

From Study to Reality: The Establishment of Public Housing in Halifax

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From Study to Reality: The Establishment of Public Housing in Halifax, 1930-1953

DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION, A NEW vision of shelter for low income families received widespread support from surprisingly varied sectors of the population. Yet, despite the encouragement of labour unions, social workers, planners, architects and important parts of the construction industry, the first public housing project did not actually open until 1949 in Toronto's Regent Park. The second arose in St. John's, Newfoundland, immediately after Confederation, and the third, despite the myth of Maritime "conservatism", was located in Halifax. In fact, Halifax had been one of the first centres of continued agitation for public housing, which began in 1930. The long and tortured history of the public housing campaigns in Halifax tells much about the social forces which both promoted and delayed the birth of public housing across the nation.

Like other Canadian cities, Halifax had experienced pressures for public housing prior to the depression. In 1913, the Nova Scotia legislature passed a measure for the establishment of limited dividend housing corporations, in response to concerns in the city. There was, however, no housing constructed under this act and the efforts to build limited dividend housing collapsed under the impact of the Halifax explosion.¹ The city participated in the short-lived federal post-war public housing scheme. It was also the site of the first public housing in Canada, the Hydrostone complex designed by international planning expert Thomas Adams to provide medium income rental housing for those displaced by the Halifax disaster. As in other Canadian cities, the campaign for better low income housing quieted down after the nation experienced a boom in residential construction starting in 1923.² At the end of 1930, however, an alliance of labour unions, professionals concerned with housing and social work, religious leaders and the building industry, began to come together. On 17 December 1930, the Reverend J. Donaldson urged the Halifax Labor Council to put forward a public housing project to reduce unemployment. After "consider-

1 Shirley Spragge, "A Confluence of Interest: Housing Reform in Toronto, 1900-1920" in Alan F. Artibise and Gilbert Stelter, eds., *The Usable Urban Past* (Toronto, 1979), p. 254; *Halifax Citizen*, 15 November 1919; W.B. Wallace, *The Housing Problem in Nova Scotia: An Evil, Its Growth and Its Remedy* (Halifax, 1919), p. 5.

2 Virtually no reference to housing appears in the annual indexes of parliamentary debates after 1923. For an account of the situation in Halifax see S.H. Prince, *Catastrophe and Social Change* (New York, 1920) and John C. Weaver, "Halifax Relief Commission, Housing and Town Planning, 1918-1921", *Plan Canada*, 9 (1976), pp. 36-46.

able discussion”, the Labor Council appointed a housing committee to develop the proposal.³

Although professional, religious and social service groups participated in the housing crusade, the labour movement in the city was critical in sustaining the campaign for improved low income housing. On 31 March 1931, the Labor Council’s newspaper, the *Citizen*, announced that labour had begun a major campaign for low rental housing. Pledging that “Filthy Tenements Must Go”, the *Citizen* warned “greedy dabblers in real estate, hungry landlords who thrive on human poverty and want” that “organized labor” was “girding its loins” for the coming “battle”. By this time, as the *Citizen* noted, organized labour had received the support of service clubs and “the churches in the city of all denominations”, for low rental housing. Representatives of Halifax’s service clubs, churches and unions all served on the Citizens’ Housing Committee. Its members included Major Tibbs of the Halifax Relief Commission, who was favourably impressed by the public housing projects he viewed while on a visit to Vienna. Another prominent member was S.H. Prince, an Anglican priest and social worker, who had been active in relief efforts following the Halifax explosion and who wrote a study of the disaster published by Columbia University. Also important was the Labor Council representative, F.C. Craig, a former Labor Council President, and a leader of the Halifax local of the Plumbers’ and Pipefitters’ union. Craig guided the Labor Council’s housing campaign and he urged union members to “study and educate themselves to understand a social system that has broken down”, just as they would “educate themselves to meet changing conditions of construction in their craft”.⁴

One of the Housing Committee’s first acts was to appoint the land use planner, A.J. Dalzell, to undertake a survey of housing conditions. Dalzell was widely recognized as the foremost Canadian housing authority and his survey of housing conditions was intended to serve as the basis for a plan of action. Despite the initial enthusiasm surrounding Dalzell’s appointment, his recommendations brought to the surface the very divisions that would frustrate housing achievements during the depression. Dalzell followed his mentor, Thomas Adams, in his opposition to subsidized low rental projects. He insisted that adequate municipal planning regulations could achieve homeownership for every Canadian family. Consequently, his report stressed the need for restrictive zoning, education campaigns to foster “the desire for homeownership”, new studies of housing finance and experiments “in the building of small homes”, higher standards in building regulations, and adjusting street widths to be

3 *Halifax Citizen*, 12 December 1930.

