

*Private Members' Business*

focus as well on the needs of youth and young families we will face increasing costs to our social security, health and justice systems while failing to meet vital challenges for First Nations.

I know from conversations with the Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the minister responsible for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation that they are both very concerned about the state of housing in certain aboriginal communities. The Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development has witnessed these conditions firsthand in many of his visits to these communities. This is an experience which has strengthened his resolve to take action.

In a recent speech to the provincial treaty forum on housing in Saskatchewan the minister acknowledged: "Housing is one of the most critical problems facing aboriginal communities today". He went on to say that the conditions he has observed simply should not occur in our country.

I am therefore pleased to confirm that the government is working very hard to finalize a new policy and action plan to tackle the First Nations housing issue. We are doing so with the support of First Nations leaders and with input from a wide range of stakeholders. This action plan will provide a multifaceted approach to addressing the housing needs of First Nations, including the special needs of elders.

The housing crisis is not a new phenomenon. The situation has been worsening year after year for the past decade as the previous governments failed to take action. Make no mistake about it. This government is committed to action on this issue.

The problems are evident enough but the difficulty lies in finding solutions that will be effective, affordable and long lasting. These solutions must also increase First Nations control of the housing portfolio and contribute to the government's objective of building new partnerships with aboriginal people.

As hon. members are aware there are serious concerns about the quality and quantity of on reserve housing. A relatively high percentage of reserve houses require some form of rehabilitation and many must be replaced. This is largely a reflection of the overall poor quality of reserve housing constructed before 1983 when the national building code standards were not enforced.

• (1810)

There is also a serious shortage of on reserve housing. This shortage is becoming more severe each year as more and more First Nations families are formed. This shortage means that houses are overcrowded. In turn this takes its toll on family and community life and can affect the physical and mental health and well-being of family members.

The housing shortage and the poor condition of existing houses are the two key issues that must be addressed. They call for a range of innovative and resourceful approaches.

As the hon. member for Peterborough has informed the House, officials of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation are working closely with the Assembly of First Nations task force on housing and others to develop concrete proposals for a new aboriginal housing policy.

Among the concepts now being explored are a number of creative options that have come directly from First Nations. These proposals will be considered by the government in deliberations on a new aboriginal housing policy. A memorandum to cabinet is being prepared to seek support for such a new policy. Both ministers have instructed their officials that any new housing policy must encompass three key elements.

First, it must improve housing conditions while moving greater control and accountability for housing to First Nations. The Government of Canada believes that community control is critical to the success of future aboriginal housing initiatives. This position is shared by First Nations.

Second, the policy must provide greater employment and business opportunities for aboriginal people. First Nations people must have enhanced opportunities to build better houses for less money with more local supplies. We must also explore new avenues for financing First Nations housing by encouraging private sector investment in the housing portfolio. In the current environment of fiscal restraint and deficit reduction, government alone cannot foot the enormous bill for aboriginal housing.

Third, the policy must promote the development of skills that will facilitate First Nations control of housing and enable aboriginal people to pursue jobs in the housing industry.

A housing policy that achieves all those goals will also lead to improved health and social conditions in aboriginal communities. This in turn will reduce costs to government and will provide for a more equitable society. In other words all Canadians have a stake in improved aboriginal housing.

As hon. members well know, the challenges in developing a new aboriginal housing policy are significant but they are not insurmountable. I am confident, as are the Minister for Indian Affairs and Northern Development and the minister responsible for CMHC, that the co-operative approach now under way offers the best chance for success. By working together with aboriginal people and making decisions that affect them we will arrive at solutions and approaches that can be supported by all Canadians.