

on The Toronto Housing Consultation with Tenant Leaders

April 14, 2013

The other day the TCHC was holding consultations with tenants again. This time, instead of just putting up notices, they sent out letters to "tenant leaders". Wow! I have suddenly been recognized as a tenant leader.

I actually haven't had much to do with the TCHC and "tenant activist" scene in recent years. I have been focused on other things. But many of the same jokers are still hanging around. Even Hoogenboom from "Toronto Housing Association of Tenants" days was there, sitting right beside me without seeming to recognize me.

But others of that crowd, I have not seen in many years now. Even Sue Gapka only started being a fake opponent of TCHC after all that had passed by. She is a protege of some sort of Effie Vlachi something of the strategic consultants something, which is paid by TCHC to attack it as well as lobby for it.

As I walked in the door the big whine was already well under way. Someone was orating that the people in TCHC are to be referred to either as "tenants" or as "residents" and "customer does not have any legal basis. Exactly, although I tend to prefer "resident". Of course, Hugh Lawson was at the mike, agreeing with everybody.

Lawson has been around a long time, too. He is the housing functionary who is credited with keeping everything going smoothly, sort of like ex-lax. Later that day, when I discussed the meeting with Dan, he said that Lawson was now only a couple of years from retiring.

Dan says he has seen Lawson doing his smoothie routine for all the many years he has been observing Toronto housing tenant politics. He says he was around when the tenant representation system was put together but he did not seem to get what was going on. Besides, I never noticed him there during those times, or any of the people in my present building, who all seem to

have been there for over twenty years, since it was with the old "Cityhomes".

One thing that is encouraging is that the TCHC staff are now talking about their core responsibilities as landlords. That is refreshing; when I was often having discussions with the housing bureaucrats, they were very hostile to the idea that they had legal obligations as landlords.

There seemed to me to be two factions within social housing administration in Toronto; the social engineers and the welfare bureaucrats. The former wanted to use housing as a way to "improve" people and were indignant that laws and the governments who funded the housing and paid their salaries were getting in their way. The latter just had the idea that housing should be as wretched as possible to encourage people to move on.

Among the ideas thrown up were; the need to look into the management of the "Housing Connections" wait list so that people get off it and into housing. Anyone with the slightest clue knows that the reason it is called "Housing Connections" is that it is about who has "connections", not who is on the list the longest, or has the greatest need.

Someone wanted a group of people to advocate for the tenants. This is stupid; who will pay these people except the housing company? Can't they understand the idea of conflict of interest? The only people who can really advocate for the tenants are the tenants themselves. To do that, of course, they have to be able to do so in safety and therein lay the kernel of the question I wanted to ask.

Challenge; hard to find out who does what within TCHC. Lawson and his crew up front talked about their "state of good repair" program, and how the participatory budget is being revived, and the budget for it increased. Some people in the hall hollered about how they were talking around the question. One very nervous flak catcher was told to talk slower.

They also started talking about their plans for tenant associations. I wanted to hear more about that. I was around for the nice ways in which the tenant initiative to create a network of resident associations within Toronto

Housing was crushed. The tenant representation system always was merely a way of coopting any such impulses.

I also heard about my old environs at 291 George street. They have created a drop in center in the building for the tenants. Well, why not? They have that big room on the ground floor that has been locked up for most of the time since the building has existed. I tried creating a drop in center there. The lunatic superintendent who they refused to get rid of smashed up the amenities I brought in there and locked the door again. No one did anything about it.

I assume they have found people to staff the drop-in center. If someone is not there to watch it here are people in there, or people off of the street, who will destroy the place or retry to take it over. I have my own solution for that place, which I told them about almost twenty years ago; use some sense about who you rent to in that neighborhood. They really did not want to hear that then and likely still do not want to.

Cleaning on weekends? Housing connections, that agency that manages the wait list to get into housing; no communication, no dialogue. No one in the building after hours who can let the police or fire department in? Or if there is a "keyman" he is a jerk or crook.

Heard it all before; still have the same people in place. When someone at the back asked who had heard all this before, every hand went up. The ideas are there, the implementation keeps falling apart; why?

A concern about the idea of tenants associations were, what if a clique takes control? What are the criteria for a well functioning tenant's association? This is a bit foolish; what are most of these tenant reps now, except toadies hand picked by the "area tenant animator" or whatever they are calling them now. They were "community health promoters" at one point. Basically, the social police over the tenants, the people with social work degrees.

Soon this was interrupted by somebody complaining about a woman in her building who could not get a number on her door. The caretaker got tired

of hearing about it and wrote a number on her door with a marker. He also told them "I have a job, you don't."

People feel that the maintenance people cannot be fired. Flak catcher #2 insisted that they can be, if there is enough evidence on file. This led to the next gripe, someone tried to get something done about a bad neighbor, and was told there were no files. He eventually found out that when a new manager came in, he or she immediately dumped all the files for that building in the trash.

Some other sagacious individual asked the TCHC people if they have noticed that everyone brings their personal problems to these forums because they are so desperate. They cannot get them resolved where they live. Thus, there is no way to keep the discussion on city wide issues, like this tenant associations thing. There are way more people who want to talk then there is time.