4 *Ibid.*, 31 March 1931, 30 September 1932; Citizens’ Committee on Housing, *Housing in Halifax* (Halifax, 1932), Public Archives of Canada [hereafter PAC]; *Halifax Labor Annual* (Halifax, 1930).

appropriate to residential densities. The only public housing Dalzell would countenance was for “undesirable tenants”. These were the “feble-minded woman with a large number of children” who was “not yet accepted as an institutional case”, the “habitual drunkard”, or the more deserving poor who were aged or handicapped. Their housing was conceived along the lines of a modernized Elizabethan poorhouse. The unfit tenants, Dalzell declared, would be placed “under the regular supervision of officials”, who would see that “those that proved to be incurable because of their own bad habits and complete inefficiency are put in their proper place”.⁵

Dalzell’s approach to housing was typical of the excessive pre-depression claims of planners for the powers of their techniques to remedy social ills. The seeds of a newer diagnosis can be seen in a second report made for the Citizens’ Housing Committee by Arthur Pettipas, Secretary of the Board of Health. Pettipas found, from the 1921 census, that the “average earnings in Halifax of heads of families of wage earners in twelve different categories” was only \$1,135. Consequently, many families were below the minimum subsistence level of the Department of Labour’s \$1,400 per annum and could not afford to pay more than \$20 a month in rent. Unfortunately, accommodation for families of five could not be found in houses at this price. Consequently, as many as ten persons were forced to huddle in a single room, and families lived in “dark and semi-dark rooms, basements and cellars”. Although most Halifax homes were owner occupied, on the average 1.9 families lived in each house. A survey of 291 rooms, undertaken by Pettipas in 1931, found an average of three persons per room, two adults and children “sleeping on the floor in one room”, and five children and two adults living in two rooms in “indescribable conditions”. Houses also deteriorated as repairs became too heavy a financial burden. Pettipas found that many had “defective roofs, windows and doors causing them to be damp and quite unsuitable”. Pettipas’ perception of the relationship between affordability and basic human needs for shelter was shared by advocates of publicly subsidized low rental housing. Major Tibbs was especially eloquent on European housing development. He praised Vienna’s “purely socialist” housing scheme, noting that “all the people in these apartments appear very contented and happy”.⁶

The Housing Committee saw itself faced with a choice between socialist and capitalist solutions to Halifax’s housing crisis. It openly asked in its report: “upon which shall we decide.... In spite of worldwide experience to the contrary is Mr. Dalzell right in his recommendation to leave the matter to private enterprise?” Although the report does not deal with policy divisions among the committee, it is reasonable to assume that Tibbs and Craig were in conflict with

5 Citizens’ Housing Committee, *Housing in Halifax*, pp. 3, 16-18, 29-47.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 52-75.

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more conservative members of the committee representing Halifax's service clubs, who were integrated with the city's business community. These poles of conflict likely guided the committee onto a middle course. Accepting the evidence that rents must be subsidized for low income families, the committee still veered away from public housing. Instead, it suggested that subsidies be given to private investors, in the form of low interest loans to limited dividend companies awarded by a provincial housing board. These projects would be exempted from municipal taxes. Thus, while Dalzell's claims that subsidies were not needed was rejected, the socialist tinted remedies of Europe were not accepted. The committee did not discuss the relative merits of the quality and affordability of private and public housing. It simply stressed the need to limit controversy, citing "the principle fundamental in social reform that the object aimed at should be secured with the least possible dislocation of the existing social arrangements". Moreover, it expressed concerns that subsidies for tenants would be "constantly...added to the taxpayers' burden". The committee's proposals were quickly accepted by the Nova Scotian legislature, with the passage of the Nova Scotia Housing Act in April 1932.⁷

While events moved quickly from the launching of the Halifax Labor Council's public housing campaign in March 1931, and the formation of the Halifax Housing Committee to the completion of its report and legislative adoption of its recommendations by April 1932, action soon slowed down when the province had to move to appoint the Nova Scotia Housing Commission. Its failure to act resulted in a delay of almost two years. On 30 September 1932, the *Citizen* complained that while "the public conscience was stirred, and the public press and pulpit rose in indignation...it was all a flash in the pan as far as actions as concerned. What has been done, NOTHING".⁸ In March 1933, a delegation to the provincial Premier from the Nova Scotian chapter of the Trades and Labor Congress urged the "immediate appointment of the Housing Commission as provided by Legislation enacted in the last session", along with stricter laws against foreclosures. On 2 February 1934, the *Citizen* asked: "Will The Government Take Action?"⁹ When the government finally got around to appointing the Commission in 1934, it failed to include a representative from the province's labour movement which had campaigned for it for so long. The Commission appears to have been composed of the more moderate supporters of social housing, representing churches and service clubs.¹⁰ It was chaired by Fred Pearson, who was succeeded by S.H. Prince in 1937. Both chairmen were strong supporters of social housing. Each argued unsuccessfully with the federal

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-7.

