

# Canada requires strategy to house neediest citizens

By Edward Schreyer

*Following is the viewpoint of Schreyer, founder of the Edward & Lily Schreyer Habitat for Humanity Canada Work Project.*

When the leaders of the G8 nations arrive this week on Canadian soil, they will have in common something that sets them apart from their host — a commitment to affordable housing.

Ours is the only G8 country that lacks a national housing strategy. It was not always so. This must change if we are to truly combat the scourge of poverty and make good on our collective desire to help the least fortunate among us.

Until 1995, Canada ranked among the world's most progressive nations in providing affordable housing to those in need. Budget cuts and shifting priorities in the ensuing years have taken a devastating toll.

Federal support of affordable housing has been in decline. Responsibilities have been shifted to the provinces, which in turn have offloaded them on municipalities, most of which lack the tax base and budgets to support significant housing initiatives.

The consequences of this inaction are self-evident and sad. Across Canada, too many families are in need of simple, decent, affordable housing. Too many women and men, mothers and fathers, each month are being forced to choose between adequate shelter and food, clothing and the necessities of life. Too many children know only a life of transience, shelters and stress.

In March, Miloon Kothari, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on the Right to Adequate Housing, released a report that found Canada to be in urgent need of a "comprehensive and co-ordinated national housing policy." This follows on other reports that have described the lack of affordable housing as a "national emergency."

Several groups and agencies including Habitat for Humanity, of whom I am an International board member, mobilize volunteers and community partners to help build and supply affordable housing. But the need here in Canada is great and growing. Those who live in what economists describe as "core housing need" have an average household income of less than \$20,000 — nearly 75 per cent below the national average.

That's why there needs to be renewed commitment to affordable housing at the federal level as was the case for the 25 years from 1970 to 1995.

It is a fact that having a proper place to live leads to improved health outcomes and job prospects, and ultimately a decreased reliance on the state.

A broad housing strategy is therefore an investment in a stronger and more stable society — and in the health and vibrancy of our communities. It's a direct and effective way to fight poverty.

We submit that a "hand up" today helps avoid a "hand-out" tomorrow. Surely this axiom can, and should, be put to the test. In any case, it is the civilized and humanitarian alternative.

A key element of a successful national housing policy will be an understanding of and emphasis on the important role of affordable home ownership.

Owning a home helps reduce the burden on public housing properties and provides people with a stable foundation on which to build a life and a future. It allows them to remove themselves from the social welfare system and begin to break the cycle of need.

But it can't be achieved on a large and meaningful scale without the leadership of government — to provide tax-credit programs, help with down-payments and, where possible, donate suitable land or provide it at well below market rate.

Today, as perhaps never before, there exists across our country a contrast between an abundance of wealth and a surfeit of need — of grim living conditions being endured by those whose voices often go unheard, whose plights go unnoticed.

In this context, we take note of the fact that these past two decades have also resulted in the stalling out of measures, to reduce income gaps and inequalities and a growing pattern of disparity in inequality.

If the G8 does not wrestle with this unhealthy and unwise phenomenon, then what is the point of it meeting at all — and at what non-productive cost?

What greater and more critical role can be there for government than extending a hand up to citizens who are in need?

The true gauge of our national character rests in how we treat the least fortunate among us. This applies, to give specific examples, to policies with respect to renewable energy, emissions, the stock of affordable housing and issues of convergence/divergence in the sharing of resource-generated wealth.

The true measure of our success will be in the legacy we leave behind.