

THE SENATE OF CANADA
The Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

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CANADA

Demanding Government Action for the Homeless

By Senator Douglas Roche, O.C.

**An Address to the Edmonton Coalition on
Housing and Homelessness Conference:**

“Home Sweet Home: Responding to the Housing Crisis”

Edmonton, Stanley A. Milner Public Library

November 22, 2002

The poor and homeless in Canada have been forgotten by governments who care more about appeasing big business than social justice.

The statistics of poverty are a national disgrace:

- Some 50,000 people live on the streets across Canada, with 250,000 people experiencing homelessness some time during the year.
- 2.2 million people live in poor or substandard housing.
- 5 million people live in poverty, an increase of 25 percent in the past decade.
- Child poverty has never been higher with one in ten children living in “persistent poverty” and immigrant children twice as likely to live below the poverty line.

The persistence of poverty in Alberta – where the deficit is down, taxes are low, employment is high and oil and gas prices are generating more revenues for the province – is outrageous.

It is time to give people back their dignity and create a fully funded housing program.

Consider the situation in Edmonton. Last year, there were 1,300 homeless with 130 children under the age of 15. The count this year is expected to be higher.

The Edmonton Community Plan on Homelessness reports a desperate need for 5,000 units of low-income units in addition to emergency-type shelters. The vacancy rate for rental housing in Edmonton is less than one percent and 97 percent of those who can find a place end up paying more than 30 percent of their income on rent. As a result, people who would, but cannot afford to, rent are forced into emergency shelters—often blocking those who are even less fortunate.

In the face of this crying need, why is the government in Alberta dragging its feet on putting funds into housing? In its December 2001 budget, the federal government allocated \$680 million to create more affordable housing. Just over \$67 million of this amount was promised to Alberta in June of this year, with the condition that it be matched by an equal amount from the provincial government. But, thus far, the same provincial government that says it cannot support the Kyoto Treaty on climate change because there is no clear federal plan to implement it, has failed to come up with its own plan for matching the federal funds. This double standard is unacceptable.

Since 1993, the Alberta government has cut \$225 million from its social housing programs. Meanwhile, because of the province's growing economy, the cost of living has gone up 16 percent over the same period. The guiding principle of the Alberta government's policies has been "less government is better government." But this approach has done little to help families torn apart by violence, bankrupted by prescription drug bills or separated by divorce.

The housing crisis points to a larger illness afflicting Canadian society. There has been a systematic failure on the part of governments across Canada to provide full social and economic participation to all Canadians. This is threatening the social fabric of the country. This is allowed to happen not because forces are out of our control: it is because the political system is not influenced enough by the needs of those who are the most vulnerable. Instead, it is assumed that the vulnerable people in society will be helped by the overall expansion of the economy, led by the smartest and strongest. "A rising tide lifts all boats." It seems, however, that only the yachts are being lifted. The measurement of our society must be more than an accounting exercise.

What concerns me is the exclusion, marginalization and isolation of a growing number of poor people in a richer Canada. The working poor, the

homeless, and hungry children are looking for human dignity, community and a feeling of truly belonging to this great country. It is a sad comment that governments have forgotten that they have a responsibility first and foremost to protect the common good.

We must stand up and tell governments clearly: Shelter is a basic human right. Until we have a place to stay, we cannot fully achieve other basic rights such as health and education. Governments have a duty to ensure this right. This is laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Canada is a signatory. It affirms that every person is entitled to safe and adequate housing. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Canada is also a signatory, also guarantees a right to housing.

Canada's own Charter of Rights and Freedoms goes even further by protecting citizens from unfair discrimination by their landlords. But prejudice is widespread. It is a regular practice of landlords to choose "desirable" tenants—code for people who are not minorities, not aboriginals, not the mentally ill and not youth. Yet these are precisely the people who are in most need of a stable roof over their heads. How is it that this situation is allowed to persist?

A large part of the reason likely has to do with the misconceptions and myths about homeless people. There is the belief that people are on the streets because they choose to be or that they do not want a job and are more interested in drugs and alcohol. Those who are better off, often reason that poverty and homelessness is “not my problem,” that the issue is not of concern to us. This could not be further from the truth.

Homelessness is not a personal choice. Often it is a financial, physical, psychological or other personal crisis beyond one’s control that pushes an otherwise middle-class person into a downward spiral. I can only begin to imagine how difficult it is for someone to pursue employment or education without an address, a phone, or any family, health or financial support network. This accumulation of disadvantages is extremely difficult to escape without help.

Studies tell us that people with nowhere stable or safe to stay have a higher rate of health problems, an increased risk of premature death, and more run-ins with the law. Politicians everywhere should read the stories of poor children contained in “Listen to the Children,” the report of the Quality of Life Commission. Children who do not know where they are sleeping or which school they are going to from one week to the next are at greater risk for hunger and poor nutrition, poor health, psychological problems, learning

difficulties, poor achievement in school, and worse, thus ensuring a continuing legacy of social decay and decreased economic productivity. It is delusional to think this situation “is not my problem.”

Adequate social housing and support is vital to a healthy community. When we marginalize the poor, put them in a corner, and cover our ears, we diminish the whole of society. The longer we allow the number of homeless to grow today, the larger the economic and social costs tomorrow. What burden are we creating for future generations if we fail to address this issue? The cost of not doing something is simply too great.

On a daily basis, we hear news of how Canada’s rate of economic growth is greater than that of the United States, how Canada is outperforming other G-8 countries, how Alberta is booming, how the budget surplus is bigger than expected, and how new jobs are being created. Is it that the problem of homelessness is out of our control? Is there nothing we can do? To these questions I give a resounding no.

Of course, the solution to the poverty and homeless crises varies from case to case. Reclaiming lives is a complex process. A short-term loan may put one person back on his feet, but for others, there may be a need for more sustained assistance and support programs, especially if physical or mental illness is a factor.

But something that would go a long way for many who are homeless would be to fund and create more affordable and secure housing. Although often not sufficient in itself to prevent or solve homelessness, it is clearly a necessary condition. As it stands, the demand for affordable housing completely outstrips the supply.

If Canada can afford to fight U.S.-led wars abroad, Canada should be able to make sure everyone has a secure roof over their heads. To achieve this:

- Governments must hold true to their commitments and immediately provide the funding already promised.
- Governments must increase existing funding.
- Governments must move away from sporadic stop-gap measures and create a unified national homelessness policy.

These measures are the very minimum we can expect from our leaders and would go a long way in giving people back their dignity and welcoming them back into Canadian society.

We must do more than hope for such policies. We must demand that Canada's political leaders respond to the voices of the marginalized calling for social reinvestment and the building of a more inclusive foundation for the future development and well-being of all Canadians.