

Follow British lead on social housing

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As Prime Minister Stephen Harper tries this summer to develop a fresh political agenda for his struggling government when Parliament reopens, he should take a long, hard look at what's happening in Britain for some much-needed inspiration.

In a bid to correct some of his country's worst poverty problems, new British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has launched an ambitious \$17-billion affordable housing plan that over the next three years will see 50,000 new units of social housing built annually. Under the program, Brown will double spending on social housing as part of a wide-ranging plan that touches every aspect of the housing market.

The new program, unveiled last week, is part of Brown's pledge to make affordable housing a major priority for his government.

Brown's plan calls for 3 million new affordable homes to be built by 2020. To achieve that, Brown will free up government-owned land for new housing developments and form housing partnerships with local authorities and the private and voluntary sectors. The program has won wide support across the political spectrum.

It is the kind of bold policy initiative that is desperately needed in Canada, and one that Ottawa could easily copy.

But in Canada, there is no national housing strategy. Worse, there is a lack of political will to develop one, despite a growing homelessness crisis and huge waiting lists for subsidized housing across the country.

Under Harper, the federal government has done little to address this issue. What little new money his Conservative government has allocated for housing has been scattered across a patchwork of programs, with little overall impact on construction.

Last year, the Conservatives extended funding under the 1999 Homeless Partnering Strategy for two more years at a cost of \$270 million. But that money was identical to the amount allocated in 1999. The program provides small capital grants for short-term housing initiatives as well as some money for homeless services.

Also, Harper, under pressure, freed up \$1.4 billion last year for the affordable housing trust funds authorized by the Liberals in 2005. The money is paid as a capital grant that covers less than a third of the cost of a typical subsidized housing unit. That funding runs out next year.

In addition, Ottawa created a five-year Affordable Housing Initiative in 2002, with a total budget of \$1 billion. The money is to build affordable housing, but the provinces must match it. Some provinces matched the funding and built new units, but others, including Ontario, didn't match it fully. The program ends when the \$1 billion is spent.

Beyond those three limited programs, there is nothing new on the federal agenda for affordable housing.

Moreover, the housing situation is worse today than it was in 1998 when hundreds of organizations and big city mayors declared homelessness a national disaster. In 1991, federal and provincial governments spent \$4.1 billion on housing. By 2006, that had slipped to \$4 billion, a 10 per cent drop when inflation is taken into account. In those 15 years, the population grew by 4 million and the number in need of housing rose to 1.6 million from 1.4 million.

Canada is alone among the major industrialized countries in not having a national housing strategy. Only 5 per cent of the housing stock in this country is social housing, one of the lowest levels in the world. Only the United States and New Zealand have less.

Such statistics are a national disgrace. As Toronto street nurse and homeless activist Cathy Crowe wrote recently in the Star: "Homelessness is our Katrina, but it wasn't caused by the weather."

For too long, Ottawa has failed to tackle this issue with any real enthusiasm and the current hodgepodge of underfunded programs have only made a small dint in our massive housing problem.

If British Prime Minister Gordon Brown can make affordable housing a national priority, then so too can political leaders in Canada.