8 *Halifax Citizen*, 30 September 1932.

9 *Ibid.*, 2 February 1934.

10 *Ibid.*, 9 March 1934.

government over the need for financial assistance to support the Commission's efforts to build low rental housing.

The purpose of the Nova Scotia Housing Commission was to await applications for housing loans for low income projects from limited dividend private housing corporations. To meet the needs of low income families, the homes would have "to rent from \$12 to \$18 a month". The Commission received a commitment from Premier Angus L. MacDonald to establish a \$200,000 fund to be loaned at rates of 3.5 per cent for three-quarters of the cost of a project. After some debate in Halifax City Council, the exemptions were also given, following some persuasion by the Halifax Labor Council.¹¹

The Nova Scotia Housing Commission soon found itself in a bind created by the moderation of the Halifax Housing Commission and the legislation under which it operated. Although seeing the need for subsidized housing, the committee was faced with the impossible task of interesting the province's private investors to build such shelter within its minimum standards. Low interest loans and tax advantages were not enough of an incentive to interest business in building low income housing. In 1936, after conferences with Premier MacDonald, the Housing Commission published a seven-point plan designed to make its limited dividend scheme more attractive to investors. This proposal did bring a flood of applicants. However, to its regret, the Commission found that none of the projects submitted met the goal of furnishing "decent homes with a rental low enough to meet the requirements of those living under unsatisfactory conditions". To lend to such developers would simply supply "cheap credit for speculative building". The Commission now faced the same choice which confronted the Citizens' Committee five years previously: whether to recommend to the province "straight government or municipal housing" or to keep looking for a solution by working with the private sector. As the former course was regarded by the Commission as a "last resort policy" felt "by many to be out of harmony with our economic institutions", it decided to call together a group of prominent Halifax businessmen to form the limited dividend Halifax Housing Company in 1937. The company was to be led by "public spirited men willing to act for the public good, if necessary, without assured pecuniary return".¹²

The Halifax Housing Corporation planned an initial project of 52 low cost rental homes, to be supplied with a kitchen-living room, bathroom, and three bedrooms, at a rate of only \$4 per month. This plan was supported by the City Engineer, the Chairman of the Board of Health, the Labor Council and the Halifax Board of Trade, but it was blocked by the City Council. The damaging of the city's finances by tax exemptions provided a convenient excuse for

11 *Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly of Nova Scotia, 1937*, Appendix No. 35, pp. 5-9.

12 *Ibid.*

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aldermen to resist approval of subsidized housing, which had received such strong community support. Conservative inclinations not to interfere with the real estate market, when shielded by the defence of municipal finances, proved able to stand up to the opposition of both leading business and labour leaders. In deference to widespread public opinion about the need to take public action to improve housing conditions, Halifax City Council did agree to make loans at interest rates not below five per cent to landlords for repairs and for plumbing costs not above \$50 per room.¹³

Although the Halifax Housing Survey generated little housing, it played a part in pressuring the Bennett government to pass housing legislation in the dying days of the New Deal. Its Dominion Housing Act of 1935 (DHA) transferred the initiative for social housing from the provincial to the federal level. The Halifax Housing Survey of 1932 and the Nova Scotian legislature's 1934 act establishing a provincial housing commission had put Halifax and the province at the forefront of efforts to encourage the creation of social housing programs. After the passage of federal legislation, however, both civic and provincial efforts became geared to securing financial assistance from Ottawa. These attempts were unsuccessful during the depression primarily because of the deep philosophical opposition of the federal Department of Finance to the notion that there were Canadian families so poor as to require public shelter subsidies. As Deputy Minister of Finance W.C. Clark explained in a confidential memorandum to Finance Minister Charles Dunning, the Department could not accept the notion that "wages or other incomes of certain groups of people in our urban centers are below a level which would enable them to pay the ordinary economic cost of necessary family shelter".¹⁴

The Department of Finance was fundamentally opposed to the approach taken by the Halifax Citizens' Committee, the Nova Scotia Housing Commission, housing surveys across Canada and the varied interest groups that supported public housing. Although Clark openly expressed his opposition to subsidized low income housing to his colleagues in the Department of Finance and federal cabinet ministers, this position was not clearly conveyed to the general public, municipalities or provincial governments. In the spring of 1936, Nova Scotia Housing Commission Chairman Fred Pearson made a plea to Clark for federal loans to the province at three per cent interest. This was the rate given by the federal government under the joint public-private sector mortgage loans which were made available to new home buyers and builders under the DHA of 1935. In response, Clark replied that he did not wish to put more difficulties upon "the over-burdened Exchequer".¹⁵

13 *Ibid.*; Halifax Citizen, 8 April 1938.

14 W.C. Clark, "A Low Rental Housing Program Summary of Criticisms", Department of Finance Papers, RG 19, vol. 3888, PAC.