At about this point Gapka flipped out and started screaming his/her/its head off. I am not sure how to address the question of The Gap's exact gender status. Has he had them snipped yet and may thus be a she?

Anyway, Gap filled in some detail about the development of this new tenant association plan. It seems this had been worked on for awhile in "consultation" with tenants; presumably since the new manager came in from the states.

I know that they are much bigger on this idea in the states. Left types of people in Canada and the U.K. are just about rabid against it. However, the idea of "tenant management organizations" as they call it in the U.K. have been very successful. In Canada the right wing types just want social housing torn down or sold off as fast as possible.

However, I do not know what kind of "consultations" came up with it in TCHC. Who were they consulting? At any rate, when it was taken to the board of TCHC the two city councillors appointed by Ford wasted no time in shooting it down. It seems this meeting was an exercise in showing that the tenants really do support such an idea.

I recall all the trouble they had trying to get the original tenant rep system through city council. Lastman was totally opposed to it, shouting that the councilors needed to look at this closely, it looked like some sort of rip off; like us tenants are going to steal the buildings. I think Mel the Moose was transferring some ideas from the real corruption which had occurred in some cooperative housing, where residents were able to convert their government housing into their private property without having to pay anything.

Whatever he thought, a compromise was eventually reached. The provincial law actually required the city to allow tenant participation. This law originally applied to the housing owned by the province, and this was down jammed to the city along with the housing. Ah, the Harris times were wonderful. Anyway, we got the tenant rep system, but set up in such a way that the housing apparatchiks could control it.

This is how it goes in housing; the residents are trapped between left and right wing fanatics. This is what really makes it impossible to get any improvements. Come to think of it, this is why increasingly nothing works in Toronto either; we are deadlocked between extreme left and right who want it their way or nothing.

But by now Gapka was arguing with Dan King. King has also been hanging around these events for a very long time. He is also into strange issues like a province of Toronto and another one in the far north. I ran into him at the Mayor's New Years Levee. What he says about these things actually makes some sense; one of the problems we have is that our political institutions and boundaries are totally out of date and here is no way to modernize them.

Eventually everybody tells Gapka to shut up. But shortly after that, somebody stupidly gives her the mike, and soon she was standing on a chair shouting. She complained that plan after plan never really involves tenants. But this is hypocritical from somebody who works with all these astroturf groups.

Gap seems to want the tenant rep system back again, because it benefits him and the people she works with. He squawked that it is not hard to hold

elections; that the vote for tenant reps is now a year overdue. It occurred to me that TCHC should consult the nerds at Fair Vote Canada about running elections for a tenant association board.

His shenness went on, talking now about contract buildings, ones TCHC had farmed out to contractors. These are not able to have their own tenant associations; why, I am not sure exactly. Probably the private management companies refuse to allow them.

I finally crumpled up the sheet of paper I had written out my little question on; it was obvious I would not have a chance to make it, and by now people were leaving. I could have asked a lot of questions about social housing tenant associations.

But my big question would have been about holding elections. It may be easy to hold elections, but to get a system into place where there is a point to the elections, that is a problem. You can ask anyone involved with the voting reform movement in Canada.

There are just too many bastards out there protecting their own power and interests. The people who are actually effected are too weak, too vulnerable to being attacked. There are all these groups who want to victimize them and appropriate their voice.

For example, there is still FMTA. Federation of Metro Tenants Associations. It has had a long standing goal of becoming the representative for Toronto Housing tenants. When their allies in Ottawa tried to get the city government to give them an annual grant of one dollar a door per year for renters in Ottawa, the city terminated their funding altogether.

Most of those people came to Toronto to work for FMTA. This time they wanted a dollar a door from the housing authority to be the tenants representatives. Ballantyne, the TCHC director at the time, was a big fan of FMTA. So was and is the city housing department. When Miller came in he also favored them.

However, part of the housing bureaucracy was very opposed to this; they wanted the tenants all to themselves. They somehow were able to stop this

from happening. The FMTA stooges even tried to crash tenant meetings. They were able to take over what was left of the Toronto Housing Tenants Associations, which of course finished it off.

I am sure FMTA has not given up on their old idea. They are always looking for more money. Other groups that have buzzed around the hapless Toronto Housing tenants looking for a honey pot have been the ACORN group from the U.S., and our very own OCAP.

What I would have asked is; since I have yet to see that TCHC is no longer operating like a mini police state, what is going to secure participants in tenant associations from physical and emotional aggression? I would like to have seen how Lawson waltzes around that one.

But I am not going to. I will have to finally snag an appointment with this new manager, and discuss my past difficulties with abusive TCHC employees. Perhaps he is the one who would finally like to take some actions to insure that certain past incidents do not finally lead to a law suit against the organization he heads.

One of these days I will have lots to blog about on that topic. But for now I have to wait. I will see how this tenant association idea develops. What they really need to do is make a real study of tenant self management. But how it can get through the right wing welfare cops and the left wing social engineers, is hard to see.

We shall see. tr