

From Katrina to Winnipeg

Natural and man-made disasters:

How we treat our displaced people.

October 16, 2006 - Winnipeg

Thank you for inviting me back to Winnipeg. On my last visit to your City I had a fantastic tour, courtesy of Tom Carter. I had the opportunity to visit a number of community based agencies and housing sites, I visited your Mountain Equipment Co-op store, and I was able to walk the picket line with your locked-out CBC workers.

Winnipeg is a fantastic place to be talking about housing, housing history and solutions to homelessness that go beyond giving homeless people a job cleaning up the street.

When I was here last on September 18, 2005 I gave a talk called "**Research with a Pulse**" during the early days of the Hurricane Katrina disaster. Like New Orleans, and more than any other large city in Canada, Winnipeg has suffered repeated physical, social and economic injury due to severe flooding.

As you may recall, 1997 could have been a really tough year for this City when it was hit with the "Flood of the Century" and just weeks earlier, on April 5th to the 8th, the so-called "Blizzard of the Century". The Red River did force the evacuation of over 28,000 people in Manitoba and it had a direct economic impact of roughly \$500 million, but Winnipeg itself largely escaped because the City began planning and preparing months in advance for a worse case scenario. 3,000 civic employees along with more than 8,500 men and women from the Canadian Forces and thousands of volunteers from across the country came together in advance of the flood to prevent a disaster.

Louisiana on the other hand, lacked an adequate plan to evacuate New Orleans, despite years of research that predicted a disaster equal to or worse than Katrina. Even after a disaster test, run a year earlier, that exposed weaknesses in evacuation and recovery, state officials still failed to come up with any solutions. The flooding of New Orleans, like Canada's homeless situation and housing crisis, were man-made disasters that could have been prevented.

The World Health Organization describes a disaster as:

“Any occurrence that causes damage, ecological disruption, loss of human life, deterioration of health and health services on a scale sufficient to warrant an extraordinary response from outside the affected community.”

From the examples of both Winnipeg and Katrina, we are now learning that the devastation caused by nature cannot be isolated from man-made structures, programmes and policies. The point of my talk today is that Canada's homeless situation and housing crisis, like Katrina, were man-made disasters that could easily have been prevented, and in the case of Canada's disaster, it is still not too late to bring about an end to the growing devastation and despair.

Canada's housing history is linked to our military history.

In order to make my point clear, it is probably best that I start with a bit of a history lesson. I want to talk about what seems to be this country's forgotten legacy, our National Housing Programme, but I will begin by putting things into historical context by talking a little bit about my grandfather's story, something my mother reminded me about recently.

My grandfather was away during the Second World War for over 5 years while my grandmother raised four children. He became an employee of the Grand Trunk Railways. There was no union in those days; you were paid only for the time you could work. Working people in his lifetime were subject to horrific strikes and abuse from the police. Later, during his time with the Canadian National

Railway, there were improvements. The union helped to change working conditions. The mechanics at the CNR were closer to the future CAW workers than any other working group and were the beginning of the climb to a middle class.

There was lots of housing to rent when they first moved to Stratford Ontario - small 2-story 3 bedroom brick homes, with hardwood floors, wood stoves in the kitchen and coal furnaces in dark dismal basements. The lots were a nice comfortable size, tree-lined, with cement sidewalks and paved roads. People lived in these houses with up to 10 children. They were not seen as slums.

Before he died at 96 years of age, he told my mom that the middle class, which had appeared in his lifetime, was struggling to maintain their status. He saw that the social benefits achieved after the war were disappearing. He could never understand why there was always money for wars but never a penny for affordable housing and social programs.

My grandfather was a CCF member and he had a sharp political mind. I wish he were here today to help me understand the cruelty and the absurdity of today's political climate. I'm sure that he would be astonished that so many continue to have so little, and that there are so few in power that really seem to care.

One of the social benefits achieved after the war, that he saw us losing was our national housing programme. Most people know the Tommy Douglas story, how we achieved our Medicare programme, but I have learned in my travels across this country, that not many know the history of how we got our national housing programme.

During World War II, the Wartime Housing Corporation built 46,000 units, mostly for war-workers and they also helped repair and modernize thousands of existing units. But, when the war ended, more than a million Canadians in the armed forces were ready to return to peacetime life, creating a housing demand that was unprecedented.

