



The Brief

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New Brunswick must stop dragging its feet on affordable housing

By ADITYA RAO



A rally for affordable housing and tenant rights occurred outside the city of Fredericton’s public engagement session on developing the NBEX lands on October 1, 2020. Rally participants, including people with precarious housing, demanded that the space be used for affordable housing. Photo by Simon Ouellette.

There is a housing crisis in New Brunswick. Just ask the mayors of its towns and cities.

Earlier this year, the *Times & Transcript* reported that more than 40 per cent of people in Moncton were spending more than what is considered affordable on housing costs. In addition, some 290 people experiencing homelessness were counted in that city this summer.

In response to this crisis, community leaders proposed a significant project: a \$12 million non-profit initiative called Rising Tide that would buy and operate 125 housing units by 2023. The city of Moncton agreed to foot \$6 million for the project months ago, challenging the province to step up for the rest of the money. But the province has yet to commit.

The situation is not that much different in Saint John. The region, home to some of the country’s wealthiest families, has a child poverty rate higher than the Canadian average of 18.6% with nearly a third of the city’s children living in poverty. In 2018, there were over 1,500 people on the waitlist for affordable housing. Even with the innovative community-funded \$2 million Victoria Commons project that would create 14 new affordable units, there remains a serious gap between housing need and housing supply.

Fredericton, too, is struggling. It was reported in August of this year that some 30 people in a Fredericton rooming house were facing evictions, some of whom had lived in that building for nearly two decades. Active cases on the “by-name” list in Fredericton – the list used by the Fredericton Homeless Shelters to allocate spaces to those who are the most vulnerable – is currently at about 80 people.

With the proposed redevelopment of the 31-acre city-owned New Brunswick Exhibition Grounds in Fredericton, community groups have mobilized to make their voice heard against what they fear might become a giveaway to for-profit developers. Activists organized a rally on October 1 demanding public investment in not-for-profit affordable housing, and supported calls from Indigenous leaders who have demanded that their free, prior and informed consent be obtained before any plans take shape.

Fredericton Mayor Mike O’Brien is no doubt paying close attention. But is Premier Blaine Higgs?

As of November of last year, there were over 5,200 people on the waitlist for public housing in the province, but the provincial housing strategy aims to build only 1,262 new units over ten years. In addition, apartment vacancy rates are at historic lows across New Brunswick. In cities and towns all over the province, the vacancy rates are at or below

one per cent. Still, the province announced last year that while it would spend \$12 million on upgrading existing housing stock, it would only spend \$629,000 on building new housing this year.

The thing is, with low vacancy rates, the power imbalance between tenants and landlords is stark. New Brunswick being one of the only jurisdictions in Canada without rent controls, it is a landlord’s market when tenants have nowhere else to go. New Brunswickers are faced with rising rents in the order of hundreds of dollars a year as a result, with the province apparently turning a blind eye.

Housing precarity is made even worse by the fact that tenants in New Brunswick have fewer rights than those in most other parts of Canada.

Tenants have no right to maintain occupancy of their unit at the end of a lease agreement in New Brunswick. Stories of discrimination against tenants who have children are not uncommon, and renovations—the practice of evicting tenants in order to ostensibly renovate or repair a rental unit—occur often.

Moreover, the province continues to permit evictions despite the pandemic.

While cities and towns across New Brunswick are at the frontlines of the housing crisis, the province is dragging its feet.

The provincial election may be over but the pandemic is not. Housing is a social determinant of public health. Simply put: people cannot stay home without a home to stay in.

Tackling this crisis requires immediate investments in public housing and not-for-profit housing, including a targeted expansion of cooperative housing. There are hundreds of millions of dollars in federal money waiting to be allocated for this purpose, much of which must flow through the province.

This is a question not of money, but of priorities. And if housing is not near the top of this government’s to-do list during the pandemic, the health and safety of those experiencing homelessness and housing precarity, as well as that of New Brunswickers as a whole, is at risk.

The good news is that communities are ready to lead. But is the Premier?

Aditya Rao is a human rights lawyer and tenant in Fredericton. He tweets at @aditrao.

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Peace, friendship and fishing in Mi’kma’ki

By HANNAH MARTIN

On October 8, I found myself seated by the sacred fire, once again in reflection, as vehicles rolled past down the dirt road at Saulnierville Wharf to observe Treaty Day. It was a beautiful day for celebration and reflection.

During these past few days, I have been thinking so much about the ones who came before me; how resilient and strong they had to be, mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically, to thrive on the land in the elements, survive the horrors of colonization and make difficult political decisions that now impact my generation today.

The Peace and Friendship Treaties, signed between 1725–1779, were the agreements my Mi’kmaq ancestors signed with British settlers to ensure our inherent rights to the lands, territories and natural resources were respected and forever protected.