15 Fred Pearson to W.C. Clark, 14 March 1936, RG 19, vol. 397, PAC.

Clark tried to deflect the interest in public housing by promoting lower cost homeownership under the DHA, but he obtained the participation of local building firms only after considerable difficulty. Clark's DHA provided for joint government-private mortgages for builders and home buyers. Twenty per cent of the cost of a home was put on a subsidized, government loan of three per cent. Eighty per cent was provided by private lending institutions at a fixed rate of interest, which meant that borrowers would pay a combined rate of 5.5 per cent. Consequently, the DHA was not popular with Halifax lending institutions since its effective interest rate was considerably below the 7.44 per cent which prevailed in the city.¹⁶ Clark, however, was able to break resistance to the DHA in Halifax by his close co-operation with the Montreal based Sun Life Insurance. Although Sun Life used the DHA to capture new markets in Halifax through its lower interest rates, Sun Life and Clark were embarrassed over the poor quality building of Sun Life's important mortgage contractors. Questions were raised in the city's press over alleged shoddy production techniques. Consequently, Clark confided to federal Finance Minister Charles Dunning that "something of a mess" had taken place in the efforts to introduce "mass production methods" through the DHA in Halifax. In any event, during the depression only 214 federal joint loans were made in Nova Scotia, which built 401 dwellings.¹⁷

Under the sponsorship of the National Employment Commission in 1936, a federal program of guarantees was also established for home repair loans made by chartered banks for sums not exceeding \$1,000. In 1936, the National Employment Commission appointed a provincial housing committee in Nova Scotia, composed of the province's leading industrialists and Liberal premier MacDonald and former Conservative premier W.L. Harrington. This committee had the responsibility of promoting the federal home improvement plan throughout the province, but they informed federal Labour Minister Norman Rodgers that the scheme was largely a failure in Halifax. Larger building contractors in the city would not support it since they feared it would "tend to decrease new construction". Halifax's landlords did not take advantage of it since they believed it would "compel them to either improve their properties or lower their rentals".¹⁸

Largely out of concern shown by the National Employment Commission about the inability of existing federal housing programs to benefit low income

16 W.C. Clark to A.L. Wickwire, RG 19, vol. 711, PAC; W.C. Clark "Memorandum re: Trip to Maritimes", 25 July 1936, RG 19, vol. 706, PAC; *Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly of Nova Scotia, 1941*, Appendix No. 32; "Address by W.C. Clark to Dalhousie University, RG 27, vol. 3337, PAC.

17 "Memorandum to Mr. Dunning re: Halifax Housing Situation", RG 19, vol. 3929, PAC.

18 Memorandum from Nova Scotia Provincial Home Improvement plan Committee to Mr. Arthur B. Purvis, Chairman, National Employment Commission, RG 19, vol. 707, PAC.

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families, the federal government passed the National Housing Act (NHA) of 1938. Section Two of this act provided for federal housing loans to public housing associations and limited dividend housing corporations, but this section did not follow the suggestions made by the National Employment Commission, largely because of opposition from the leading foe of public housing, W.C. Clark. Clark made several modifications to the legislation which prevented it from being a successful instrument to build subsidized housing. The most important was to impose limits on the level of taxation which a municipality could impose on a low rental housing project. Municipal taxation on such projects was restricted to one per cent of their construction costs. Clark was inviting a repetition of the tax controversy which had already slowed progress in building subsidized housing in Halifax. This legislation also was scheduled to expire on 30 April 1940, putting cities across Canada in a fruitless race against the clock to get their projects approved before the deadline date.¹⁹

The limitations on municipal taxation aroused strong opposition among senior Halifax city staff and the municipal council. Although the city's assessor and auditor, J.F. McManus, deplored low income housing as a "class benefit" that would penalize "the thrifty and capable", the Council supported the application of the Halifax Housing Corporation, after it received strong backing from the Trades and Labor Council, the Halifax Civic Improvement League, the Board of Trade and "every important welfare organization in the city".²⁰ Yet, despite municipal approval, no housing would be built. Federal Deputy Minister of Finance, W.C. Clark, felt that the city's tax exemptions were inadequate, since Halifax still intended to have levies to cover the costs of municipal services for the project. Six days after Halifax's approval of the project, on 20 March 1940, he wrote to S.H. Prince to outline his objections and to require that other details, including an option to purchase land and a complete project design, be completed by the 30 March 1940, NHA deadline. Prince could not meet this exacting schedule and on 26 April 1940, he asked Clark for an extension, noting that "the necessary provincial legislation is now available" and "civic co-operation assured". No extension was granted. The consensus of opinion in civil service circles in Ottawa, fostered largely by Clark, now maintained that any housing construction was a dangerous drain on the war effort.²¹

19 Based on comparison of W.C. Clark, "A Low Rental Housing Program Summary of Criticisms", the National Employment Commission's "Act to Promote Slum Clearance and Assist the Construction of Low Rental Housing", RG 19, vol. 3388, PAC, and the NHA legislation outlined in *Statutes of Canada*, 1939, pp. 358-64.

