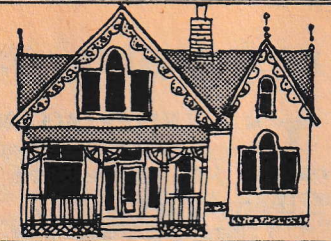


* We live in MONCTON and we're getting the runaround?



AS WITH MOST CITIES IN THE MARITIMES, the housing problems of Moncton are confined to a pretty small area and have not yet attained the depth of squalor and hopelessness of the slums of really large and advanced and civilized cities. Still, you find people like the woman *The Mysterious East* talked to in the Salvation Army welfare center in Moncton.

She and her three children live in a two-bedroom house in the East End of Moncton. Before she moved in, the house rented for \$25 a month; it jumped immediately to \$40 and this year was increased again to \$45. The house has no bathtub; earlier this year the toilet gave out. Calls to the landlord, to the city and to anyone else she could think of have still not acquired her a bathtub, though she did ultimately get the toilet fixed — after a wait of three weeks. The house the woman lives in is owned by one of a group of people who own most of the housing in that end of town — indeed, some claim, most of the rental housing in Moncton — and prosperity and a wide range of business interests have rendered them pretty insensitive to cases like hers.

"You can't complain too much," she says, "because you'd get your notice. You can't take a chance unless you've got someplace to go, and you can't get one because if you phone a place like Central Trust they hang up when you tell them you've got kids." She refused to give us her name because, she said, "They'd put me out."

Moncton building inspector Claire Bulmer contends, with some justification, that Moncton does not have very serious slum problems and that the city is making progress in solving the problems it does have. He says, for one thing, that his department investigates every single complaint lodged with them. The woman in the Salvation Army welfare center claimed "city hall gives you the runaround"; Bulmer explains that she must have called the wrong department or not made her complaint clear. "If it had come to us," he says, "we'd have investigated it."

Bulmer is voluble and convincing on the subject of Moncton's attack on its problems. To begin with, he points to the federally-assisted low-rental housing already present in Moncton, on the marshland near the Université de Moncton. They have been described as concrete block chicken coops on concrete slabs; they are unattractive, small, uninviting. They *look* like low-income housing. And Bulmer clearly shares the general dissatisfaction with them, pointing out that people don't like them, won't stay in them if they have somewhere else to go, and won't keep them up. But, he says, they are evidence of Moncton's and his department's long-standing commitment to attempts to solve Moncton's housing problems.

AS OTHER EVIDENCE, Bulmer cites the statistics on buildings destroyed in Moncton — 83 last year, 88 in 1968 — of which most, he says, were substandard.

Bulmer's main contention, though, is that his department is aggressive in investigating and correcting complaints. Frustrated by the fact that his department has to operate without legal sanctions, he nonetheless points

out that the city of Moncton has established what it calls a "Five Year Plan" to upgrade housing in the metropolitan area. Applying mostly to newly annexed areas, such as Parkton, the policy is meant to be extended to cover the whole city eventually. Basically, it is a timetable constructed around a system of priorities: when an area is annexed, the department talks to the people in it to let them know it is interested in improving housing. First, all the dwellings must be hooked up to Moncton sewers and water. Then each is inspected for fire hazards — especially paperboard walls, which must be replaced by fire-resistant board — and faulty wiring. This is Bulmer's special interest because, he says, "you really feel it when a place you've checked and warned people about burns down and people are hospitalized or killed."

The department then inspects and orders repairs on foundations, and finally checks on the appearance of the exterior of the house. In each case, where violations are found, the city proceeds by establishing a timetable for improvements, taking into consideration such matters as the owner's ability to pay. In each case the city tries to complete the process of upgrading within a five year period.

"It's the most successful plan I've ever seen of its kind," says Bulmer with pride. What is most impressive is that, as Bulmer readily admits, the plan operates almost entirely on bluff. As in most cities, there is at present no municipal law allowing Bulmer to enforce his edicts or providing penalties for defiance. He must depend on the landlord's willingness to cooperate and on indirect pressures. There are many forms such indirect pressures can take, but it is almost always impossible to discover whether or not a government is exerting them; often departments capable of exerting pressure — the zoning people, for instance — do not have close liason with the building inspectors.