Through these Treaties, our lands, territories and natural resources were never ceded, nor surrendered to the British or any other colonial power.

Yet, like every other treaty in Canada, attempts by settler Canadians and government branches alike continue to be made to place limits on our rights and undermine our self-determination and sovereignty.

The specific right under scrutiny at this time, in this place, is the right to a “moderate livelihood,” which is an inherent right protected by the Peace and Friendship Treaties and the legal basis of the ongoing Mi’kmaq fishing activity in Saulnierville.

Peace and Friendship?

While the Treaty of 1752 is well known for its “Truck House” clause and its role in protecting the Shubenacadie River from Alton Gas, it was the Treaties of 1760-61 that were cited in the Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) in 1999 through R. v. Marshall to affirm that Donald Marshall Jr. had the inherent right to sell the eels he had caught and sold to earn a moderate livelihood.

On September 17, the same day as Donald Marshall’s historic victory 21 years earlier, the Mi’kmaq band of Sipekne’katik launched the first regulated “moderate livelihood fishery” in Mi’kma’ki. Sipekne’katik distributed seven licenses, with a limit of 50 traps per license.

But in the hours and days that followed, the Mi’kmaq fleet was met with confrontation. At times in the escalating and ongoing dispute, more than 100 commercial boats attempted to block Mi’kmaq access to the water. The evening of September 17th, one boat was shot at by flares. Trap lines have been cut, gear stolen, and local goods and services such as fishing gear, bait, and accommodations denied. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans presence and reactions were severely underwhelming during the height of the conflict.

It left me wondering, whose responsibility is it to ensure an accessible and safe environment for legal fisheries, free of violence and harassment?

While most of the protesting commercial fishers maintained that their displeasure in the Mi’kmaq moderate livelihood fishery was not an issue of race but rather one of conservation, race evidently played a role. In live videos, fishers were shown mocking Mi’kmaq language speakers and drummers during a standoff on Saulnierville Wharf.

“Our rights are not up for debate”

It is important to emphasize the fact that this fishery is as legal as the commercial fishery that currently exists in the Province of Nova Scotia. And while these rights are protected by Treaties and reaffirmed by the SCC, they ultimately stem from the inherent right that the Mi’kmaq have to the



Wolastoq Grand Council Chief spasaqsit possesom (Ron Tremblay) addressing a crowd of about 200 people at a rally in solidarity with the Mi’kmaq lobster fishers at the New Brunswick Legislature on October 22, 2020. Photo by Tracy Glynn.

For more grassroots news, visit: nbmediacoop.org

End nursing home privatization: Nurses’ union

By BRIAN BEATON

The New Brunswick Nurses Union (NBNU) published a potentially game-changing report on October 15 calling for the immediate halt to further privatization of nursing homes in the province.

The report, “The Forgotten Generation: An Urgent Call For Reform In New Brunswick’s Long-Term Care Sector,” is based on extensive research into the complex challenges facing seniors and their families attempting to work with nursing homes and the long-term care sector across New Brunswick.

The report’s first page describes New Brunswick’s nursing home system as “in desperate need of reform.” It states: “The seniors who built and contributed to the prosperity of our province deserve the right to live out their final years safely and with dignity. However, many homes are suffering from an erosion of regulated care professionals, inadequate funding, and a lack of oversight by Government, which has led to a continued decline in care.”

The report describes how the level of care provided in New Brunswick nursing homes has fallen to unsafe levels as a direct result of a staffing crisis. Nearly half of New Brunswick nursing homes are failing to meet their minimum safe staffing ratios in 2019.

The reliance on casual staffing in many New Brunswick nursing homes has risen to unacceptably high levels. Nearly one-third of all RNs in New Brunswick’s long-term care sector left their positions in 2017.

The report found that “for-profit long-term care homes provide significantly less care to residents and produce substantially worse outcomes.” The NBNU’s recommendations include halting further privatization in the nursing home sector.

According to the NBNU’s analysis, other research has shown that “for-profit nursing homes are less effective than their nonprofit counterparts in virtually every significant category – including value-for-money.”

When Premier Shawn Graham’s Liberal government signed the first contract with the private-sector Shannex nursing home in 2008, the government’s position was that “the number of seniors waiting for long-term care beds had reached a crisis point, and that urgent action was needed.”

Introducing the profit motive into the province’s long-term care sector changed the incentives behind resident care. But over the next 12 years, the problems privatization was supposed to address continued to worsen. In particular, available nursing home beds are unable to match the demand for the number of seniors requiring these long-term care services.

Since the 2008 privatization of nursing homes began, numerous reports have questioned government decisions to continue adding more privately-operated nursing homes to the long-term care system. These past reports are reviewed and referenced throughout this latest report by NBNU’s researchers.