20 Memorandum of J.F. McManus, City Assessor and A.M. Bulter to City Council, 14 February 1940, RG 35-103, Series 3, File 103, Housing Conditions (1938-43), Public Archives of Nova Scotia [hereafter PANS].

21 W.C. Clark to S.H. Prince, 20 March 1940, and Prince to Clark, 26 April 1940, RG 19, vol. 706, PAC; For Hostility to residential construction during wartime see "Report of Economic

World War Two added new complexities to federal housing policy. The need for adequate housing for munitions workers weakened the formerly paramount influence that W.C. Clark had had in shaping federal housing policy and Wartime Housing Limited was created as a crown corporation to build rental housing for munitions workers. Wartime Housing was a branch of the Department of Munitions and Supply but the scope of its activities was limited by the careful scrutiny of its activities by the Department of Finance.

Halifax City Council generally supported a more expansive building program by Wartime Housing. On 22 March 1942, it noted that "many houses formerly occupied by a single family are now tenanted by two, and in some cases three families living under conditions most unsatisfactory".²² Joint pressure from the Council and the Nova Scotia Housing Commission caused Wartime Housing to release 30 homes for dispossessed families of soldiers and those "in urgent need of housing relief". By 21 February 1942, Wartime Housing had built or begun some 961 dwellings at a cost of \$3,568,880, let at rates of \$25 and \$32 a month. Continuing shortages and municipal pressure led to the joint federal-municipal Ardmore Park Project, for citizens "not necessarily war workers", to which Halifax contributed \$250,000 for land acquisition and ground services. The scale of the wartime housing problem was revealed by the 1,000 applications for the 199 unit complex completed in 1942.²³

Yet, despite mounting housing pressures, no other large Wartime Housing project would be started in Halifax. On 6 November 1941, the federal government clamped down on all Wartime Housing projects because of the outrage of Ontario realtors, lumber dealers and small builders over a proposed Wartime Housing Limited project in Hamilton. This decision resulted in the appointment of a new federal official, the Real Property Administrator, Russel Smart, who was given authority to make investigations before any new Wartime Housing project could be approved. His findings were submitted to the housing Co-ordinating Committee, which had final approval over new projects. While Smart was part of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board, the housing Co-ordinating Committee included representatives of several government agencies, including the Department of Finance.²⁴ On 7 December 1942, the Minister of Munitions and Supply, C.D. Howe, wrote to Finance Minister J.L. Isley to assure him that Wartime Housing Limited's proposals for 200 houses for dockyard workers and 300 for shipyard employees had been rejected. Howe

Advisory Committee on Housing Policy", RG 19, vol. 38980, PAC.

22 "Summary Re: Housing Situation in Halifax", 27 March 1942, RG 35, Series 34, H. 1, PANS.

23 *Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly of Nova Scotia, 1942*. Appendix No. 33, p. 10.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 12; Russel Smart to Donald Gordon, 21 November 1942, RG 19, vol. 715, File re: Congested Housing Halifax, PAC.

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promised no action would be taken “unless and until we are advised by the Administrator of Real Property that additional houses are required at Halifax”. Any further housing would require “exceptional reasons”.²⁵

Russel Smart proved to be generally supportive of more wartime housing for Halifax, but after eight months of trying to work within the limits of the nation’s existing shelter stock, he had Halifax removed from his jurisdiction. Responsibility for Halifax was transferred to E.L. Cousins, Administrator of Canadian Atlantic ports, after an 8 September 1943 meeting of the Cabinet War Committee. This action was taken in response to reports of a severe housing shortage blocking the war effort.²⁶ In May 1943, P.B. Carswell, Controller of Ship Repairs and Salvage, had complained to Minister of Munitions and Supply, C.D. Howe, that the “refitting of escort vessels for convoy duty has become a serious problem in the Maritimes” since “conditions in the Port of Halifax offer serious resistance to our efforts to fully man facilities”. Not only was “sleeping space...not available to workers”, but “good food is difficult to procure...transportation facilities are inadequate and in the event of an air raid, panic conditions would follow”. Carswell seized on a blunt solution: the “evacuation of large numbers of new inhabitants who stay in Halifax” contributing “nothing towards winning the war”.²⁷ Carswell’s opinion was supported by Smart’s Executive Assistant, H.D. Fripp, who argued that “additional military dependents and non-essentials” should be barred from entry “within 50 miles of the city”. Women already there, Fripp felt, should “be cleared out from the area”.²⁸ In his report, Fripp pointed out the seriousness of the housing crisis. Of the 12,500 dwellings in Halifax, half were taking roomers. Only 776 “houses and living units” had been built from 1938 to 14 July 1943. Some companies had built bunkhouses for their employees and the National Harbour Board had 130 of its 750 workers “sleeping in freight cars”. The shortage of housing was so severe, Fripp noted, that the National Selective Service refused to allocate workers to employers unless they could guarantee accommodation. It had requests for “5334 additional males and 933 females” to work in the city.²⁹