- In 1945, the federal government declared Toronto an "emergency shelter" area, forbidding people from moving there unless they were starting a job

- deemed essential.
- In 1947, Toronto Mayor Saunders put an ad in newspapers saying, “Acute Housing Shortage in Toronto— do not come”.
 - In 1946, 600 homeless veterans protested and took control of the vacant Hotel Vancouver as a protest. They held the building for more than two weeks and due to enormous public sympathy, it was turned into a hostel for up to 1,200 vets until 1948.
 - In 1946, when Ottawa Mayor Stanley Lewis refused to promise housing for Vets, the vets’ leader Franklyn Edward Hanratty ordered an occupation of the barracks. Eleven vets, their wives and 18 children took over the Kildare Barracks, unloading a truck with beds, stoves and washing machines to set up house. More families followed. Later that year, buildings on the site were leased by the City of Ottawa from the federal government for rental housing. (Hmmm...don’t you have empty base housing here in Winnipeg!).
 - Finally, Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation was born (now called Canada Mortgage and Housing).

From the end of World War 2 until 1993 – our national housing program built 650,000 units of affordable housing, housing 2 million Canadians to this day. That is our legacy.

So, what went so terribly wrong?

Recipe for disaster

In 1998, homelessness was declared a national disaster. At that time, I naively thought it would lead to more than just a federal appointment of a Minister Responsible for Homelessness and some emergency relief monies. Many of us thought that it was reasonable to expect that the federal minister responsible for housing might get involved in a solution that would include housing.

But no, that would have been too logical a response.

The beginning of mass homelessness began with the 1993 federal budget, when all new social housing construction was eliminated. More than 175,000 potential new social housing units were lost when the programme was cancelled.

I had the particular vantage point of being a Street Nurse working at what can only be described as the ***epicentre of homelessness in Canada***, at the corner

of Sherbourne and Dundas in downtown east Toronto. It was from that vantage point that I began seeing things I couldn't at first explain, and things I couldn't easily treat or prevent.

In 1995-1996 things got markedly worse. My colleagues and I noticed:

- a new flood of 'home-grown' refugees entering the drop-ins and shelters - people made suddenly homeless due to economic evictions, job loss and housing affordability issues;
- people were sicker and had more serious conditions and complications;
- tuberculosis returned with a vengeance;
- there were signs of malnutrition and not enough food in centres;
- more people were sleeping outside and there were more squats and encampments;
- there were more deaths including the first cluster of deaths, such as 'the three freezing deaths';
- people became stuck in homelessness year after year after year.

Unlike victims of an earthquake or ice-storm, the people I saw were victims of policy - a direct result of the 1993 cancellation by the federal government of the national housing program and the 1995 cancellation of Ontario's housing programme which coincided with the welfare cuts.

I joined with several colleagues to form the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee in the summer of 1998. We wrote a report called the State of Emergency Declaration, which used statistics and referenced the UN Charters that Canada had signed. It was a passionate document, at a very basic literacy level, and it was to the point.

On October 8, 1998 we held a press conference and declared homelessness a **National Disaster**. What we saw was not unique to Toronto. We believed that Toronto was the canary in the mineshaft of homelessness throughout Canada.

Ursula Franklin reminded us that it was a man-made disaster, and here's what those men did:

At the federal level:

- 1984 to 1993 – almost \$2 billion was cut from housing spending
- 1993 – all new housing spending was cancelled
- 1996 – the transfer of housing to the provinces/territories

In Ontario:

- 1995 – all new housing spending was cancelled
- 1995 - welfare rates were cut by almost 22%
- 1998 - housing was downloaded to the municipalities

In the **State of Emergency Declaration (www.tdrc.net)**, we called for two things:

First, that federal emergency relief monies be released to communities across the country so they could provide disaster relief for their rapidly growing homeless populations. This type of effort is what should have happened in the Gulf coast in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Second, we called for a long-term solution, the 1% solution – a National Housing Programme, where all levels of government would spend an additional 1% of their budgets to build affordable housing. The 1% solution originates from **research** done by Professor David Hulchanski, who determined that when our federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments were allocating money towards building social housing, they were spending on average 1% of their budgets.

The first item we called for – the federal emergency relief monies, essentially occurred. Homelessness in Canada was catapulted on the national and international scene and we were shamed by UN condemnations of Canada's record on homelessness. Prime Minister Chrétien appointed Claudette Bradshaw as our first ever **Minister Responsible for Homelessness**. In 2000, 'SCPI' (Supporting Community Partnerships Initiatives) monies were rolled out across the country - hundreds of millions of dollars! So, Canada had the distinction of having a Minister Responsible for Homelessness but not a Minister with full responsibility for housing – even though Alfonso Gagliano was the Minister

Responsible for Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

The hundreds of millions of SCPI dollars, or as I like to call them 'disaster relief monies' have funded new shelter beds, renovations to drop-ins, shelters and food banks, programs that target homeless youth, identification replacement programs, even some transitional housing.

