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Report to LeSage Commission

introduction

what you have heard so far at these hearings

I spoke to LeSage briefly at the Wellesley center hearings. That was with the St. Jamestown crowd. That is what they are like; neolithic people. That is how people are when they are all crowded together and treated with contempt. They did not like the idea that I came there to talk to the commission, not to them.

They have something to say, especially about the destructive effects of the idea that TCHC is going to house absolutely everybody. No matter if they are a threat to other tenants, or the other tenants are a threat to them. They zeroed in on the real point of the Gosling case; why the hell was he in housing in the first place?

what I can tell you

But they can only tell you what the problem is. I can tell you what the solution is. Like most other residents of social housing, I have been much disadvantaged in life. I have lived with complicated and disabling medical problems which were not diagnosed properly for a long time. I still have trouble getting fully appropriate treatment. I have also lived in social housing in three different provinces and for most of my adult life.

But I am also smarter than most social housing residents. While my health improved and I stayed on in social housing, I also educated myself. I have passed some university courses. I maintain web sites and newsletters about various poverty issues. I am now starting to distill what I have learned about social housing policies. I am a very big threat to the management of TCHC and their political protectors.

personal experiences with TCHC & legacy organizations

my own experiences

TCHC and its legacy organizations have been my "landlord", and I wish that feudal term would go out of use, since I came to Toronto in 1995. For nine years I lived at 291 George street, in the center of the highest crime area in Toronto. It is one of the worst buildings TCHC has. I did what I could to improve conditions there and I was even the "tenant rep" for awhile. For my efforts I had everything done to me to destroy me and get rid of me. Finally they used false statements to get me arrested. This back fired on them and they were forced to move me to one of their best buildings.

Now I live on the Esplanade in St. Lawrence neighborhood. In TCHC land, this is as good as it gets. It is not bad. Their instinct is still to threaten any tenant who dares object to anything. Last summer they had the idea that they were going to unhook my stove while they renovated my kitchen, and just leave it there until it pleased them to hook it up again. In the end they hooked it back up pretty damned fast, even bringing someone out after hours to do it, but this was after I had security guards sent after me and threats to have me arrested again.

What makes my present home liveable is that the local neighborhood association flatly refuses to allow TCHC to operate a slum. It understands that it has to back up the tenants and has to stand up to TCHC bullying. However, there is a limit to what they can do. This is in contrast to the damned fools of the neighborhood association around 291 George street, who blamed the tenants for the trouble there and refused to deal with us until we "got organized".

My building and other TCHC buildings in this area have absorbed many former Regent Park residents with little trouble. The few hard cases and criminals are soon weeded out and the rest soon adapt to a more civilized way of life.

experiences of acquaintances

Everybody I know who has tried to set up a tenant association or to try to speak or the tenants as a tenant rep has been given a very hard time by TCHC. They even harassed a woman in her eighties. They believe they have impunity to commit crimes in order to protect themselves from the truth and it seems that generally they do. Police seem generally willing to believe anything they are told by TCHC staff and do whatever they want.

As I mentioned to you at Wellesley center, I had just returned from Scarborough where I observed the railroading of a woman at Landlord and Tenant court there. They submitted some posters they say she put up around the building as evidence of harassment. She denies all knowledge of them. She is not very good at defending herself, and has some paranoia problems. But I think she has now given up on the idea that if she just drops the tenant association stuff and forgets about the dangerous structural flaw in the building which is being covered up, they will leave her alone. She has some chance of not being

evicted because the management there, a private contractor for TCHC, is so incompetent at presenting their case.

I have found that once they have you marked out as a trouble maker, they will never leave you alone. The only thing that works is counterattack; even though it is very hard to win a suit against them, it scares them. I met one tenant rep who won twice in court against them although she has decided it is too stressful to keep fighting them and dropped out. But most tenants are terrified of going to court on their own.

