



Notes for CHRA President, Stephan Corriveau, speech at CHRA's Indigenous Caucus. Ottawa, April 24 2018

Elder Commanda,
Richard George, Vancouver Natives Housing Society,
Indigenous Housing providers representatives,
Indigenous Caucus members
Partners,
Friends

Bonjour,

I would like to begin by acknowledging that the land on which we gather is the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin nation and to say that it is an honour for me to be invited to address you for the second time as CHRA's Board President.

Let's start by putting everything in perspective. As CHRA President, I am bound to say that all members of the organization have the same rights and the same legitimacy. Therefore, every issue, every question raised by one member or another should have the same treatment and receive the same attention. I guess that's what democracy is about and, as much as possible, I try to reach in that direction in my personal as well as in my social and professional life.

Nevertheless, I strongly believe that today, in this room, I am facing a special sort of CHRA members. You are, in my view, what the ancient Greek were calling "Primus inter pares," meaning "first among equals."

You are first because CHRA's mission is to speak and act in ways that transform this society from a world where a house is seen and managed as a simple commodity to

a universe where it is the accomplishment of a right and the fulfillment of a need. And no group in this country has been more hit by the lack of recognition of the right to housing than Indigenous peoples. So, to make it clear, nothing CHRA says or does can have more meaning and more usefulness than what we do to support the fair treatment of Indigenous peoples. This is why the battle you are fighting makes you the first among equals.

In Canada today, this goal, this vision of proper housing for disenfranchised people, which is summarized in the expression “the right to housing,” is often qualify as unrealistic if not straight out lunatic stuff.

I’ll tell you my friends, I don’t mind being called a lunatic by people who like the way things are right now. Because if being realistic is being comfortable with the way the world is going, I want to be as unrealistic as possible.

Last year, both before you and the plenary session, I made it clear that there can be no National Housing Strategy without an Indigenous Housing Strategy. That statement remains as true today as it was a year ago. And in spite of the beginning of a dialogue with some government agencies, we have yet to see a government-wide commitment to establish an urban, rural and northern Indigenous housing strategy.

Frankly, I can’t believe that we’ve made so few advances on the front of Indigenous peoples housing. That single issue is enough to make the whole National Housing Strategy collapse. There is no group in Canada that is more in need and deserving of a clear, unfettered, large and consistent commitment from the federal government.

With over 70% of Indigenous peoples in Canada living in urban and rural centres, and who face disproportionate problem to access safe and affordable housing compared to the non-Indigenous population, it is clear why an Indigenous urban and rural strategy is so vital.

Whether they live on reserve or anywhere else, Indigenous people of this land have been unfairly treated on a large number of issues, and housing is certainly one of the most spectacular ones. There is no way Canadian society can seriously claim to be

on a journey to reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples and nations without a major shift of policies and resources allocation.

We keep saying there is no Indigenous housing strategy in Canada, but, in fact, this is not true. In my view, one can summarize past and current *de facto* housing policy for the Indigenous people with a four-prong description.

Prong number one: Push back, by force if necessary, the communities in reservations that are, more often than not, ill situated, unfit for economic self-reliance and open to constant paternalistic and demeaning management by repressive and colonial-minded rulers and managers who don't provide for proper housing conditions and forbid access, at any significant scale, to financial resources such as the mortgages that all other Canadians have access to in order to build and buy their homes.

Prong number two: Scoop the kids for generations and either send them into Residential school or scatter them away to non-indigenous households across the continent and Europe. The latter evolving in the recent time into a more subtle modus operandi, where the parents are first labeled unfit and then the kids are being sent into the child protection services "for their own good."

Prong number three: When they quit the reservation ghettos, just let them wander the streets of our cities, don't invest any significant amount to help the youngest, fastest-growing demographic group and latest wave of urbanizing community, pretending you don't have the means to help them. Forgetting that you've spent billions helping the previous waves of young urbanizing group from 1945 until 1995 to establish themselves in the cities. As a result, Indigenous people are grossly overrepresented among homeless Canadians and have dire housing conditions. One out of 15 are likely to be homeless while it is one out of 128 for the average Canadian population.

Prong number four: Build large, solid, impressive concrete complexes, call them "Correctional facilities" and give privileged access to Indigenous peoples so that as many as possible can stay there. Some might think I am going a bit far on this one, let's see what Canada's own Office of the Correctional investigator say about it: "The

disturbing reality of Aboriginal overrepresentation in Canadian correctional populations is well-known. Indigenous people comprise 3.8% of the Canadian population but now account for 23.2% of the total inmate population. Between 2001 and 2012, the incarcerated Aboriginal population has increased 37.3%, while incarcerated Aboriginal women have increased by 109%. Aboriginal women offenders comprise 33% of the total inmate population under federal jurisdiction.”

Of course, when one happens to fit simultaneously into 2, 3 or more unlucky categories at Canada “lotto-housing” such as being a woman, having addiction issues, mental health problem, or just being poor, you might be in for an even tougher ride. For example, if you are both woman and Indigenous, you could find yourself in the dreary cases study by the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women Commission, since a very high proportion of the reported cases were or had a history of being homeless.

