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Special Issue on the History of Canadian Housing Policy

General Introduction to the Issue

J. David Hulchanski

It has been fifty years since Canada began implementing housing programs on a continuing basis and forty years since a national housing agency, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, was established. Canadians have a right to ask: After a half century of housing programs and the expenditure of many billions of dollars, why do we still have housing problems? There is no denying that Canadians are among the best housed people in the world. What matters more than comparisons with other countries, however, is the comparison of Canadians with each other. Such a comparison raises the question of distribution: the wide disparity in the quality, quantity and affordability of the shelter occupied by rich and poor households, by home owners and renters, by urban and rural populations, and by native and non-native Canadians.

The three papers in this special issue of the *Urban History Review* examine the early years in the formulation of Canadian housing policy. The first paper provides a broad overview of the evolution of Canadian housing policy from the early part of this century to the present. It examines the programs which were implemented as well as the options which were defeated. Canada's approach is also compared to the manner in which other advanced western democratic states have approached their housing problems.

The second paper examines in detail the origins, implementation and impact of the 1935 Dominion Housing Act. With the DHA the federal government initiated a permanent presence in Canada's housing sector. Though the size of the role played by government has grown significantly over the past fifty years, the general principles and basic approach to housing policy initiated by the DHA have changed very little. The third paper examines Wartime Housing Ltd., a federal crown corporation which successfully built and managed thousands of rental units between 1941 and 1947. WHL represents a directly interventionist approach to housing problems, an exception to the norm which was quickly abandoned after the war. By the late 1940s WHL's stock of affordable housing was privatized and a post-war program promoting home ownership and private

enterprise, similar to the approach of the 1935 DHA, was reinstated.

These three papers are among the first to carefully examine the history of Canadian housing *policy* using archival and other original sources. Interest in policy analysis has grown steadily in recent years, with an increasing focus on how certain policies have evolved over time. "Policy analysis," writes Thomas Dye,¹ is finding out what governments do, why they do it, and what difference it makes." Whether one seeks to analyze an aspect of current policy or the history of some policy, policy analysis is still the same thing — the description and explanation of the causes and consequences of government action. The preoccupation is with *what* government does. In terms of the different varieties of policy analysis² the history of public policy falls into the category of "studies of policy content" in which analysts seek to describe and explain the genesis and development of particular policies. According to Ham and Hill, the analyst interested in policy content "usually investigates one or more cases in order to trace how a policy emerged, how it was implemented and what the results were."³ This variety of policy study provides a foundation for the other forms, such as studies of the policy process, policy evaluation studies, and a process and policy advocacy studies.

With the benefits of the passage of time and with access to the rich archival record, a detailed examination of the development of a particular policy approach is possible. Unlike members of the opposition in today's legislatures or analysts of contemporary policy, researchers who study the history of policy are in the fortunate position of being able to read the daily mail, departmental memos and policy papers of ministers, deputy ministers and key staff. The passage of time also allows an analyst to more precisely identify trends and develop a more sophisticated understanding of the social, economic and political dynamics behind the flow of events — that is, to better identify and characterize the nature of the forest, not just the individual trees. The history of public policy, therefore, has a significant role to play in the field of policy analysis by helping identify the interrelationships between individual actors, the political process, the economy and society in general. In examining the historical evolution of policy it is easier to stand back from the events being analyzed and to ask some of the bigger questions about the

role of the state and the distribution of power between different social groups.

The three papers in this issue attempt to both, identify the day-to-day events and key actors in the evolution of Canada's housing policy, as well as to situate these events in their broader context. The former is relatively straight forward, a process of careful detective work. The latter is more difficult and more susceptible to misinterpretation, for it involves judgment calls about how events fit together, the significance of different events and decisions about what events to examine in order to arrive at an overall interpretation of events.

The three papers in this issue have quite independently arrived at a common analytic framework which provides a means of explaining the basic trends in the development of Canadian housing policy. Housing policy has had one ubiquitous trait which helps explain its general development through the decades. It happens to be the same trait which Sam Bass Warner has identified in his study of U.S. urban history as "the most important element of our culture for understanding the development of cities."⁴ The trait is "privatism." Warner explains that the culture of privatism means that cities depend

for their wages, employment, and general prosperity upon the aggregate successes and failures of thousands of individual enterprises, not upon community action. It has also meant that the physical form of American cities, their lots, houses, factories, and streets have been the outcome of a real estate market of profit-seeking builders, land speculators, and large investors.⁵

When applying the concept to public policy formulation, privatism can be defined as "the tendency to pursue public goals via private means, or at least to formalize protections for private interests within specific program designs."⁶ This definition, which is from a recent assessment of the history of U.S. housing policy, is an excellent summary characterization of the substance of all the archival material examined in the three articles.

This is not a new or startling discovery. It is more a recognition that the fundamental issues in the debate over housing policy have not changed. Past and present housing policy formulation has at its core the fundamental issue of

privatism. The historical record examined in the three articles leaves little doubt about the accuracy of this interpretation. This is why many current housing professionals will feel at home reading these three papers. The specific people and events are from a different era but the fundamental issues are the same. The contemporary relevance of the historical record is to be found in the way its analysis contributes to an improved understanding of our society's decision making process on important policy issues.

Understanding something better does not mean that conflicts will dissolve and solutions implemented. Fifty years from now we will still have housing problems. Problems are not so much solved as superseded. As a problem-centred activity, all varieties of policy analysis seek to ameliorate problems through a process of creativity, imagination and craftsmanship. "The role of analysis," according to Ham and Hill, "is to locate problems where solutions might be tried." Given the intractability of many social problems, they argue, if an "analyst is able to redefine problems in a way which makes some improvement possible than this is as much as can be expected."⁷

It is hoped that these three papers and other similar historical research on the evolution of Canada's housing policy can help better define current issues and contribute to improved policy analysis and, ideally, improved housing policy.

J. David Hulchanski

NOTES

1. Thomas R. Dye, *Policy Analysis* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1976), 1. See also: A. Wildavsky, *Speaking Truth to Power: The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979).
2. See: Christopher Ham and Michael Hill, *The Policy Process in the Modern Capitalist State* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books Ltd., 1984), Chapter 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 8.
4. Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 4.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Larry Bennett, "Privatism and Housing Policy in the United States," *Urban Law and Policy*, 6 (1983): 170.
7. Ham and Hill, *The Policy Process*, 6.