

**Bill C-304****An Act to ensure secure, adequate, accessible and affordable housing for Canadians****10/20/2010****Mr. Michael Savage (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.):**

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak to Bill C-304. The Liberal Party has supported Bill C-304 from the beginning.

Like many private members' bills, the bill has had issues and challenges. I am very pleased that the Liberal Party has strengthened the bill. I want to commend the work of a number of Liberals on the committee. I have been at the committee and we have been very supportive. I want to commend my colleague from Parkdale—High Park who has brought forward amendments to this bill that make this bill more applicable to persons with disabilities, that bring not for profits to the table in a stronger way, that set targets and standards and take into account strengthened environmental needs of affordable social housing in the country.

This is a way that we have worked to make sure that this bill is even better, but we support the bill. We want this bill to pass. We think this bill is important. Contrary to what the parliamentary secretary was implying, we think this is a very strong bill from an economic point of view.

This bill does not require a royal recommendation. It is about having a housing strategy and governments would make choices about what would be included in a housing strategy. There are recommendations in this bill, but first and foremost, it says that we should have some kind of a national strategy on affordable housing. I think most people would agree with that. Certainly the people in the not for profit community, many economists, many social scientists, people from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, who have become more and more involved in the need for affordable housing, would echo the sentiment that this is a bill that has real potential to make a difference in Canada.

I want to speak about the need for affordable housing. I referenced earlier a Senate report. My colleague from Sault Ste. Marie in the NDP, my colleague from Chambly—Borduas in the Bloc and others on the government side who have been part of an anti-poverty strategy would know some of this, but the Senate released a report on poverty and homelessness in December. The House of Commons has a report that is ready to go, but as it is only in draft form, I will not quote from that. I will, however, quote from the Senate report.

The Senate report opens a section on homelessness by saying:

The most visible sign of the failure of our income security and housing systems and programs to meet the basic needs of individuals and families is homelessness.

By definition, homelessness is difficult to measure, but witness after witness reported increases in demand for shelters and food banks, even among those who are employed.

It goes on to reference a specific study in British Columbia, but it is echoed by other studies across the country. I will quote again:

The study concluded, based on the experience of participants, that costs for services for those who were homeless at the time of the study was 33% higher than for those who had been homeless but were then housed.

In other words, it costs money to have people homeless. It is a classic lose-lose situation.

My colleague from Yukon gave me a very good report the other day from the Wellesley Institute. I want to quote from its introduction:

People's ability to find, and afford, good quality housing is crucial to their overall health and wellbeing and is a telling index of the state of a country's social infrastructure.

I do not think anything could be more true than that. There are a lot of people who need more affordable housing who could benefit from a national housing strategy. One of the groups that would most benefit is people with disabilities.

In April or May, a press release came out from the Council of Canadians With Disabilities, from Marie White, the national chairperson. She is one of the great advocates in this country on social issues, not just on people with disabilities but on many other things as well. She calls on all parties to support Bill C-304:

Adequate housing is essential to the well being of persons with disabilities.... Canadians with disabilities disproportionately live in poverty and finding affordable housing is a huge challenge.

One of the great advocates for disability issues in this country is Steve Estey, who lives in my community of Dartmouth. He was a negotiator when Canada went to the United Nations to work on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. If he were here today, Steve would point out to us how important it is to recognize our international obligations to people with disabilities, the part of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities regarding the right to housing, and the important need that we have to provide that housing to people with disabilities.

There is another issue that I want to mention briefly. People are concerned about housing, not just for the really poor, to whom we really need to be responsive, but

many other Canadians are awfully nervous and are not that far away themselves from having issues regarding decent shelter.

I want to provide a statistic from RBC Economics in September. It stated, "Today the typical Canadian family must devote 49% of its income to own a standard two-storey home while mortgage rates are at their lowest point". Another statistic was that 58% of Canadians are concerned with their current level of debt, averaging \$41,470 per person. That means many people are not that far from being under-housed, at the very least, and perhaps even some being homeless.

The statistics and evidence of the need for housing is coming from all kinds of quarters. Recently TD Economics released a report on the Toronto area economy's hidden recession. It stated, "Looking ahead, little improvement in the jobless rate, social assistance case loads and social housing wait lists can be expected over the medium term".

The news is not really very positive. We need to take action on poverty overall, specifically homelessness. Let us look at the groups that have endorsed Bill C-304 recently such as the YWCA Canada, the Ontario Human Rights Commission and the Canadian Federation of University Women. which is a fabulous organization. It has great advocacy. I happen to know that because my mother-in-law is an active member of the Canadian Federation of University Women and I would never go against her advice.

Other groups that endorse the bill include the Canadian Medical Association, Canada Without Poverty, the Red Tent campaign and the Canadian Housing and Renewal Association. As I mentioned, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has been very active on the need for getting into the housing business on a national level, bringing everybody to the table and asking what we can do, not just because it is an issue of social justice but because it is an issue of good economics as well.

I hosted a round table in my constituency last week, along with my colleague from Halifax, on palliative, or end of life care. We spent a lot of time talking about the importance of people choosing to die at home. Somebody stood and asked, "What about the people who don't have a home to die in?" When we think about the very basic needs of Canadians, one of the most important ones is that people have homes, not only where they can live but where they can die when that time is upon them.

In my constituency many times I visited the Metro Turning Point Shelter, where 70 or 80 men at a time live in one room. I think the beds are surplus prison beds. The men line up and spend the night there. We are all familiar with that in our constituencies. They go to the mission or, in our case, to Hope Cottage in the morning to get their meals. They wander around and return at night to try to get a bed. There is some really innovative stuff going on. We just need to encourage more of it.

Also in my constituency Affirmative Industries is an organization that has built housing for mental health consumers. Not only do people pay rent, but as part of the program they build up equity in those houses so eventually they actually have a few dollars invested. It gives them pride in home and when they leave, they have some place to go and a little money. More important, they have the dignity of knowing that it belongs to them.

We can do innovative things in housing. The Canadian Co-operative Housing Association has some fabulous projects that could benefit from the national housing strategy. There is no lack of ideas. There is a lack of a national strategy and commitment from the federal government. We need to do more.

On our federal anti-poverty hearings in the House of Commons Standing Committee on Human Resources, Skills and Social Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, everybody who came, from Mike Kirby with the Mental Health Commission to people with disabilities, people from the aboriginal community, they all said the same thing. The first and most important step is to have a house. In Canada, where we pride ourselves on social infrastructure, we need to do better.

We can make the case purely from a social justice argument, but we can also make it from an economic argument. There is more and more evidence telling us that if people have a house, they are less of a burden on the health, justice and social welfare systems. This is where we have to go. It is time that we have some kind of national system that looks at this really important issue and asks if we can do better, if people in Canada should be housed, if everyone should have shelter. If they should, they can start here and this bill can play an important role.

We are happy to have made it better. We congratulate the member for Vancouver East for bringing it this far and we hope the House sees fit to adopt it.