

**Searching for the
New Liberalism**

TORONTO • SEPTEMBER 27 - 29, 2002



**Comments on
Sherri Torjman's Presentation
Regarding "The New Liberalism:
Ideas and Ideals"**

by David Crenna

*Comments by David Crenna, President, The Bayswater Consulting Group Inc.
on a Presentation by Sherri Torjman, Vice President, Caledon Institute of Social Policy
Regarding "The New Liberalism: Ideas and Ideals"*

Sherri Torjman has provided us with an excellent overview of the social policy priorities that New Liberals should address. She has also opened up the possibility of Federal leadership in "comprehensive community initiatives", such as neighbourhood regeneration. In responding to Sherri's paper, I will take up the challenge set out by Dr. Carolyn Bennett in opening this panel. She advised commentators to make specific proposals about *what* should be done, *how* it should be done, and *how citizens should be engaged* in implementing social policy priorities. I want to focus my comments on specific ways to follow up on Sherri's ideas for community empowerment through multi-stakeholder problem-solving processes.

In the late 60s and early 70s, both of the Axworthy brothers were very much involved in devising innovative solutions for Canada's cities. Lloyd Axworthy worked with the Hellyer Task Force that recommended an end to what was called the "Urban Renewal Program". The latter was very much a "top-down" approach to community development: things were decided by senior officials and then announced to residents. As you may recall, the results were often to destroy the fabric of neighbourhoods already beset by many serious economic and social difficulties.

In the early 1970s, while working at the Central (later Canada) Mortgage and Housing Corporation, I was in charge of detailed staff work to develop an alternative to Urban Renewal. It came to be called the "Neighbourhood Improvement Program". Tom Axworthy was then a Special Assistant to the Honourable Ron Basford, Minister of Urban Affairs and Minister responsible for CMHC. Tom was a great facilitator of this policy work in his political advisor's role.

The Neighbourhood Improvement Program, as might be expected, was still focused on physically upgrading low-income neighbourhoods of cities and towns and also smaller communities. It included Federal funding for planning, housing rehabilitation and enhanced community infrastructure and facilities. The most difficult issue to be resolved was how to ensure that communities were actively engaged in setting their own priorities. An original version of *National Housing Act* amendments developed for the Honourable Robert Andras

included a formal requirement for municipal consultation with affected residents. This was subsequently modified by Mr. Basford to state that municipalities were required to state exactly how local residents would be engaged in planning and priority-setting for action.

- 2 -

However, the net effect on the ground was essentially the same. Many excellent, locally-driven priority-setting and results-definition processes ensued, along with a lot of practical project implementation, ranging from tot lots to community rinks to new street layouts and furniture. These investments in public elements of the community were designed to rebuild confidence and to support private home rehabilitation efforts.

The Neighbourhood Improvement Program unfortunately ran afoul of Federal/Provincial political conflicts toward the end of the 1970s and was not renewed. Nonetheless, it was considered a success by most evaluators, and had positive impacts on some 500 urban neighbourhoods and smaller communities across the country.

Federal/Provincial/Municipal infrastructure programs undertaken since 1993 have tended to focus on one-off large-scale projects of priority to provincial and local leadership groups. It is not a criticism of these programs to say that smaller-scale investments to regenerate poverty-stricken areas of cities and towns have not been on their radar screen.

I would like to propose that the Federal government give serious consideration to reviving an updated version of the Neighbourhood Improvement Program. This would address the wider agenda of employment, population health, skills development and early childhood support set out in Sherri Torjman's paper. These wider concerns can readily be complemented by attention to the more conventional housing and community-scale infrastructure improvements, also flagged in her presentation. A redesigned Neighbourhood Improvement Program would offer an ideal vehicle for addressing community environmental and sustainability issues as well as social, economic, and political empowerment. It would act as a means of leveraging and focusing a rather fragmented array of smaller Federal and provincial initiatives already offered by various departments, ministries and agencies.

The Federal investments need not be very large. In some cases, risk underwriting, planning and management funds, and small-scale infrastructure financing are likely to be enough, if coupled with targeted support from existing programs. Most important will be predictable funding and political encouragement for community planning secretariats. These would facilitate local stakeholder engagement, sustained priority-setting, coordinated project implementation, and accountability for results. The secretariat plus multi-stakeholder format is already being applied successfully on an international plane by Industry Canada via its "Sustainable Cities Initiative".

During the summer of 2002, I travelled across Western Canada with my family, visiting relatives there. From my personal observations, and from in-depth academic research such as that undertaken by Professor David Hawkes, it is clear that the core areas of too many towns and cities are continuing to be hollowed out. Social conditions in some communities are becoming

more and more reminiscent of those in Detroit of the 1960s. Block after block of semi-comatose businesses, pawnshops, and decrepit housing do not bode well for the future.

- 3 -

The Canadian equivalent of the U.S. "flight to the suburbs" is still taking place through combinations of new subdivisions and "big-box" shopping malls. Similar dynamics, with differing ethnic composition and local politics, are occurring in pockets right across the country. It is time to move in a positive fashion to build coalitions of stakeholders in favour of targeted private and public investment, jobs for people on welfare, and inter-racial dialogue. The costs of inaction are mounting daily. The opportunities arising from leadership in this field are immense and lasting.

Thank you.