

Election 2021: Federal failure on housing must come to an end

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Housing advocates carry a banner. Black words on red read, "Housing for All." Many signs in background say "Social Housing Now." Image: Cathy Crowe

The *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* "Water, water, everywhere, Nor any drop to drink" by Samuel Coleridge aptly brings to mind today's reality: housing, housing everywhere but none for many to access.

With election 2021 on the horizon, let's look at how we got here.

In the early 1990s the federal Conservatives, replaced in 1993 by the Liberals, jointly decimated Canada's successful national social housing supply program. We continue to live with that disaster.

The retreat from a responsible role for government in Canada's housing system continues to this day. This is a full reversal of the mid-1960s decision to focus on those most in need of adequate housing when the federal government began producing about 20,000 new non-market housing units annually.

In 1973, a minority Pierre Trudeau Liberal government supported by the NDP launched an improved version of this housing strategy focused on non-profit and co-op housing, also building about 20,000 non-market units per year.

The three decades from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s resulted in the approximately 550,000 social housing units we have today, which is only four per cent of our national housing stock. If we maintained that annual supply, we would have another approximately 550,000 social housing units by now. Waiting lists

would be much smaller, and there would be no need for an unhoused person to remain that way for very long.

By the late 1990s, however, the decision to leave Canada's housing system to the marketplace has had tragic consequences. (What if we did that to our health care system?)

In 1998, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC) issued its [State of Emergency Declaration](#) -- endorsed by municipalities, NGOs and individuals -- declaring homelessness to be a national disaster. The related national grassroots network targeted federal and provincial cabinets and ministers responsible for housing seeking an immediate change in housing policy. But to no avail.

Today, 28 years later, with the continued neglect of those most in need of housing assistance, the context is even worse: neoliberal fiscal austerity, privatization, and the financialization of housing (see the film [Push](#)). Governments continue to refuse to do the one thing that works: adequate social programs and an annual supply of permanent non-market housing.

Instead, we are in the age of calculated misdirection and misinformation. We are fed alternative facts and instead of actual policies and programs, clever slogans disguised as solutions. Here are a few examples we have likely all heard plenty about.

Example one: "Housing First"

The continuation of mass homelessness required a shift in ideology filled nicely by the adoption of the U.S.-founded "Housing First" strategy for homeless people. On the surface, this seems to make sense. Unhoused people need housing. Some also need support services. But let's get them housed.

From the start, however, Housing First has had two tiny problems advocates rarely mention: there are too many to try to rehouse (given government refusal to provide adequate funding) and, where is the available housing?

Housing First is not a policy, it is a slogan. A policy is a course of action. Where is the action? There is not enough housing for those most in need.

Example two: redefine the problem

Given there are too many unhoused people for Housing First, how about a new definition of the problem: categories of worthy and less worthy unhoused people. We have, after all, a century long history of doing that.

For a vast majority of unhoused people, we are told, homelessness is not that bad a problem because most are "only" temporarily unhoused. Nothing here to really worry about. After all, it's likely their own fault. Mass shelters are a good enough response for this group.

The other group, however, unhoused for longer periods of time, cost "us" a lot of money. Let's give this group a medical designation; the "chronic homeless." We need to help this smaller group -- for our own financial benefit. They cost us a lot in expensive homeless services. Therefore, strict policing for all of them,

institutionalization including jail for some, and good-enough supportive housing -- that is, "housing first" -- for a few others if we can find the housing.

Example three: ten-year plans

An addition to the feel-good political rhetoric of Housing First is the notion of municipal and provincial ten-year plans to end homelessness. Solving problems takes time and we are on our way, with a plan!

Now that more than ten years have passed, how has that worked out? We now have encampments of the unhoused like we had in in the 1930s. The forest of construction cranes in the sky over big cities offer no help as they build condominiums and, in recent years, expensive rentals subsidized by the most recent empty rhetoric.

Example four: the National Housing Strategy

The current talking point for politicians who need to talk about housing progress but refuse to fund any, is the ten-year National Housing Strategy. In 2017 it had an \$11-billion alleged budget; now the claim is that it's over \$70 billion. That is a lot of money, if it was actual federal spending, and if the spending was focused on those most in need of housing assistance, starting with homeless people.

But it is smoke and mirrors, with most of the big number amounts in the form of loans for private sector developers, not expenditures focused on those most in need.

As the Parliamentary Budget Office pointed out it in its [June 2019 assessment](#), the proposed spending by the housing strategy -- compared to the previous very modest spending by the Harper government -- is:

- a 14 per cent reduction in funding to help low-income households;
- a 30 per cent reduction in funding for federal social housing; and
- a \$664 million annual increase in subsidized financing for housing that is not necessarily targeted to low-income households (i.e., the expensive, developer-owned rentals).

Its funding for unhoused people is focused on (you can guess this one): yes, "chronic homelessness."

In its follow-up assessment last month of federal spending on affordable housing, which includes the special one-time COVID-19 housing-related funds, the [PBO found](#):

- a 15 per cent cut in spending on assisting low-income households;
- less than 50 per cent of funds for the first three years has been spent;
- 12,000 expensive private sector rental housing units have been funded, only some with temporary rent supplements; and,
- there continues to be no focus on households most in need of housing assistance.

Where do the parties stand in Election 2021 on our housing and homelessness crisis?

The [Liberal platform](#) on housing is not yet released.

The [Conservative Party platform](#) promises to build one million homes in three years with no mention of affordability or who would finance this flooding of the housing market. There is a mention of Housing First, but no mention of co-op housing or social housing.

The [NDP platform](#). Calgary researcher Nick Falvo highlights a helpful [10 things to know about the NDP housing plan](#) in English and French here.

The [Green Party platform](#) is yet to be released. Green leader Annamie Paul has demonstrated keen interest in housing calling for Prime Minister Trudeau's government [to declare](#) a national affordable housing and homelessness emergency.

The [Bloc Québécois platform](#) is yet to be released.

What this election should be about

A post-pandemic recovery that provides robust funding for a substantial housing program that includes new non-market housing with clear targets, rent controls, and protection of existing affordable housing.

It should also have the fervour that was applied to Canada's post-WWII recovery. Today, that should include jobs that build green housing and green jobs that include home-care workers that can keep people in their homes.

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