WHAT BULMER CONSIDERS THE MOST HOPEFUL THING about the situation in Moncton is the proposed new bylaw — the product, he indicates, of a long struggle on his part and the part of other people concerned with Moncton's housing problem — which will cover housing standards in Moncton. The new law will, by all reports, be quite specific, covering not only safety but comfort and appearance of dwellings as well. With this law, if and when it passes, Bulmer will be able to make his decisions stick, will perhaps be able to do something in the case of some of the less cooperative landlords.

One wonders, though, about the new law. If it is very much the sort of thing that already exists in cities like Halifax, it is clearly no cure-all. It might, in fact, have the effect of convincing the city that now it has solved its problems and can relax. One also wonders about the motives for passing it, in view of the recently enunciated federal policy of requiring such a law as a condition of federal aid for housing.

And what is most clear is that the law will not solve some of the most fundamental problems facing the people living in substandard housing, in Moncton or anywhere else.

One problem is the nature of economic conditions in a

* We live in CHARLOTTETOWN and we're organizing

slum. For instance, if you live in the section of Moncton's East End around Pearl and Queen Streets, you have no easy access to a supermarket. You are dependent for all your groceries on small neighborhood markets, who could not — even if they wanted to — equal the prices offered by the big chains. And the big chains will not come into such an area because the market's not big enough. Result? Those who can least afford it pay most for their groceries. This is especially true when — as is usually the case — the resident has never thought of comparison shopping or of taking public transportation to a more competitively priced market.

ANOTHER PROBLEM is the nature of the relation of such people to their government. Whatever happened to the woman's complaint about the lack of a bathtub in her house? Bulmer is certain the complaint never came to his desk. Why not? Most likely because the woman — like most people in her position — is overwhelmed by the size and the unattainable majesty of government, and interprets the tone of voice of somebody's secretary as "the runaround." Now it never occurs to most people involved in government that people in general react like this — clearly Claire Bulmer, a veteran of city administration, would not likely be intimidated by someone's secretary or overwhelmed by the majesty of the government of Moncton, or think it likely that anyone else would.

Meanwhile, the woman in the bathroomless house is convinced that city hall just gives you the runaround.



THE SLUMS OF CHARLOTTETOWN look pretty much like the slums of most other cities in the Atlantic Provinces. They're not large, they're not obvious from the highways, they're not spectacular. They're just a place where, for instance, four families live in one house with one bathroom—a bathroom which consists of a toilet with no seat and a wash basin which has never been connected to the water. They're a place where a man pays \$70 a month for an apartment which is heated by three oil stoves, which are so placed that to get into the bedroom or the bathroom you must squeeze through an eleven-inch space between a hot stove and a wall. They're a place where people use their bathtubs as coalbins, since they've never been connected to running water.

And they're a place where government builds "low-income" housing and then only lets middle-income, secure people with a good credit rating and between three and five children rent them—at a rate, sometimes, of \$130 a month. Where members of the Housing Authority that builds them express fears that admitting poor people into them will turn them into slums. Where politicians claim there's really no problem, and rely on the cooperation and good faith of landlords to comply with reasonable standards.

And you'd expect them—like most other Atlantic slums—to be a place where the poor reside in silent acceptance of a situation that they not only aren't aware they can change, but to which they often don't even know there's an alternative.

BUT SOMEONE IN CHARLOTTETOWN has discovered that there is an alternative. This winter, suddenly things started to happen in Charlottetown, things that have implications for everyone living in substandard and ill-kept housing in the Maritimes. An organization called the Poverty committee appeared among the residents of Charlottetown's low rent district and began making noises suggesting militancy. A city councilman, Addie MacDonald, began issuing statements calling on landlords to improve their facilities and to lower their rent or face city action—though, as in most cities, his call was mostly bluff. The provincial cabinet and the premier met with representatives of the Committee. Meetings have been scheduled with Robert Andras at which the city of Charlottetown is planning to try to get federal aid for new low-rental housing construction and for improvement of existing dwellings. And then, in January, a Tenants' Union sprouted in Charlottetown and began presenting a program to the city and provincial governments.

What had happened? As Alex Burke, newly-elected president of the Charlottetown Tenants' Union, explains it, "The thing that makes this different is that the people who live in the area are organizing it. It's not being imposed from above." The result of this is two-fold; the organization is closer to the problem and actually deals with the issues that are at stake for poor people living in inadequate housing, and it's willing to work harder because the people have a stake in it.