

Editorial

Facing a crisis

Homeowners all over Halton Hills who have been quietly renting out their basement apartments have good reason to be nervous.

The town recently managed to make an example of a Toronto man who turned an Albert Street home into three apartments without obtaining the proper permits by taking him to court. The homeowner was given the largest fine in the town's history for such an offence - \$4,400.

The incident came to the town's attention when homeowners around the house-come-apartment building complained. It took them seven months and a court battle but they won.

The case sets the mood for things to come.

In Halton Hills hundreds, if not thousands, of homeowners have adjusted to skyrocketing mortgages by renting out their basements.

Without those basement apartments, many young Halton Hills residents would literally have nowhere to live in town.

But, residents who purchase houses in a neighborhood predominated by single family dwellings are anxious to protect their investment. And the Albert Street residents showed it can be done.

Now, the town is saying 'if you've got a problem with illegal apartments in your neighborhood, tell us and we'll do something about it.'

You can't blame the town's civil servants for doing their jobs and enforcing bylaws, but it's a very worrisome thought to ponder the possibility of hundreds of young people - many of them supplying the local work force - tossed out on the street.

Halton Hills has not coped with the affordable housing crunch well. For a long time the town has had a .01 per cent vacancy rate for apartments and a quick check in local newspapers classified sections shows a basement apartment goes for as much as \$650 a month.

One of the few things we can do is to legalize basement apartments. Such houses usually mean only one extra car, but it's a blessing for homeowners and for the apartment dwellers.

No doubt the apartment owner's taxes would have to be increased.

Currently, someone who converts a house to contain an apartment pays the same taxes as a single family living in a house, even though the house containing an apartment draws more of the town's services and resources.

But these are problems with solutions.

Finding an affordable roof to put over your head in Halton Hills isn't as easy.

The town's building code enforcement officer John Holmes acknowledges the town is facing a crisis. "People are desperate. If someone has a basement apartment they have no problem renting it," he says.

In the coming months, Halton Hills councillors will be looking over a report on illegal apartments now being prepared by town staff.

It's imperative that councillors look upon homeowners with basement apartments with leniency.

The Albert Street case was "a blatant skirting of the law," according to Mr. Holmes.

It was a case of an absentee homeowner renting out the apartments.

Most people wouldn't complain about pursuing such a case.

But if the issue spills over to basement apartments, Halton Hills could soon be dealing with the worst social crisis it has ever faced.

Similarities between parties short-changes the electorate

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The sameness of the Liberal, New Democratic and Progressive Conservative parties of Ontario has often been remarked upon in this column.

And how that short-changes the electorate.

Now, TV Ontario has produced a six-part series, Left, Right and Centre: Party Politics In Ontario, that generally agrees about the sameness, but considers it a virtue rather than a vice.

A somewhat longer version of the TV series is also available in print. (The series has just concluded on television, but will inevitably run again. And again.)

Left, right and centre, of course, is the shorthand term many people use as an alternative description of, respectively, socialism, conservatism and liberalism.

Executive producer Mike McManus set the tone for the series when he noted in the print version the difficulty of pinning these labels on the three old-line Canadian political parties: "There

is a right in Chile and a right in Canada, a left in Cuba and a left in Canada - and we all know they are very different things.

CANADIAN MEANINGS

"Why do these terms fail to capture the same realities (here as elsewhere)? The answer, in a word, is Canada. Our geography, history, and cultural patchwork have all conspired to give these historical terms uniquely Canadian meanings," he suggests.

The seeming sameness of the parties is strengthened "by an absence of extremes, which is characteristically Canadian (and should be seen) not as the wimpish blandness sometimes ascribed to the Canadian character, but rather as a strength, a sensitivity to others, born out of a realization that this nation survives because its leaders stay in and around the ideological centre," he added.

That doesn't answer who defines where the "centre" lies on an issue-by-issue basis, but at least the series tries to tackle the broader question of what is this muddy middle?

The show calls it "liberalism," which historian Ramsay Cook, in the TV series, suggests is "parliamentary government, the rule of law, certain kinds of rights about citizens' participation in politics, the right to free speech, (and) the sense that the individual's position in society relates somehow to property and property-holding."

How the Liberals, New Democrats and PCs differ is in their interpretation of how to apply

these ideas.

In a general sense - since all three parties are liberal - their arguments come down to an emphasis upon either "market liberalism" or "welfare liberalism," this last merging into "social democracy."

INDIVIDUAL

"Market liberalism" gives more weight to the individual and to the marketplace and decries government interference in the pursuit of capitalist economics. "Welfare liberalism" (which we've had in Canada since the 1920s or 1960s, depending on how you look at it), accepts the market, but sees government as a positive force, which, by implementing various social programs, could free people in a way the market couldn't. "Social democracy" takes the concept of equality of opportunity that underlies both market and welfare liberalism and insists people are not really free until there is also equality of results, the end of individual failure in the pursuit of opportunity.

I recommend watching the series to see how the (mainly liberal) analysts apply those categories to the parties. None of the analysts share my belief that all three parties want to force and twist the market to make it achieve social democratic goals.

And only a few touch on the non-economic issues (such as the British imperial connection) that have shaped our politics, the disappearance of which has temporarily contributed to the blurring of the three parties.



Serious consequences will arise if Meech Lake is defeated



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Prime Minister Brian Mulroney and Quebec Premier Robert Bourassa are probably correct in predicting some serious consequences for Canada should the Meech Lake constitutional accord go down the tube.

But the sad irony is that both of these men will have made major contributions to these serious consequences. Had they put a lid on their rhetoric from the beginning, there is no doubt the consequences of the accord's failure would be far

less severe.

It's not through serious study that a majority of Quebecers have come around to the view that, if the accord is not ratified, they would support some form of independence for the province. Very few people, in Quebec or elsewhere, burn the midnight oil trying to unravel the complexities of the accord.

The vast majority of us are getting our information, and viewpoints, from political leaders. Considering some of the things being said, it's little doubt that opinions are changing.

The Meech Lake accord was agreed upon, by Mr. Mulroney and the 10 premiers, back in the spring of 1987. And just three months ago, in September, 1989, opinion polls showed that only 29 per cent of Quebec would support limited independence if the accord was not ratified.

Now, a mere three months later, we have a poll showing that 58 per cent of Quebecers feel that way,

FAST CHANGE

Obviously, our political leaders have played a major role in these fast-changing viewpoints. And in that three-month period, there was certainly no shortage of rhetoric from the political stage.

Far too many of the leaders, including the prime minister and the Quebec premier, have been leaving the impression that a rejection of the accord would be a direct slap in the face to Quebec.

Outside the province, the impression is different, and Mr. Mulroney has often said that "the accord is not just in the best interests of Quebec, it is in the best interests of Canada - it is good for Canada."

However, within the province, the emphasis is on Quebec and how its citizens could be expected to interpret a rejection of the accord. Mr. Bourassa tells an audience that "Quebec will not sit passively and watch with indifference the

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