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Homes on native land

Recently, about 180 members of the Tsuu T'ina Nation occupied 204 officers' vacant homes at Harvey Barracks in southwest Calgary. The family housing units were empty because the military base is no longer used. The land on which they sit belongs to the Tsuu T'ina reserve but is still under lease to the Department of National Defence.

While the band council was negotiating with DND about disposition of the homes, the occupiers claimed they were not adequately housed on the reserve. Bruce Starlight, Jr., son of the band's best-known dissident, Bruce, said he was living in a teepee with his wife and child. Others said they had been forced to live with relatives or off-reserve.

DND and the Tsuu T'ina band council have agreed to let the occupiers stay, and (one hopes) the value of the housing will be worked into the lease agreement between the two parties. But many questions call for answers. In particular, why is there a housing shortage on the reserve?

The Tsuu T'ina Nation has an entrepreneurial leadership that understands housing markets. Its first big project was Redwood Meadows, a flourishing golf course and housing development on reserve land near the hamlet of Bragg Creek. As with the national parks, the Crown retained title but granted long-term leases so the houses could be bought and sold on the market. If the Tsuu T'ina can successfully build and sell homes to others, why can they not house their own people?

A short-term factor is the current economic boom in Calgary, which, by driving up housing costs, has encouraged some band members to move back to the reserve. But there are much deeper causes of the chronic housing shortages that exist, not just on this reserve, but on most reserves in Western Canada.

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There is some variation, but on the typical reserve the band council owns almost all the housing, which has been built with a combination of band funds, annual grants from the Department of Indian Affairs, and assistance from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. The band council assigns the houses to residents and lets them live rent-free, often without even charging for utilities. When rent is required for CMHC-financed homes, the band usually pays it without collecting from the occupants.

In short, there is no functioning housing market on most reserves. Band members cannot buy or rent a home; they have to queue up for assignment by administrative authorities. New applicants often live with relatives for years until something becomes available. Those who are not on good terms with the band council may wait forever.

This system of public ownership without markets is bound to produce shortages, as it did in the communist systems of Eastern Europe. Indeed, communist housing problems are identical with those on Canadian Indian reserves: chronic shortage of supply, queuing for access, political favouritism and poor maintenance of the existing housing stock.

This last point is particularly noteworthy.

Paradoxically, housing on Indian reserves is on average much newer than the general supply of housing in Canada, but it is also in much worse condition. People do not respect what they do not have to pay for, and they do not invest in the upkeep of what they do not own.

A drive through a reserve will show the sad results. Even though there may be a current housing shortage, derelict homes stand vacant, no longer habitable because they have not been maintained over the years. Contrast that to the typical Canadian city, where people vie with one another to purchase and renovate homes that are a century old or more.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples recommended a move toward private ownership and realistic rents, but progress is painfully slow. It is an article of faith in the aboriginal community that housing is a treaty right, although no treaty even mentions housing, let alone calls for the government to provide it at no cost to all residents of reserves.

As long as this exaggerated and unfounded interpretation of treaties holds sway, aboriginal leaders who suggest a more sensible, market-based housing policy risk repudiation by their own people.

The Harvey Barracks episode was both hopeful and sad. Hopeful, because it showed the desire of large numbers of Tsuu T'ina to break out of a degrading pseudo-communistic system that cannot supply their demand for housing. Sad, because in order to obtain housing they resorted to unilateral seizure, whereas the mark of free men and women is to fulfill their needs through voluntary transactions with others.

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