These detailed descriptions of housing shortages led the federal Cabinet to give Cousins a mandate to take action to relieve Halifax’s housing shortage. His

25 C.D. Howe to J.L. Isley, 2 November 1942, RG 19, vol. 3539, PAC.

26 Minutes of Meeting of 17 September 1943, to deal with the Housing Situation in Halifax in accordance with Cabinet War Committee Minutes dated 8 September 1943, RG 2, Series 18, vol. 9, Privy Council Papers, PAC; Memorandum from F. Kent Hamilton, 18 September 1943, RG 2, Series 18, vol. 9, PAC.

27 P.B. Carswell to C.D. Howe, 8 May 1943, RG 2, Series 18, vol. 9, PAC.

28 Memorandum re: Halifax Housing from H.D. Fripp, Executive Assistant, Real Property Administration, 19 July 1943, RG 2, Series 18, vol. 9, PAC.

29 Memorandum from H.D. Fripp, 19 July 1943, RG 2, Series 18, vol. 9, PAC.

powers included restricting the movement of troops and relocating the civilian population. At the outset of assuming his housing duties, the federal Cabinet suggested to Cousins that the removal of 4,000 persons from the city would create "the equivalent of 1,000 homes".³⁰ Wisely, however, Cousins decided against immediate evictions and commissioned a special housing census. Under his orders, the navy also provided barracks for an additional 3,000 officers and ratings by mid-April 1944. Rejecting entrance controls, Cousins had the federal government undertake a publicity campaign against unwarranted travel to Halifax, "through the C.B.C. news, moving pictures in every theatre in Canada, general press publicity and warnings as to travel in the Halifax-Dartmouth area in the various railway stations in Canada". Another 4,000 service personnel were removed from the Halifax area, largely through the RCAF's moving out of the city.³¹

The view that the indolent caused Halifax's housing problems was finally abandoned by Cousins in his report of 17 July 1944, based on a Halifax-Dartmouth population census, conducted under a special Order-in-Council. This census found that 19,195 arrivals had been added to the city's pre-war population of 65,000. With the exception of 501 women married to service personnel, only a "very few" were unemployed, or not "members of families whose heads are in business employed in Halifax". The 501 women did not cause housing shortages, as all but 119 lived in rooming houses, which currently had 349 vacant rooms, and 46 of the 119 persons "living in houses, flats or apartments" were employed in "necessary war work". The 73 women eligible for eviction consequently amounted to ".890 per thousand of the population" and their deportation would provide only "negligible" relief. The census revealed very clearly that housing shortages continued, as witnessed by cases of a family of eight living in a single room, 25 persons in a four-room house, and 36 in a twelve-room structure. Some 270 houses had been condemned by the Health department, but tenants could not be evicted due to the prevailing overcrowding. A surprising 43 per cent of Halifax's dwelling units were "not structurally good". Some 18 per cent had inadequate sanitary facilities; 400 dwellings lacked inside toilets and 2,500 both bathtubs and showers. Another 5,800 homes were heated by stoves.³²

While eviction as a policy was rejected by Cousins, the federal government's housing efforts remained decidedly modest. Wartime Housing moved 25 houses from Liverpool to Halifax for emergency accommodations. Cousins gave material and labour priorities to the St. Lawrence Construction Company,

30 Cousins to C.D. Howe, 1 November 1943, RG 2, Series 18, vol. 9, PAC.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Cousins to Howe, 17 July 1944, RG 2, Series 18, vol. 9, File H-13, PAC; *Journals and Proceedings of the House of Assembly of Nova Scotia, 1945*, Appendix No. 31, p. 9.

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which encouraged the building of 120 private homes, almost double the 67 constructed from January to July 1944. Cousins recognized the inadequacy of this response, and told C.D. Howe he had “no hesitancy” in saying that “the Halifax-Dartmouth area could advantageously use a further 1,000 houses, to rent from \$30 to \$35 per month”.³³

The bizarre proposals for evictions epitomize the strong opposition within the federal government to expanding Wartime Housing’s operations. This conservative tenor was also reflected in the 1944 National Housing Act. It rejected proposals of the Curtis sub-committee of the James Advisory Committee on Post-war Reconstruction, whose members included NSHC Chairman S.H. Prince, for federally subsidized but municipally administered non-profit housing development. Instead, the legislation provided the same unworkable provisions for limited dividend housing as the NHA of 1938 and once again private investors refused to participate in the program. Typically, a 1947 memorandum from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) Halifax office concluded that there was no interest apart from “some well-intentioned people who have no money to put into such a scheme themselves but who think it would be excellent for the general good”.³⁴