TCHC can and will forge documents, make false statements to police, spread slander, engineer assaults on people, conceal evidence of crimes, enter people's suites to remove documents incriminating them, stuff ballot boxes in tenant rep elections, tamper with mail, and seek to intimidate politicians and neighborhood associations. I know one case where they have driven somebody to suicide. They have done everything short of murder and I am not sure that is out of the question with these freaks.

And it is almost hopeless to find anyone to report all this to.

the housing cult

It is still very difficult to get anyone to believe that the TCHC will do these things. They are very good at creating a propaganda wall around themselves. Lately the wall of illusion has been crumbling along with the physical walls. That is why we have this commission.

One long time housing manager I got on with described what he called a kind of "cult" among social housing apparatchiks, especially the ones from the old MTHCL. They do seem to share a common belief system or ideology, and are determined to control all housing in Toronto and to run it their way. I also see a kind of conflict between two factions in housing. This cult might be called the social workers or the "social engineers". Or, the "social police". Opposed to them are the "welfare bureaucrats" who formerly inhabited the Ontario Housing system, before it was downloaded to the city. They merely believe that housing is welfare and should be as miserable as possible to encourage people to "move on". When MTHCL and the old "Cityhomes" housing entity were merged, the social engineers cult took over and got rid of all the Cityhomes people. When Ontario housing was downloaded, the welfare bureaucrats lasted longer, but were overwhelmed by the cult.

I quote a cooperative housing activist in Tasmania, Australia I corresponded with a few years ago; *"Social workers are poverty police, they are trained in keeping the riff-raff under control. They do a lousy job of managing housing, but that is their cover, not their primary function. Their task is to manage the people in the housing, to keep us from controlling any part of our lives. From all accounts they are doing as good a job of that in Toronto as they are doing here."*

These TCHC social police have a cult-like attitude similar to some other kinds of police in Toronto. They think they know better than the public they are supposed to be serving,

what is good for them. They have a warped sense of right, an ends justify means mentality. They think they are justified in breaking laws and harming other people in order to protect each other and maintain their power and control.

the political cover for the housing cult

This cult has very powerful political protection from the left and right, who both have an interest in having housing run this way.

To the left, social housing and anything 'non profit' is a sacred cow. It is something fought for by the left for years and will be fiercely protected by them, even when it has gone wrong. The authoritarian left believes that it knows best for every body and all social problems would be solved if the social work profession were allowed to control poor people's lives and 'improve' them. All government social programs should be turned over to non-profit agencies run by social workers, who are practically deified.

To the right, social housing is a means of keeping the 'underclass' under control as well as providing certain services cheaply. The systems of care homes for the mentally ill were dismantled in the 1980s because they were thought to be too expensive. The former inmates were to be "treated in the community" meaning, dumped into the poor neighborhoods and especially into social housing. As usual with really barbaric measures by government, this was sold as an enlightened innovation. Now social housing is becoming the cheap substitute for proper care homes for the aged and disabled, or half way houses for released prisoners, or settlement houses for new immigrants. Meanwhile, the buildings can be allowed to deteriorate to help insure that they do not become an alternative to private market housing, this reducing rental profits. When they eventually must be demolished the valuable land under them can be bought up cheaply by insiders.

It is interesting how the interests of the authoritarian left and authoritarian right mesh.

what works for providing affordable housing

the stages in evolving a housing system

build your own

Prior to the industrial age, most people just built their own housing. That is still the system in much of the global south. It is not a very satisfactory solution as people move from the country side to the cities, as can be seen throughout our "planet of slums".

left over housing

Of course housing for the lower half of the population has never been built by private business and never will be. It will always be more profitable to build for the relatively well off. The step up from improvised housing is to cram people into the deteriorating

buildings which the well off no longer want. This is not satisfactory either. It still creates slums with all the problems to the whole of society.

subsidized private

The next step is to pay private developers to build low income housing. This is expensive, difficult to administer, and the housing does always stay low income. It still tends to lead to slums as such housing developments are clustered together. A variant of this is subsidized rent. This is shown to increase rents for everybody, even those who are not subsidized. It also gets no new housing built.