As my good friend and colleague Michael Shapcott says, people were made a little more comfortable but they were still homeless.

That program, as you may know has been recently threatened and is due to be shut down, or 'sunsetting' in March 2007.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my talk, as disasters go, Katrina and homelessness in Canada have far too much in common.

Natural and man-made disasters

We know it's important to be whistle-blowers before a tragedy occurs but it's also important to do so afterwards, no matter how many times the truth has been told and no matter what speaking out can do to your career. During the Toronto International Film Festival, I had the opportunity to see Spike Lee's documentary ***When the levees broke: A Requiem in Four Acts***. He tells it like it is – he had to.

Spike Lee, in describing his reaction to the catastrophe in New Orleans and his motivation for the movie, said:

"It was a very painful experience to see my fellow American citizens, the majority of them African-American, in the dire situation they were in. And I was outraged with the slow response of the federal government."

In the film, the people themselves speak:

"How hard can that be, to bring in food and water?"

“She drowned in her own home!”

“Not just the levees broke -the spirit broke.” (Phyllis Montana LeBlanc)

“Hope is not a job.” (graffiti)

“I want someone to know I’m suffering.”

“Where is my government?”

These quotes are very similar to what homeless people are telling me to tell the politicians when I go see them. For example Nancy told me, ***“tell them that we are dying.”***

For those still living ... there is no home.

Climate experts have pointed out that the first flow of climate refugees has in fact been the people forced to move away from the Gulf Coast in the United States, not the low-lying islands in the Pacific as had been expected. There are an estimated 250,000 people still displaced from New Orleans. Pre-Katrina, 30% of the New Orleans population lived below the poverty line and Lee suggests in his film that class, not just race, was a major contributing factor to the inadequate federal response. You’ll see in Lee’s film the violent emotional reaction by New Orleans residents when they realize they are being called refugees in their own country.

There are painful similarities between the victims of Katrina and those facing poverty and the housing crisis here in Canada. Both cases involve purposeful neglect by policy makers and politicians, for example, decisions to not fund infrastructure whether it be levees or housing, and decisions to hold back promised monies. In both cases huge numbers of people are displaced, dislocated and left to die.

In fact, we know that across Canada:

- 1.8 million people lack adequate shelter
- 300,000 Canadians are probably homeless
- 65,000 are youth
- Over 10,000 are children
- Thousands are forced to sleep outside
- Poverty means you die earlier and get sicker

Earlier this year the United Nations Committee reviewed Canada's status as signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Their statement says that the reported numbers of homeless people in Canada range from 100,000 to 250,000 and in addition that the per cent of Canadians in core housing need (i.e. vulnerable to become homeless) remains high at approximately 15%. The UN recommended that federal, provincial and territorial governments address homelessness and inadequate housing as a ***national emergency***. This is extremely strong language from this august body.

The sudden and recent scare over loss of SCPI monies for this fiscal year meant that we raged across the country and we won the money back. Yet, today, we are still fighting for the program to continue after March 31, 2007.

We are always trying to fight to hold our ground, to save programs from even further cuts or cancellation, let alone getting any new money. When I was here in Winnipeg the last time, I gave the talk called Research with a Pulse where I suggested research had to have a life, a purpose that would make a difference in people's lives – and not just sit on a shelf.

I want to illustrate these points with a recent example of how desperate the fight is for the most basic life-saving programmes.

Danger - Heat wave

During this summer's heat wave, I pleaded with the City of Toronto to alter their formula for calling heat alerts so that alerts could be called early enough to provide people with relief. I pleaded that they not wait as they did several times and call the alert on a Sunday when both social service agencies and media are down to skeleton staff; I begged them to relocate the one 24 hour cooling centre out of the Metro Hall lobby to a more comfortable and accessible location; I begged them to open more than one 24 cooling centre for a city of 2.5 million people; I begged them to provide something more substantial than a cereal bar to people using the cooling centres; and I begged them to modify the City by-law that makes 3rd and 4th floor windows in rooming and boarding homes restricted from opening no more than 100 mm (3 inches).

In addition, Michael Shapcott articulated the need for longer-term solutions, like heat island mitigation strategies such as green roofs, the development of a maximum temperature by-law (similar to the minimum temperature by-law we have in winter that landlords have to comply with), and energy conservation measures for low-income housing. These could include energy rebates for landlords who install air-conditioning and pilot programmes to that effect.