Since legislation for permanent low rental housing was unworkable, Wartime Housing was perpetuated from 1945 to 1949 to construct rental housing for returning veterans. These projects in Halifax had higher standards than those set by Wartime Housing for the homes of munitions workers. Wartime dwellings originally built in Halifax were placed on top of wood pilings, but the initial 274 units of veterans’ housing had permanent foundations. In 1948, CMHC developed two large veteran rental housing complexes, with 221 units in the first and 66 in the second. These projects on a former military base were developed along the lines of a limited access subdivision with attractive landscaping features. Even these large projects could not meet the demand for veteran rental housing; in 1948, Halifax had a waiting list of 900 persons for such shelter. To be on a waiting list often meant being placed in “emergency shelter” accommodation in a converted wartime barracks or military staff house. Waiting lists were even present for such spartan shelter; in 1949, a widow complained that she had been waiting for a year, and that her two children living with her father faced a four-mile journey to attend school.³⁵

33 Cousins to Howe, 1 November 1943, RG 2, Series 18, vol. 9, PAC; secret memorandum to Cabinet War Committee, Document No. 38, 21 May 1944, Cabinet War Committee Records, RG 2, Reel C-4876, PAC.

34 A.E. Brounell to D.F. Marstand, 19 May 1947, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation Papers, PAC.

35 Mayor Ahern to CMHC, 1 October 1948, RG 35-102, PANS; *A Redevelopment Study of Halifax*, Supplementary Volume, pp. 9-10; Mrs. Ballie to Mayor Ahern, RG 35-102, Series 3, File 103-A, PANS.

Although Wartime Housing was terminated in 1949, this action finally resulted in the federal government's acceptance of a workable program of low income housing through an amendment to the National Housing Act. Under the new Section 35 of the NHA, provision was made for the federal government to pay 75 per cent of the capital costs and subsidies of rental housing built jointly with provincial governments. The 1949 public housing legislation was drafted by the more flexible CMHC President David Mansur, who did not share W.C. Clark's aversion to public housing. CMHC had been formed in 1945, loosening the rigid supervision over housing policy exercised by Clark when responsibility for the administration of the National Housing Act had been in the Finance Department. The 1949 NHA amendments, unlike earlier legislation for subsidized rental housing, were workable and did finally produce public housing units. No attempt was made, however, to promote the use of the legislation or to set targets to meet social needs for affordable housing. The program consequently only produced a trickle of units. This achievement was small in part because of CMHC's decision to sell off its Wartime Housing rental units as rapidly as possible. Rather than become part of the portfolio of newly formed public housing authorities, Wartime Housing would be placed on the private market as rapidly as possible.

Halifax, like most Canadian cities, would help to sell off more public housing in 1950 than it would create in the subsequent decade. CMHC sold 787 units of Wartime Housing to Halifax at \$1,000 apiece. They were resold at prices ranging from \$1,700 to \$2,300. The Edgewood-Ardmore Tenants' Association complained that they were "at a loss to see why a price increase of 70 per cent to 130 per cent is justified". Tenants who did not buy by 1 November 1950 lost priority; the city had a list of 1,700 purchasers and the Mayor noted that "people are being evicted in other areas and they want to buy these houses". The Chairman of the city council committee which handled transactions, Alderman De Wolf, admitted that 20 per cent of tenants could not afford to buy. He felt, however, that since CMHC said to tenants who were unable to buy, "you move to another place", that the city of Halifax could "do the same". Some tenants who purchased their homes rapidly sold them to the Broadway Real Estate Company, which resold them by advertisements.³⁶

Although Halifax did not incorporate existing housing stock into a supply of public housing, Nova Scotia did become one of the first provinces to undertake a housing project under the 1949 federal-provincial arrangements. The early 1949 Regent Park project had been developed solely on the initiative of the city of Toronto, which received federal funds only for land acquisition. The first scheme under the new federal-provincial arrangements, Newfoundland's St.

36 Minutes of the Special Committee on Prefabricated Houses, 16 February 1950, p. 6, 6 July 1950, p. 5, RG 35-102 (D. 1), PANS.

John's Estbary Estates, had severe restrictions imposed on it by the provincial government. These required, for example, that tenants provide their own sources of heat or hot water.³⁷ Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, and Alberta all had governments who opposed public housing out of a rigid ideological commitment. Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, the CCF governed province of Saskatchewan, British Columbia and New Brunswick alone would permit municipalities to take part in the first years of the federal-provincial scheme. In British Columbia, despite provincial approval, public housing was delayed by the efforts of many elements of the business community to restrict it to senior citizens and welfare recipients.³⁸ In Halifax, important centers of resistance to a project to improve the housing conditions of low income families were not present. Since the 1933 Halifax Housing Survey and the 1934 creation of the NSHC, there had been a recognition of the need for public subsidies to house low income families. Halifax had come closest to meeting the 31 March 1940 deadline for the first opportunity to participate in federally subsidized housing under NHA. It would be the second city to apply opportunities given under the newly passed Section 35 of NHA. Federal funding of 75 per cent of the cost of NHA finally allowed the pioneer social housing advocates of the depression era to turn their principles into reality. S.H. Prince, who had chaired the 1932 Halifax Citizens' Committee, saw his vision of public housing achieved 21 years later while still chairman of the NSHC.