mass housing

The next step is mass housing. Again the problem is with administration and with conflicting priorities. In the end it reproduces the slum again. However, it makes it easier for the social police to keep the underclass in one place where they can be more effectively controlled. It becomes impossible to find anywhere to build them because nobody wants them in their back yard, with good reason.

self housing and Tenant management

What societies finally get around to is resident self management and self housing. There are various forms of these which will suit different low incomers needing housing. However, these people can forget the idea that they can just pay their rent and be left alone. The world does not work that way. As well, the social police and their political overseers will not tolerate the underclass acquiring the habit of running their own lives. Aside from self management of existing housing, the two basic forms of self housing are cooperatives and assisted ownership. They could be in multiple or single residential but they must be small; anything over 50 units does not seem to work well. And of course the residents must only be allowed to own the buildings; the land under it must be under a lease hold. Public lands remain in public hands. This was the mistake of the cooperative movement in Ontario.

Tenant management is, of course, where tenants take over management of an existing property, as with the Tenant Management Organizations of the U.K.

where we are in Toronto and in Canada

We are in the pathetic state of moving backwards. We had started building cooperative housing for low income people, and we even had a start at turning some mass housing into tenant management. However, it was bungled. Public land was given away along with the coops, creating a windfall for people. There were power struggles and cronyism in many coops, which the coop association failed to deal with. All this created actual corruption and incompetence in management, and impressions of it. There were reactions against cooperatives. All coops in Toronto now, except those in which the residents have

equity, have been taken over by the city housing department again, have been forced to accept new tenants from off the Connections Housing list, and to accept the housing management company set up by the city and Toronto housing.

The mass housing bureaucracy and its political support are lobbying massively through many fake agencies and initiatives to get funding for mass housing happening again. At the same time they are kiboshing any new housing that is not under their control. This is why money allocated for new housing cannot be spent. Higher governments desire to start building housing again, but refuse to fund any more slums and an abusive, incompetent, wasteful bureaucracy. They want new ideas. So new social housing is at a deadlock.

In the meantime, out of desperation, people are going back to subsidized private housing to create some new housing. You know what kind of "build your own" has been attempted in Toronto in recent years.

what we need in Toronto and in Canada

The need is to break the deadlock. We need to get affordable housing built again, but it needs to be built outside the empire of the housing cult in TCHC and the city housing department. As well, the three levels of government must stop fighting. The province needs to get off the city's back and stop forcing it to pay for building and running housing but with limited control over it. The money in the form of low or no interest loans and grants can only come from the federal government. City government must be restructured to reduce parochialism and out of control bureaucracies such as TCHC.

But above all there must be the will to defeat this powerful but destructive system of social control over the underclass. The tenants flatly cannot do it themselves. They are as powerless as it gets. They are usually uneducated, not always intelligent, and focussed on trying to get by a day at a time. They know what the problem is but they generally have no way of finding solutions and no way of implementing them.

how to get from here to there.

the real obstacles

lack of economic democracy

It is going to be difficult in the near future to push back against global capitalism which wants governments, especially local government, sharply restricted and social programs oriented toward maintaining a cheap, compliant labor force. It does not want money spent on "economically unjustified people". Hate campaigns are still being cranked up against the underclass and many of the underclass join in them. This global hegemony is starting to collapse but it is creating even more economic dislocation. Governments are going to go bankrupt in the next few years as the old financial system breaks down.

lack of equality

Canada is becoming like an underdeveloped country in its inequality of wealth. The poor do not have enough money to look after themselves. If the residents do not have adequate personal income, no kind of housing can work. You will have large numbers of desperate people crammed in together and who will destroy their environment, their housing, just trying to cope, and because of the ennui created by hopelessness. If you try to create mixed housing, with different social classes mixed together, it will not work. It is fine in Europe, where there is nothing like the scale and depth of poverty in Canada. People who are comfortably well off are not going to live peacefully next to people who do not even have enough to eat.

