

Suggested Lack of Urban Policy

Hon. Robert K. Andras (Minister without Portfolio): Mr. Speaker, as the minister responsible for housing I have been very interested in hearing the comments made today because, as all members know—I think many participants in the debate recognize this—many of the issues which must be faced in housing are embedded in a much broader matrix of economic, social and political questions that are usually referred to as urban affairs.

Moreover, this government, as we have indicated before, has been seized with the importance of this question for some time. I believe that when last I spoke in the House on this question, I indicated that a broad series of studies was under way in the light of which the government would in due course have something to say about the policy which it would follow in regard to the problems of the cities. I am sure that no hon. member will find it surprising that the government does not choose the occasion of this particular debate to announce its intention in any great detail. The studies to which I referred earlier have, of course, progressed a good deal further and we are now considering the implication of their findings in regard to policy.

● (9:30 p.m.)

I say with respect and in some form of congratulation to the hon. member for Selkirk (Mr. Rowland) that while I did not make precise notes of his comments, to the best of my memory every point that he raised in the description of the depth to which this urban policy should be addressed is the subject individually and collectively of our analyses. These studies have not illuminated all the ramifications of the urban question. They have not removed all the mysteries of urbanization and have not pointed to a complete and precise course of action for this government. However, the fact is—and I make no apology for admitting this—that we are faced with questions here that are not quite as straightforward or one-dimensional as some of today's appear to indicate.

Perhaps I can describe what I mean by dwelling for a moment on some aspects of the problem and at least one suggestion which has been made by several speakers. There has never been the slightest reservation by this government about the importance and the relevance of the urban question. There has never been any doubt about this matter in the mind of the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau). There has never been any doubt about

[Mr. Rowland.]

the need to articulate a more coherent federal position with regard to the urban problems of this country.

We are certainly aware that there is scarcely a federal department or agency that is not involved directly or indirectly in the cities of Canada. It is precisely because of the breadth of the physical presence of the federal government in cities, and its manifold less direct influences on them, that the formulation of a single strategy to guide all federal interventions in the urban scene is so difficult.

Reference has been made to the press release that accompanied the decision of the NDP to use today's opposition day to debate the subject of urban affairs, an opportunity which I appreciate. In drawing attention to the wording of this news release, I am not knocking what is contained in it. I think it is very significant. I am not going to read it all. I refer to the fourth and fifth paragraphs, which read as follows:

We do not need more funds put into our present piecemeal programs such as urban renewal,—

I do not know how that comment would sit with the hon. member for Hamilton West (Mr. Alexander).

—transportation and pollution control—it is those very programs which are destroying our cities.

We do need a completely new approach which will recognize that cities can and should be desirable places in which to live.

I say "amen" to that. Having said that, I wish to direct the attention of hon. members to the depth, care and wisdom that will be required to achieve that end. Even if we in our wisdom at the federal level can come up with the most enlightened approach possible, I think it is only realistic and quite proper that we recognize there are other partners in this affair. There has been a suggestion that we form a department of urban affairs. It has been my feeling for some time that at the organizational level the problem is far too subtle and pervasive to be solved merely by naming some federal entity or group of entities a department of urban affairs. Rightly or wrongly, it has been my position that machinery is not a substitute for objectives, policy or strategy. It is a necessary adjunct to them. However, it surely should follow from them.

Beyond the problem of developing a strategy, a base of knowledge and an organizational arrangement through which to inform and guide the federal impact on our cities there is the equally difficult and even more important task of intergovernmental consultation and