With its high design standards and goal of meeting a broad range of low income families, the Bayers Road housing project was a demonstration of the potential of the 1949 federal-provincial public housing partnership. However, this success was to underline the severity of the city's remaining housing problems among low income families and make tenant selection the greatest administrative controversy. Although some 1,000 low income families applied to be admitted to Bayers Road, only 161 could be selected. With such pressures, tight income eligibility rules had to be adopted. The poorest, such as welfare recipients and families earning less than \$1,500 a year, were not admitted. At the upper level, tenants earning over \$3,200 had to move, as they were considered too affluent to remain. In the first year of operation, this policy forced 39 out of the 161 families to relocate.³⁹

Bayers Road's problems stemmed from its popularity; the only tenant protests were over being forced to leave through income ceilings. The strict income ceilings were a rationing mechanism established to ensure the very limited

37 Minutes of CMHC Executive Committee, 23 May 1950, RG 19, vol. 723, PAC; CMHC, *Annual Report, 1951*, p. 16.

38 CMHC, *Annual Report, 1951*, p. 16; Newspaper Clippings, Housing 1950-1963, Housing Docket #6, M4289-6, Vancouver City Archives [hereafter VCA].

39 Albert Rose, *Regent Park* (Toronto, 1958), p. 123; Correspondence and Press Clippings re: Bayers Road Public Housing Project, RG 35-102, PANS.

amount of public housing available went to those families who were in greatest need and best able to benefit from it. The only public program to assist families earning under \$1,500 a year was emergency shelter. Although federal assistance to these shelters was terminated after 1949, municipalities continued to operate them due to the severe housing shortage. Consequently, emergency shelter remained in use in Halifax throughout the 1950s. Its operation was testimony to the continuing need for low income housing in Halifax. When "slum clearance" began for Halifax's urban renewal in 1959, Halifax had a 351 family waiting list for the Bayers Road public housing project and 198 families still living in emergency shelter.⁴⁰ Despite the building of the second public housing project, Mulgrove Park, specifically to rehouse families displaced by urban renewal, the massive demolitions caused by the clearance of much of downtown Halifax greatly intensified housing shortages. In 1961, Halifax's social welfare officer, H.B. Jones, estimated that 200 families a month were leaving the city because of redevelopment pressures. He noted that urban renewal had "pushed hundreds of families all over Halifax County" with former residents now living also in Digby, Cape Breton and "as far as Windsor and beyond". When Halifax's last emergency shelter unit was closed in 1961, tenants were evicted under court orders. Families were divided up between the City Home, Children's Aid and St. Joseph Orphanage.⁴¹

Although it went only part way to meeting the housing problems reformers decried, the final building of Halifax's first public housing project was eloquent testimony to the long years of effort of pioneers such as S.H. Prince who had worked for over 20 years to bring it to the city. The Bayers Road public housing project was an achievement of the dedication of almost two decades of efforts by religious leaders and social service agencies, which had been sustained by the continual pressure of the city's labour movement. In fact, organized labour had played the most important role in the achievement of public housing in Halifax, since its interest continued when that of other sectors of the community lagged or fell dormant.

It took so long to achieve public housing in Halifax largely because of the resistance to the idea that low income families needed subsidized shelter from the body that controlled the purse strings, the federal Department of Finance. Local conservatism also played a role in the long delay between the conception and birth of public housing in Halifax. Although there was a consensus that public subsidies were needed to house low income families, progress was stalled over the insistence that such shelter be operated by private limited dividend companies. Resistance to the innovation of public housing was deep enough to

40 "Redevelopment, Halifax Nova Scotia", 14 November 1957, p. 6, RG 35-M, vol. 42 (unsorted), PANS.

41 Department of Public Works Newspaper Scrapbook on Housing, MG 9, vol. 461, PANS; Housing Review Committee Minutes, 11 July 1961, pp. 1-3, RG 35-102, vol. 34, PANS.

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persist by making it taboo even after private investors indicated they did not wish to become involved in carrying out the development of low income housing envisaged for them. Despite such local opposition, when federal policy became flexible enough to develop a workable public housing program, the support nurtured for many years by housing reformers at the municipal and provincial levels permitted its relatively rapid introduction to Halifax. Rather than a bastion of supposed Maritime "conservatism", Halifax became an important area of innovation for housing programs.