

...Would You Live in a Slum?

"It's not our responsibility" seems to be the common cry from governments when the Association asks for protection. There are other problems too - problems of education. Laws are technical documents as are leases, and few tenants really understand the few rights they do have - a situation that the landlords take advantage of.

"One of the most dastardly things," according to Canon French, "is the fact that in the present situation in Halifax, reprisals can and have been used quite extensively. I get phone calls every day from people who say I have to get out of my house - I only have a week to do so." In reality a landlord can't put them out on the streets for three months, Canon French said in an interview.

"Very often," declared the Anglican minister, "people live in very bad housing - a man and his wife with four children for example: the situation is intolerable, but he is not able to go and complain, because of harrassment from the landlord." Steve Ballantyne's problem is not unique as five minutes in Canon French's office will convince you and neither is it merely a student problem.

Dalhousie's Graduate Students Association has recognized both the student context of the problem and its broader scope. Currently they're working with the three local tenants groups and have distributed a pamphlet urging greater student concern for the problem on campus.

in their powers. But the city had pressure from the other side as well.

In a brief presented to Halifax City Council in June, that bastion of progressive reform, The Halifax Board of Trade took a swipe at rent control. "We believe," the Board told Council,

"The whole business of housing in Halifax, particularly in the rent area, is in the hands of a few people. If that's free enterprise, good Lord, it certainly can't operate and we don't want it!"

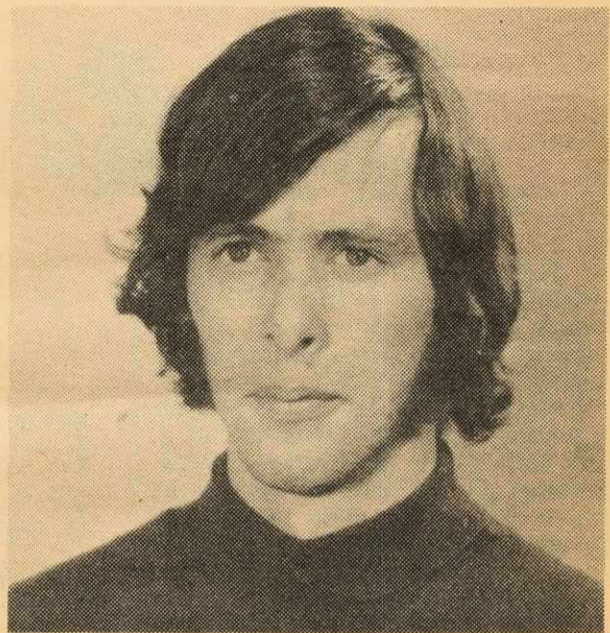
rental controls do not help those who require protection. Only an element of choice can really provide long term solutions. Rental Controls could discourage developers and lenders, thus worsening the overall situation".

It's hard, though, to tell that to a man with a wife and four children, with a job that gives him \$3,200 a year, a slum that costs him \$2,100 in rent each year, leaving him less than a thousand dollars for all the other necessities of life.

And so the Tenants Association continues its fight. They want rent control to keep rents in line with costs instead of

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a perpetuation of the current laissez faire attitude toward landlords. They've called on the city for either a rental ombudsman to arbitrate disputes or an impartial rent control board with some teeth, instead of the toothless wonder that the Board of Trade would like to see. Their only concession to the



Steve Ballantyne... home, sweet slum

tenant side was a rental review board without any power. To quote from its presentation, it "could not legally bind any party but its effectiveness would be evident in the publicity resulting from its hearings." Commented one irate tenant after hearing the brief presented to City Council: "Do you really think the Chicken Herald would print anything nasty about its friends?"

Besides rent control, the Tenants are calling for the right to withhold rent - otherwise known as a rent strike (another proposal of the Tenants Association cut by the city from the new Ordinance 135) in order to have a bargaining weapon in their negotiations with landlords. It's a weapon that has been used effectively in numerous Canadian cities to force recalcitrant landlords into listening to tenants. "It's one of the most effective weapons," says Canon French, "because when you hit a man in his pocketbook you really hit him hard."

But rent control, rent strikes, and the multitude of other goals of the Tenants groups are really only short term solutions, because they do not get at the basic problem which is, who has control of the environment - the landlord or the tenant? It's also likely that rent controls and the like won't be implemented anyway, for the simple reason that most of the people who do the implementing are not tenants. (Halifax City Council does not have a single tenant in its ranks).

When I asked Canon French what the long term solution was, he appeared to hedge, but when I put it to him bluntly - can the free enterprise system solve the housing problem? - the veteran Cape Breton activist didn't mince his words: "Decidedly not, because we don't have free enterprise. The whole business of housing in Halifax, particularly in the rent area, is in the hands of a few people. If that's free enterprise, good lord, it certainly can't operate and we don't want it!"

"When it's a landlords market, it means of course that rents can go as high as possible. It works for the benefit of those who can set rents at their will."

It is not just a poor man's problem either. While those with money aren't being forced to live in slum conditions, they're paying outlandish rents to landlords who have no reason not to charge what the market will bear. Right now, with the current shortage the market will bear just about anything and that's what the landlords are charging.

What are the solutions? Well, Steve Ballantyne who can't get out of his lease without a hassle, has called the health inspector, the fire inspector, and others "I'm confident it will be condemned," he says.

But getting the building condemned doesn't help even in the short term, because it just means that there is one less house that's available.

The Tenant's Association and others are currently waging a battle to put teeth in a revised city ordinance on minimum standards in housing. Most of their important recommendations regarding things like rent control and penalties for non-compliance were chopped out by the city because they weren't with-

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