving palliative care in a shelter.

We must get angry about this!

South African activist Steven Biko said:

“The most powerful weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.”

We must get angry and fight back.

I don’t think that in the minds of Ontarians, we really believe yet that all of our people have a right to housing, and that is a problem. How else to explain the Canadian NGO’s

2005 submission to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Working Group, that reported Canada has:

“no coherent policy of national standards to ensure that the right to adequate housing is enjoyed by all and particularly by poor and disadvantaged groups, such as low-income women.”

Last year, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights named Canada’s Human Rights violations. Here is just one of them:

#62. The Committee reiterates its recommendation that the federal, provincial, and territorial governments address homelessness and inadequate housing as a national emergency...and implement a national strategy for the reduction of homelessness that includes measurable goals and timetables, consultation and collaboration with affected communities

Isn’t housing a human right?

Michael Wilson didn’t seem to think so when, as finance minister through most of the Mulroney Conservative government, he presided over about \$1.8 billion in cuts to housing programs.

Don Mazankowski, the last finance minister in the previous Conservative government didn’t think so, when he presided over the decision to suspend funding for new social housing.

Paul Martin didn’t think so, when as finance minister he made massive cuts in health and social spending and announced the downloading of national housing programs in the 1996 budget – which left Canada as one of the only countries in the world without a national housing program. He didn’t think so when he led the commercialization of Canada Mortgage and Housing in 1998, which included changes to the National Housing Act, eroding the ability of CMHC to deal with the housing crisis.

Several months after we declared homelessness a national disaster in 1998, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien appointed ***Claudette Bradshaw*** as Minister Responsible for Homelessness. This was a first - Canada had the distinction of having a Minister Responsible for Homelessness but not a Minister with full responsibility for housing.

In fact, we’ve had many federal Ministers with housing responsibilities, but it would appear that none of them thought their role included the building of housing.

There was ***Minister Diane Marleau, Minister Alfonso Gagliano, Minister David Collenette, Minister Steve Mahoney, Minister John McCallum, Minister Joe Fontana, Minister Diane Finlay and now it isdo you know? – Monte Solberg.***

We know too well, the housing damage done in Ontario by successive governments. 17,000 units of housing cut by the neo-conservative Mike Harris government which would have housed up to 40,000 people, 21.6 % cuts to social assistance rates that catapulted people into homelessness, downloading of housing to municipalities, amalgamation of communities, de-listing of services, etc.

James Flaherty, the current federal finance minister, who we know well in Ontario, doesn't seem to think housing is a right. He was poised to kill all federal homelessness funding, complete the privatization of CMHC, and end all federal housing funding following the roll-out of the C-48 housing dollars in two years time. One people's victory is that a number of communities, particularly in Quebec and Ontario fought back to make sure the federal homeless funding program – whose acronym is SCPI was continued in some form and that was a WIN! With two years of funding promised.

What's happening in Ontario?

The Ontario government spends about 14 cents per person per day on affordable housing – less than half the per capita spending than in 2000 – even though the population has grown and housing needs to continue to grow – waiting lists get longer in every community, housing deteriorates (both public and private), and waiting lists and family circumstances lead to overcrowding in housing.

So, what does happen when we don't believe in and we don't fund the right to housing in Canada? What happens when Ontario blocks \$392.5 million in federal housing monies already set aside in a trust fund for Ontarians.

This is what we are fighting – literally on the streets in communities right now. I want to highlight 5 issues.

1. ***unhealthy shelter conditions*** that leave people vulnerable to bedbugs...to tuberculosis...to emerging viruses like Norwalk or SARS; people are not meant to live like this. Some shelters still do not meet the UN Standard for Refugee camps. Last week TDRC took **secret video footage** in an overflow area of a city run shelter exposing what we were hearing from homeless people directly – people sleeping on the hallway floor, in the dining room, on the floor, no beds, no mats, no blankets, lights kept on all night and people forced to leave at 6 am.
2. ***attacks*** (physical attacks and policy attacks) on people outside; people forced to sleep outside using cardboard and tarpaulin, or living in cars and vans – **we are fighting back at the rules that prohibit agencies from delivering survival supplies** (food and sleeping bags) to these people;
3. for these people outside, an ***increased intolerance*** for people sleeping outdoors; so evident that even the National Post ('City quietly evicting homeless' by Peter Kuitenbrouwer, January 24/07) exposed it this week in a quite remarkable story; and how is it that union workers – city

employees agree **to further torment homeless people by participating with New York models of practice by removing people's belongings or putting them into garbage trucks?**

4. **laws against homelessness** such as Toronto's City Hall by-law criminalizing homeless people sleeping on the square, a recent Mayoralty race where Mayor Miller's primary opposition Jane Pitfield repeatedly pushed her idea of quality of life which translated into laws and policing against homeless people. Her mission is now carried on by Case Ootes who wants to work with Police Chief Bill Blair in Toronto to introduce a by-law prohibiting panhandling in tourist areas. Why is this a concern for all of you? I know you won't support the formalization of economic apartheid zones in Toronto. I plan this week to call on the labour movement, in particular those representing the hotel and restaurant workers to take a position against this.
5. The **dismantling and gutting** of services. Growing evidence that systematically we are losing our services for homeless and poor people in our downtown core(s). Funding neglect and funding restraints, growing NIMBYism, organization's ideological shift to 'programs' instead of ensuring life-saving shelter services are provided, and of course these were worsened by withdrawal of provincial dollars a number of years ago.

Where are our champions?

We sure have had a champion with Cheri DiNovo and her campaign for a \$10 minimum wage. She arrived in Queen's Park with tremendous energy, so grounded in the community she comes from and informed with years of activism.

We need leadership like that and it has to come just from all of us as well. Nothing will be freely given to poor people – we're going to have to fight for it.

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