inadequate institutions

Other countries less wealthy than Canada have been able to solve the riddle of providing adequate housing for everybody. That is because civilization, which effectively means democracy, is at a higher standard in them. Canada is economically advanced but still living in a colonial hangover. Especially in Toronto, you still have family compacts who think they are going to run everything to keep the lower orders in their places. Our electoral, judicial, and constitutional structures are a century out of date. For some reason, Canadians think of themselves as a progressive country. But every social advancement from women's suffrage to health care to social housing, has happened one or two generations later in Canada than in other advanced countries, and usually they are weaker than elsewhere. It is very hard to push progressive reforms forward with the kind of political institutions and culture we have here.

overcoming the obstacles

The problem of unjust evictions is like one tree in a big logjam. It is impossible to deal with it in isolation. If you try to free it, the bigger trees will still be in the way. They have to be moved first. That is no comfort for those who want to do something now about the predicament of social housing residents. I will get into what can be done in the interim below. But there is nothing to be done in the short term to liquidate these problems. They are symptoms of deep systemic problems in society, requiring systemic solutions. TCHC may be like a city state, but it exists within a larger state and is a product of that larger state.

Those who would like to do something about social housing need to get behind the efforts of those trying to remove the log jam because that will have to go before decent housing and all these other issues will be accessible to resolving.

Log one is electoral reform to open up the political process and make all other reforms possible.

Log two is constitutional reform to establish cities as an arm of government, and to locate revenues and power correctly. This will give the citizens of cities the revenues and power to create a sensible housing system.

Log three is the establishment of a constitutional right to the means of a decent life, including a minimum guaranteed income. This will give residents of social housing the money and leisure to be able to participate in the governance of their communities, to have a stake in them, and to be able to maintain their own units.

Log four is the reform of the currency and financial systems, with the power to issue credit returned to the federal treasury where it belongs. This will make it possible to finance new affordable housing without prohibitive interest charges.

outline of a real affordable housing system

While it is not yet feasible to start creating it, it is important to understand what a modern age affordable housing system would look like.

federal government

There must be a federal housing allowance which follows individuals to whatever kind of housing is most suited to them; a care home, a cooperative, an assisted ownership plan. This will cover operating costs, and initial capital costs will be covered by grants to the housing group. These disbursements must be contingent upon cooperation by local and provincial governments. Particularly, each funded project must be either tenant managed where possible, or else closely supervised to prevent abuse of residents.

provincial government

The only thing social housing tenants in Toronto need from the province is for it to promptly download to the city of Toronto the powers and revenues which it should have had long ago. Particularly, the Social Housing Reform Act and Tenant Protection Act need to be ripped up. Regulating private and social housing is the business of the city alone.

local government

It is the business of the Federal government to fund housing and set out general guidelines and it is the business of the city to administer housing programs. A more democratic, participatory, and transparent governance at city hall will inevitably lead to better social housing. Local politicians must be made to understand that social housing is not a cheap substitute for care housing and institutional housing.

what to try in the interim.

the three security threats against tenants

external

The tenant can be in danger from people coming into a building for a bad purpose. This is usually a variant of one of the other threats because usually such people are not there to see the scenery. Someone has invited them in.

internal

There is a multitude of anti-social behaviors by which one tenant can make the lives of their neighbors hell. Some of them may seem trivial to somebody who has never lived in an apartment or been in the situation, such as somebody with a powerful speaker set. Civil behavior absolutely must be enforced in a multi-unit building. Those who want to terrorize their neighbors must be removed immediately, not six months later.

organizational

However, this is complicated by the reality of misbehavior by the housing management. False accusations of misbehavior may be used to remove somebody the management does not like. The solution for this should be the police, but we do not have a competent police force in Toronto. The laws governing civil behavior in multi-residential housing are reasonable. The problem again is the absence of responsible adults in responsible positions to apply the rules.