By summer's end, the heat alert formula had not changed, Metro Hall was still designated as the site for the one 24 hour cooling centre, people still only got a cereal bar there and the request to modify the by-law and look at longer term measures seem to be sitting on the shelf. It seems nothing can be done in a Toronto election year except decide to dump our garbage near London.

I'm telling you this story because the lack of innovation meant that thousands of people were left sweltering in hot rooming houses and high-rises, in some cases with room temperatures above 37 degrees Celsius. The people suffering and at elevated heat risk included people living in poverty - the frail elderly, persons experiencing serious mental health or other health challenges, people on psychiatric medications, people living in isolation, with mobility issues, under-housed and homeless.

In Toronto's Parkdale community alone, the estimate is that the number of

people at elevated heat risk is 1,200. By and large they do not have the means, or the energy or the motivation to go to the lobby of a government building to sit and receive a cereal bar.

There were at least 5 heat-related deaths during the 2005 heat wave in Toronto, primarily rooming house tenants. Both the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee and the Toronto Board of Health (of which I'm a member) requested the Coroner consider holding an inquest into the heat-related death of James Howell. One year later, the Coroner advised there would be no inquest because there is nothing to be learned. Despite repeated requests to the Coroner's office, they will not issue that decision to us in writing.

Broad scientific research has shown that the greatest life-saving measures in an extreme heat emergency is access to air conditioning. Yes, it may raise hydro costs, but we are not talking about people who use cappuccino machines, food processors, hair dryers, computers, TV/VCR/DVDs. In some cases we are talking about people who don't even have a fridge or stove, a washer or dryer. Poor and vulnerable populations tend not to be energy hogs.

A/C is no longer a luxury in extreme heat. We need to figure out how we can provide the relief people need. Project Elder Cool in Kansas City installed 426 air conditioners in the homes of vulnerable elderly; the oldest was 106 years old. A common refrain heard by "the air conditioning guys" is "I'm glad to see you!"

Do we really need dozens of deaths before we do something?

Our Katrina

If we had a Spike Lee in Canada I think this is the kind of film he or she would have to make. They would have to show the rest of Canada:

- the shelter conditions that are not meant for long-term living, including some, which I've discovered in communities outside of Toronto that do not meet the UN Standard for

Refugee camps

- the huge number of outdoor encampments that range from cardboard and tarpaulin to more elaborate shacks such as Chris' who lived under Toronto's Gardiner expressway
- the mean-spirited way city officials and even the police collaborate to remove said structures and belongings
- the vulnerabilities of men and women who are pushed away from safer city hall squares and public spaces because of new by-laws and NIMBY neighbours and police who make it clear people are not wanted in public view
- the crummy motels that municipalities are increasingly forced to use for emergency shelter for families with children because they don't have enough shelter space and they won't create spaces
- the intolerable and unhealthy shelter conditions that leave people vulnerable to bedbugs... to tuberculosis... to emerging viruses like Norwalk or SARS...
- the growing hunger and the food shortages in agencies
- the growing hate and discrimination targeted towards homeless people, particularly those with mental health or substance use histories
- the unnecessary and the easily preventable deaths
- and while all this is going on, almost half of the \$1 billion dollars from the 2001 Affordable Housing Programme remains unspent, a significant amount of that in Ontario and Toronto

Then I hope our film would show where our politicians live, where they shop and what they say when they're asked about these issues. Condoleezza Rice had lots of time for shoe shopping during the Katrina aftermath, and I suspect a Canadian Spike Lee would be able to demonstrate that, in the face of our disaster, most of our political leaders have way too much time on their hands.

Pressure and politics

I am very convinced that the public cares about these issues. A recent 'Raising

the Roof' survey showed that 80% of Canadians believe it is possible to solve homelessness. Somehow that sentiment is not being translated into action at the political level.

Historically, when most progress has been made on the housing front it has been during times of minority governments. The current federal government is redefining its role and we must be vigilant, and we must be clear that we insist they have a role in housing.

So, it is critical that you overcome any political differences you might have, and find ways to mobilize. We appreciated the efforts made to join us in Toronto on September 12 to fight for the temporary continuation of SCPI monies.

Politicians hate housing report cards – how have your local politicians done when it comes to money promised, money spent, number of units built and affordability?

November 22 is National Housing Day, the day the big city mayors' caucus of the Federation of Canadian Municipalities first endorsed the 1998 declaration that homelessness was a national disaster. We will be holding a car rally, a form of protest that has been used in the past in Canada. A focus of the day will be on SCPI continuation.

Please, I ask that you start today, to make housing an election issue.

Thank you

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