In most cases the reports contained numerous recommendations, mostly ignored by successive Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments. Decisions made by government officials have resulted in additional private nursing homes being built and managed by corporate entities with their operational costs being billed to the provincial government.

Deborah van den Hoonaard, Professor Emerita at St. Thomas University, states in the report foreword that the province has over many years, “chosen to see long-term care as an expense that should be minimized.”



Cover photograph of the New Brunswick Nurses Union’s report, “The Forgotten Generation.”

New Brunswick has been lowering hours of care and the ratio of regulated staff over a number of years, resulting in poor care and staffing shortages. These decisions have been compounded by relying on casual and part-time work and low pay.

In April this year, Joan McFarland, recently-retired Professor of Economics at St. Thomas University, presented her research on the privatization of nursing homes in New Brunswick in a webinar, “Care in the time of corona: the neoliberal care home.” McFarland discussed the impact of privatization on seniors “who are too easily scapegoated as the cause of the province’s fiscal problems.”

McFarland argues that New Brunswick’s “aging population is an excuse for a neoliberal agenda” being imposed across the province to privatize nursing homes and long-term care services. Similar arguments were used by successive Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments when they privatized extra-mural healthcare services with Medavie.

The NBNU is now calling for an inquiry into long-term care in New Brunswick as a result of the report’s findings. The nurses’ union is hoping New Brunswickers will “ask the hard questions on behalf of vulnerable seniors who cannot speak-up for themselves.”

These questions include why the governance, oversight, accountability and transparency in New Brunswick’s long-term care sector have become so weak and ineffective that the sector is “akin to being self-regulated.”

The nurses’ union promises it will deliver a report card on the report’s recommendations by the fall of 2023. They hope government officials will view their report as a comprehensive set of recommendations that must be acted upon to immediately begin addressing the challenges facing our nursing homes and our long-term care health system.

“Jeff Hull, the report’s principal author and the New Brunswick Nurses Union, are to be congratulated for producing such a comprehensive and valuable working document that puts elders first and supports a needed healthcare system that will serve every citizen with dignity and respect,” says Tracy Glynn, author of the NB Health Coalition’s 2017 report, “The Creeping Privatization of Health Care in New Brunswick.”

Brian Beaton is a writer and the calendar coordinator for the NB Media Co-op.

What drought? The worst drought New Brunswick has seen in decades

By DREW GILBERT

Did you notice the colours of the leaves changed earlier than usual this year? If you went to pick apples this season, they came earlier as well. The reason? Not frost, but one of the worst droughts on record. May to July saw a tenth of the average rainfall. July had some rain to water the forests, but not enough to fill the rivers. Water tables across the province have continued to drop because, although August and September were average in temperature, only a quarter of the average rain fell. Ours is a drought that nobody discusses.

I look at the world a little differently because I studied geology, glaciation, and hydrology. Maybe you never noticed the little rain we got this summer because it was so lovely that you didn’t think about it. But I did.

While we went about our summer activities, the rivers ran dry, the water tables dropped, and the people who get their water from wells have been worried or are already out of water. Over 300,000 people get water from wells across New Brunswick. The abnormally low water tables have impacted many of these well water users.

There are a lot more people at our local spring, filling up with water these days. We started catching rain last year, to water the garden. But, even then, we have had to ration the water, as the garden did not flourish in the way we had hoped it would. We did catch rain again this year, but we got much less than the year before. Food shortages during COVID-19 motivated many of us to start a garden this year. But, for first-time gardeners, it was not an inspiring garden season because of such abnormally dry weather.

We increased our rain catchment storage capacity to 8,000 litres, not wanting to waste a drop of water off the roof. I bought a 1,000-litre storage tote from a local farmer, and he told me troubling accounts of low hay production. Production was down half from average for him, and some farmers up “north” were unable to get their first cut in at all, for fear of killing their super dry grasses. The drought has affected farmers, which has impacted the cost and the availability of the food we eat.

Since 2018, New Brunswick has seen hay and forage shortages, which have forced some cattle producers to sell their stock, at different times. In early August, CBC interviewed Cedric MacLeod, of Local Valley Beef, in Centreville. He reported the worst hay crops in his 17 years on the farm.

“Guys and gals are pulling off between 50 per cent of their normal average” said MacLeod.

In Hartland, I saw grasses growing on a dry Wolastoq (Saint John River) bed, under the world’s longest covered bridge. A 60-year-old lifelong resident explained to me that he had never seen the water so low. Many of the waterfalls around Fredericton have become mere trickles over the rocks, with dry, empty riverbeds.

Global warming plays a significant role in the drought; of that, there is no question. New Brunswick is not alone, however. Droughts are becoming widespread around the world. We tend to think of global warming as something ambiguous, something that takes place only in the high atmosphere, but it can cause drought, which can damage local ecosystems.