The worst kind of security threat tenants can face is that from the landlord and his or her agents. The landlord controls the tenant's environment. The solution is to give the tenants of a building more control over the landlord, or the capacity to eliminate the landlord and self manage.

real tenant participation

The TCHC charter contains beautiful words about tenant representation. It is mandated by the City and the province to have a tenant consultation or participation system. In practice the system is a sham. Only a fool would expect anything else from a massive bureaucracy oriented to self preservation rather than the needs of its tenants.

There is no way to ameliorate this. Even breaking it up into smaller parts will not in itself solve anything. The way out is to look at how countries all over the world, which have developed housing systems, have addressed this problem. The best example to follow is the United Kingdom with its experience in tenant management organizations, TMOs.

This began when the Thatcher government had the notion of selling off all the U.K.'s social housing stock. The choicest properties were sold off, but the rest found no buyers. So ways to transfer title to the tenants were experimented with. Local councils were very hostile to this; it removed a means of social control and patronage, much as goes on in Toronto. But the "right to manage" laws were so successful and popular that the government was forced extend them to private housing.

After more than twenty years, it is still an unfinished revolution there, with many TMOs a sham and controlled indirectly by the local councils they were supposed to have been

freed from, usually by fake management companies. But other TMOs have been successful. It is up to the tenants; they have to finally decide to throw off the chains. But the support must be there for them, and the training in self management. They have to be free to fail and try again.

protect tenant leaders from harassment

The hostility and resistance of local councils and housing administrators in the U.K., to tenant self management was great. However, there does not seem to have been the thuggery which characterizes housing management in Toronto. I have not found it to this degree in other Canadian provinces. I believe that the key to reform of the governance of social housing in Toronto is to protect tenant leaders and thinkers from attacks from the housing thugs.

Do not expect tenants to stick their necks out and risk retaliation from the housing company if you do not intend to defend them. In the past a TCHC tenant's advocacy office or an 'ombudsman' has been suggested. I do not think that goes far enough. We need a tenant's defense and investigations office with lawyers and investigators on call. Given the attitude of many TCHC apparatchiks, some tenants may have to be provided temporarily with body guards.

There needs to be discussions with the TCHC employees unions. They need to rethink the misguided practice of protecting their members from the consequences of their actions, even when they are engaged in criminal activities. Or, merely being unqualified and unable to do their jobs. If these unions cannot get this, maybe they need to be decertified.

There needs to be discussions with Landlord and Tenant adjudicators, and monitoring of the way they treat eviction cases from TCHC, especially ones involving claims by management of harassment by the tenant.

There needs to be discussions with the police about how they are to treat information from TCHC staff about tenants. I know one person who was repeatedly jailed and lost a good job because TCHC staff had him marked out as a trouble maker and kept claiming to the cops that he was dealing drugs.

protect tenants from cooptation

from outside

As if TCHC tenants do not have enough problems, there are other opportunistic groups who also want a piece of them. Groups like OCAP, and ACORN lately famous in the States for various corrupt practices, want to 'organize' the TCHC tenants. A group called Federation of Metro Tenants Associations (FMTA) is in the business of getting money from government to 'organize' private market tenants. This means, to harass any private tenant association which will not join them. This prevents the city government from being bothered by a real tenant's movement. They are as vicious thugs as TCHC. However, a long standing goal of FMTA has been to create a TCHC tenant association under their

direction. These same people could not get a one dollar a month check off for every rented unit in Ottawa, but they think they could get one from every TCHC tenant; a gold mine for them.

from inside

TCHCs tenant services unit is very good at infiltrating and disrupting any tenant group. I saw them destroy the old Cityhome tenant association. they are also good at creating fake tenant groups, usually using private companies such as this "Public Interest Consulting".

