

## **Homeless**

### **Too many people don't have homes to go to**

A common dream of young people starting out in life used to be owning their own homes. In years gone by it was achievable, for most anyway. There were those, of course, whose finances didn't stretch as far, so they had to be content with renting; and yet others who couldn't manage even that. Years ago we took a trip to the UK and while out walking came across what was commonly called cardboard city. The abodes were actually cardboard boxes set up under archways and other places which would stay relatively dry during wet weather; and this was where disadvantaged individuals lived – a terrible state of affairs which, in a way, made us feel guilty for being more fortunate. Knowing we couldn't fix the world, the best we could do at the time was gift a few dollars (sorry, pounds) for some to buy a coffee or a sandwich. We returned home with this depressing memory, but were grateful not to be in the same position and continued to believe our country's population hadn't been reduced to poverty on such a scale.

But that was then; now, however, things have changed; or maybe it had always been around only we never noticed. These days the situation of homelessness is hard to ignore. We see it on the TV with politicians arguing the toss, the opposition demanding the Government do something about the lack of affordable housing. The response from the party in power is usually that they are already spending millions to resolve the problem and they blame rising building costs and shortages of materials and labour. Then, they say, to combat the latter they are bringing in workers from overseas to fill the gap. Fine, but where are these people going to live – in the houses that our folk can't afford to rent, or maybe some time in the future in places that they are here to help build?

And so it goes on for the homeless. Because house prices have increased phenomenally the rents charged by landlords has kept pace. When a vacancy occurs there are queues of prospective new tenants, some even bidding for top spot. Needless to say houses and apartments to rent are gone in a flash and the losers start again, trawling advertisements and the Net for another to try for. Meanwhile, couples and families, particularly single mums with kids, they have no option but to sleep in their cars. There is, of course, couch-surfing: crashing on the sofa of a friend or relation willing to let them stay until they can get somewhere of their own; an unlikely eventuality in the current economic climate. At the bottom of the stack are the individuals living really rough, sleeping on the streets, under public-building verandas; maybe in a squat, if they can find an unoccupied property or abandoned house. What a poor reflection on a supposedly modern civilization!

I don't like criticizing unless I can put forward a solution of sorts; and this matter is no different. Obviously, more affordable accommodation is needed. People with properties that are geared to short term rental are encouraged to offer them with long-term leases; but that won't fix the growing problem. Neither will building new houses which won't be finished for a year or more. A better option would be pre-fabricated units that are made in

factories ready for assembly on suitable land. In Australia, at least, there is plenty of that; provided the Government is prepared to release or purchase it and is willing to set up the usual facilities such as water, sewerage, plus utilities like electricity and gas. Maybe these alternatives aren't exactly luxurious, but they are adequate and a darn sight more comfortable than the back seat of a car or a vacant spot on the sidewalk. For years, mining companies have been accommodating their workers in dongas, small cabins with a few basic facilities. They are transportable, cheap to construct; and although might be considered a band-aid solution, they would provide somewhere temporary for the homeless to live while governmental round-table discussions go on and on, rarely scratching little more than the surface of a huge problem.

From time to time politicians may be reminded that there are Housing Commission dwellings that are left empty. The excuse is that they are in need of repair or renovation which is costly. Surely patching them up so that they are livable would be much cheaper and quicker than building a new house from scratch? Then there are buildings now standing idle that would accommodate more than a single family – an isolation centre used during the pandemic, and a number of other unused facilities originally designated for purposes such as a hospital replaced by a new one and a refugee camp no longer needed for that purpose; what about them? But no, no: too hard, too expensive. Really...? Get with the program guys!

Going back to the pre-fabricated dwellings, I recall seeing many in the suburbs of London just after World War II. Prefabs they were known as; and they were set up on bomb sites, a result of the Blitz, and on commons. They were nothing flash, but they provided homes for people whose houses had been blown to bits. When a person has nowhere else to go, they are surely preferable to living rough.

I only hope that the powers-that-be stop with the endless talk-talk and be more compassionate towards those people who, through no fault of their own, are being left out in the cold; and all thanks to Governments which claim to be doing the right thing by everyone, but never seem to actually do it.

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