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- **Peace, friendship and fishing in Mi’kma’ki**
 - resources that we have depended on since time immemorial.
 - To quote Chief Mike Sack of Sipekne’katik, “we are not asking for access, we already have access.” Our rights are not up for debate, or subject to opinion. What is happening is greater than just fishing alone – it is about taking back what rightfully belongs to the Mi’kmaq, as a sovereign and self-governing people.
 - Generations of Mi’kmaq people have been raised in these rights-based struggles. In Western-thought we are often called activists but there is an important distinction to be made: we are not really activists but simply original peoples exercising and protecting the rights given to us by Kesulk, our Creator.

- On my grandmother Jean Johnson’s side, I am a relative of Grand Chief Gabrielle Sylliboy, as a descendent of his brother, Stephen. It was Chief Sylliboy who was criminalized and denied justice all the way to the SCC in 1927, over his right to catch muskrats “out of season” and to sell their furs. Grand Chief Sylliboy was finally pardoned in 2017, 90 years later.

- As an L’nu’skw (L’nu woman), I am a rights holder. In essence, I am also a rights protector when our collective livelihood is under attack.

- Over the past weeks, I have been at the Saulnierville Wharf sacred fire often, praying, organizing supplies, cooking dinners, and gate-keeping. What calls me to the frontlines, I can’t say for sure. But it is a spirit that lives within me and perhaps a culmination of all those who walked before me. It is the same spirit that lives in the sacred fire and the ocean water; the spirit the earth that my ancestors walked, the spirit of our inherent rights to live, eat, and breathe; to be L’nu.

Invitation to a Treaty Future

- Perhaps one of the most important questions we must ask ourselves in light of these recent events, is what does it mean to be a Treaty person? It is ironic that while we all have Treaty rights and responsibilities, as Mi’kmaq we consistently work towards the fulfilment of our half of the agreement while non-Mi’kmaq – who benefit most – often lack the very foundational Treaty education needed to understand their own privileges and responsibilities here in Mi’kma’ki.

- It has been three weeks since the first protest against our moderate livelihood fishery began in Saulnierville; 21 years since the very first protests against our legal moderate livelihood fishery occurred in Burnt Church First Nation. It feels that not much has changed.

- Recent events in Saulnierville have revealed a dire need for more rigorous education and awareness on our respective Treaty rights and responsibilities. Treaty partnerships must transcend the performative and symbolic and become substantive. This is hard work that we all must endure, and it will not happen overnight, but we can all begin by asking ourselves important questions.

- How do we understand our identities as Treaty people? How do we relate to each other? The land? Our shared history? We have a right and a responsibility to tread a new path as we walk into what can be a new, just, future together.

- As a young Mi’kmaw woman, I understand this work to be an integral part of my journey; a lifetime challenge, and commitment to be a part of the solution to a centuries-long problem of what has been a failed partnership for far too long. Let these events be a call to action for all of us who call Mi’kma’ki home, to ensure a more just and peaceful future for the generations to come.

- *Hannah Martin is a Mi’kmaw woman from the traditional, unceded territory of Taqamiju’jk, Mi’kma’ki (Nova Scotia) and is a proud member of the We’kophekwitk (Millbrook) First Nation community. She is a passionate advocate for Indigenous rights and self-determination, and is a traditional basketmaker and practitioner of Mi’kmaw Ecological Knowledge.*

- *This commentary was first published by the Yellowhead Institute.*

What can we do in New Brunswick?

Stop clearcutting. Forests breathe air and water through transpiration, and their presence brings about localized rainfall. Clearcutting and the monoculture forest policies in our province take water from all living creatures, be they animals, plants, and humans.

Shade the watershed. In the Nashwaak Valley where I live, the river has been so low, the lowest that I have seen in 13 years, and the water temperature has risen. With the water levels so low, fish cannot hide in the cooler, deeper waters. Salmon become stressed when the temperatures rise over 20 degrees Celsius, and they stop feeding. Temperatures as high as 27 degrees Celsius in salmon-bearing habitats were recorded at Durham Bridge this summer by the Nashwaak Watershed Association.

Don’t till the soil. The amount of carbon dioxide emissions caused by overtilling is one of the leading causes of greenhouse gas emissions. Bare soils dry and are at a greater risk of erosion because of wind and heavy rains.

Manage your woodlot to create and maintain healthy riparian zones on the edges of rivers by planting trees and by rebuilding damaged soils.

Take the opportunity to build momentum, to save forests, to grow the watershed, and to keep drought from becoming a permanent part of our lives.

Drew Gilbert lives in Taymouth, New Brunswick, where he is an enthusiast in renewable energy.

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