You said that TCHC employees were not allowed at your meetings, but you can bet their stooges are there, recording everything said and who said it. All the organizations I mentioned were there. So, you can imagine how difficult it will be to set up any kind of tenant body without it being taken over and legitimate tenants coerced into conformity or driven out. The only solution is to keep identifying the infiltrators and booting them out.

a right to manage law

A right to manage law based on that of the U.K. would be a start; something to rally around. It will be very hard to get the first one off the ground. It would be hard to even form a group of tenants and honest TCHC tenant supporters to lobby the province for it. They would have to have protection such as described above. The TCHC apparatchiks must be forbidden to try to infiltrate it or to communicate directly or indirectly with any of its members, and punished seriously when inevitably they try anyway.

a tenant advisory council

There needs to be some way to be able to convene a tenants council that the TCHC and its associates and stooges cannot get at or tamper with. Likewise all outside opportunist groups. This needs some budget and staff. It needs to hear from experts in all alternatives to mass housing. Its job would be to make recommendations to city and provincial government, act as a voice for social housing tenants if that is at all possible, and I hope, to catalyse the first tenant run housing in Toronto.

trying to get a model project going

Any hope for a new model of housing lies in getting that first model project happening. That could be the work of a city wide tenant council or some group of social housing tenants somewhere who just rise up and decide to give it a try. But without strong political support they are going to get squashed. Where will that political support come from? Judge LeSage probably knows the answer better than I do.

Politics aside, a cooperative would be financially quite viable, as long as you can get two out of these three things; a plot of land for a dollar a year from the city or province, most municipal taxes waived, and an interest free loan or grant from somewhere.

Social Housing Reform Act and Rent Geared to Income.

Much was made at the Wellesley meeting of the troubles resulting from the Rent Geared to Income system and the Social Housing Reform Act. Not much really needs to be said. The obvious solution for this problem of calculating rent is to calculate it on the previous month's income, rather than trying to guess next month's income. As for people who have trouble with the forms, can't TCHC find somebody who can do arithmetic to help them?

A better solution would be to do away with RGI altogether. Set the rent at the basic cost of providing the housing. Then set the housing portion of Ontario Works cheques to at least that level. Preferably much better.

conclusion

no alternative to tenant management

Whatever Judge LeSage recommends to the board of TCHC, which has no real control over the organization, it will not mean anything unless it gets across the idea that the problem is the flawed model of social housing provision. There is no alternative to moving to tenant management. You can write all the beautiful "eviction prevention strategies" you want; they will make no difference.

resistance to tenant management

Eventually, necessity will overcome the savage resistance to any idea of the 'dangerous class' gaining any experience at running their own lives. Reform at TCHC will definitely link in with the demands for reform which are starting to rise in the city. People are getting fed up with elitist government.

The big argument with the public about tenant management and assisted ownership is that it will be a lot cheaper than mass housing. Having no social housing is not an option, you are just going to have more people on the streets or in shelters, which are much more expensive to run.

solution likely impossible without larger political reforms

That is why I have not in this paper gone into any detail about how TMOs developed in the U.K., or how housing cooperatives or housing societies work in various countries, or how assisted ownership might work. I am not going to try communicating these ideas to social housing tenants at first, anyway. To again quote my friend in Tasmania; *"The core concept is self-management, control of your housing, if people don't want that then you don't have anything. You can lead a horse to water, etc.*

But the expectations themselves is quite unrealistic. The idea is self-MANAGEMENT, in other words democratic control. That is not the same as do-it-yourself. I've also seen many people get the two concepts confused, almost as if they can't even 'conceive' of the idea of self-management."

The inhabitants of TCHC are the products of generations of social control and suppression. They are angry about the way their lives are being controlled. But the first problem with changing anything is their inability to even conceive of managing their own lives.

The solution for these problems lies first in the larger community which TCHC is within. It must decide to not tolerate deliberately created slums in their midst, and to deal with it by attacking the cause of the problem, not the victims of it.

This is as far as I can go with this. I await the report of the LeSage inquiry.