But, quite incredibly, everything in this picture is not dark and depressing.

In spite of blatant racism and systemic disadvantages, Indigenous individuals and groups in urban, rural and northern areas have been developing a number of resources to help themselves and the most fragile members of their communities. Women being the first in line both in terms of need and commitment. For decades, you’ve developed a network of Indigenous housing providers and you are doing some extraordinary work all over the land; providing close to 20,000 units, mainly to women-led households. These achievements and this work is the most powerful and most efficient tool in existence to radically transform the current situation.

Raised from the community for the community, these housing providers, you, have gathered within CHRA’s Indigenous Caucus to coordinate, improve actions and push for a better-defined and more comprehensive program from the state.

As CHRA President, I am now publicly telling you that the whole organization will keep calling on the Canadian government to come forward and engage with the Caucus at a scale and a speed that respects the rights, the needs and the will of Indigenous people. You’ve organized yourselves into genuine Indigenous housing providers and you’ve made it clear that you want to work, hand in hand with them, to

set up and implement a plan that would end the shameful situation we are facing today. The government must understand that the National Housing Strategy cannot be acknowledged as such without that condition being properly met.

Internally, in the last year, CHRA has seriously beefed up its action to support the claim for an Indigenous urban, rural and northern housing policy that would be based on you, the Indigenous housing providers. We've committed more staff, including the hiring of an Indigenous woman to be in charge of our actions on the matter (hello SM), we've made sure that every meeting with an official had the item on the agenda and that it would be a representative of the Caucus that would plead that point. Significant amounts of money (in the very limited world of CHRA finances) was committed to support the Caucus and the cause of Indigenous right to housing.

More importantly, the representation of Indigenous housing providers on CHRA's board has increased. So today, not only does the Caucus have statutory representation (via Robert Byers), but three more people from the Caucus are now member of the board, so 4 out of 10 Board members are also Caucus members. And 3 of those are now on CHRA's executive committee. And if everything can always be improved, one can make the factual assessment that Indigenous issues and indigenous voices are central in CHRA political and organizational agendas.

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Now let's talk a bit about tomorrow morning.

I am asking you for 2 favours.

One. I'm worry you might get bored during my opening statement because you will have heard large excerpts in today's speech. Now the room will be packed with CHRA non-Indigenous members and government officials. For me to find the strength to speak with the right energy, I will need your help to get the message across. I will rely on you to make the room lively, to create an enthusiastic mood, and to show your support to the position I will defend about Indigenous issues but also more globally in favor of a stronger National Housing Strategy for all Canadians

who need it. Tomorrow's assembly should not, cannot be silent when strong declarations will be issued.

Two. As you can hear, French is my mother tongue and because CHRA is a Canadian organization and because a significant delegation of French-speaking people will be in the room, most speakers, including me, will give part of their speeches in French. I can tell you that it would be well-appreciated and seen as a sign of respect by the Québec delegation to see you using the simultaneous translation devices. On top of that, since some of the strong stuff I will say will be said in French, you'll need to have the device in order to know when to react.

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In conclusion, you might remember that I started my speech by claiming the right to be unrealistic.

But, in full honesty, I truly believe that, in spite of all my efforts, I can only be classified in the "featherweight" unrealistic championship category; while in this room I am surrounded by some "super heavyweight," top champion, unrealistic people.

Frankly, I admire you because you are the most unrealistic people in this conference, and I shall say, among the most unrealistic people in this country.

You seriously believe you can contribute to transform a situation where the most disenfranchised individuals in this land can be turned into full-fledged members of the community and make them able to contribute to its advancement.

You are so unrealistic you think it's possible for the governments to redeem themselves after 400 years of abuses and treacheries and act in decent and honourable ways.

You are so unrealistic that you spend countless hours every day healing and caring and advocating for people that are looked at and treated as little more than trash by a large section of the population and institutions of this land.

You are so unrealistic that you think that, by presenting the right logical and structured arguments, plans and proposals, you will be listened to and will change the way things are.

You are so unrealistic that you believe reconciliation is an objective that is shared by enough people in the non-Indigenous population that it is achievable.

Well my friends, with such an attitude, you are entitled to the glorious label of being knights of the unrealistic, because you believe you can change the world!

And me, I'm still a young kid who believes the knights can charge the dragons and win. So, my plea for you today is very simple and has two folds.

First, promise me that you won't give up on your unrealistic dream of a world where housing for all is a right, and houses are being built and managed for the people by the people.

Second, allow me to stand beside you in that battle until we win. And victory will be ours the day those who dare classify us as unrealistic today will be defeated along with those (and they are quite often the same) who still today, feel they can lynch an Indigenous guy or rape an Indigenous woman and even brag about it, expecting full impunity because they think it's their God-given right.

I beg for you not to abandon me amongst the barbarians, because I shall not survive in such a world without you.

Thank for your attention and I wish you the best possible conference.



Stéphan Corriveau, président