

# Middle-income families need public housing

## Ottawa needs to fill wide gap, writes Kennedy Stewart.

The federal government needs to get back into the housing game in a big way.

In 1979, when I was 13 years old, mortgage rates unexpectedly skyrocketed and my family lost our Nova Scotia home. Unable to afford a place to live, we moved into my grandfather's un-winterized cabin in one of the poorest parts of the province. These events devastated my family. I headed west in the 1980s to find work, luckily landing in a one-bedroom Burnaby basement apartment shared with four friends. This experience informs my politics and shows why we need immediate action to help Metro Vancouver families cope with our current housing crisis.

Our out-of-control housing market is causing extreme anxiety for renters and those looking to purchase a home. It is so bad that a recent Angus Reid study finds more than 150,000 families are considering leaving Metro Vancouver due to high prices and rents. A Bank of Canada report in June flagged our housing market as a "national economic vulnerability" caused by migration; high employment; limited land on which to build new housing; provincial and municipal land-use regulation; self-reinforcing expectations; and foreign buying.

Many recent media reports point at foreign buying as the sole cause of all our housing problems. But UBC professor Tsur Somerville suggests that while foreign money impacts some wealthy neighbourhoods, the region-wide impact is limited. **Instead of just focusing on who is buying what, we need to acknowledge the real cause of our housing crisis: the failure of successive federal governments to invest in public housing for middle-income families.**

Housing will always be unaffordable to many living in big cities with growing economies when the private sector is left alone to build homes. This is because when lots of people move into a confined space land becomes scarcer, and, as such, land prices increase. **Private developers prefer to build homes from which they can make the most money.**

**They tend to build homes for the wealthy, which squeezes average people out of the housing market.**

National governments in other countries invest in much-needed shelters and social housing for the poor like what we might find in our own Downtown Eastside. But they also invest in homes for the middle-class, such as high-quality rental buildings, co-operatives, and for-purchase homes with resale restrictions — places where average families can afford to rent or own when the market fails to provide the kind of housing they would prefer.

Professor Penny Gurstein, Kristin Patten and Prajna Rao from UBC track the percentage of public housing found in various countries around the world. The results shine a bright light on Canada's housing problem. In Singapore, 82 per cent of all housing is public housing. In Hong

Kong, public housing constitutes 45 per cent of the entire housing market; Sweden 35 per cent; the Netherlands, 31 per cent; Denmark 25 per cent; Austria 25 per cent; France 20 per cent; the U.K. 18 per cent; China 18 per cent; Ireland 10 per cent; and South Korea, nine per cent.

Only five per cent of Canada's current housing stock is public housing. That's right. Only five per cent of all housing in Canada has any kind of government support, with 95 per cent of all homes being provided solely by market forces. This means when housing markets heat up in big cities, average people must take on huge mortgages, pay high rents, or leave. While the federal government used to help build public housing in places like False Creek and Burnaby Mountain, this all ended in the early 1990s. Twenty-five years of failing to invest in public housing has caused the crisis we have today in Metro Vancouver.

The federal government needs to get back into the housing game in a big way to help Metro Vancouver be a more affordable place to live. We need shovels in the ground now so we can save thousands of families the pain of what my family went through. I recently challenged the Trudeau government to implement my Made-in-B. C. Affordable Housing Strategy, and I won't stop fighting until the government restarts the federal public housing program and brings an end to our housing crisis.