



Remarks on proposed amendments to the National Housing Strategy Act

Oral presentation to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Finance regarding Bill C-97, *An Act to implement certain provisions of the budget tabled in Parliament on March 19, 2019 and other measures*

May 8, 2018

Good evening. My name is Elizabeth McIsaac, and I am the President of Maytree.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before this committee to provide recommendations for amendments on Bill C-97, *Budget Implementation Act, 2019*. My written submission includes recommended amendments to the National Housing Strategy Act and the Poverty Reduction Act. For this presentation, my comments are focused on recommended amendments to the National Housing Strategy Act.

Canadians believe that equality, non-discrimination, freedom from fear and want—among other protections and freedoms—are fundamental to a free and democratic society. These values are reflected in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and form guiding principles for how we govern, legislate, and develop public policies.

While Canadians may believe that we have a strong tradition of upholding human rights, we have been selective about which rights we recognize and protect. To date, our successes have been largely focused on civil and political rights. Civil and political rights—like the freedom of religion and the right to vote—are critical, and are reflective of specific movements and political moments in our national and international history.

Economic and social rights are just as fundamental.

While there has been a reticence on the part of past Canadian legislatures to recognize and uphold economic and social rights, this is the moment to do so.

Currently, there are over 235,000 Canadians that are homeless. Over 1.7 million households in Canada live in unsuitable, inadequate or unaffordable housing.

Canadians understand that safe, affordable, and secure housing is critical to living a life with dignity. Housing is a human right.

With the introduction of the National Housing Strategy Act, we have an opportunity to recognize one of the basic and fundamental rights that we think all Canadians should be afforded. The proposed legislation undertakes a rights-based approach to housing, and provides an opportunity to re-set the framework within which we conceptualize, develop, and implement housing policy in Canada.

Now we need to get this right.

The proposed National Housing Strategy Act needs to be strengthened so that it clearly recognizes that housing is a human right, and includes an effective accountability framework and mechanism for affected groups to claim their right.

We urge all members of the Standing Committee to support our proposed amendments especially with respect to:

1. Unequivocally recognizing that housing is a fundamental human right
2. Mandating the Housing Advocate to receive and investigate petitions identifying systemic housing rights issue, and establishing a process for a review panel to hear and make recommendations on these issues
3. Strengthening the monitoring role of the Housing Council

These proposed amendments will commit Canada to the progressive realization to the right to housing, and set out the framework for an accountability mechanism that meets our obligations under international law while reflecting a unique made-in-Canada approach. Importantly, affected groups will have access to public hearings into key systemic issues, before an expert panel with at least one representative of affected communities.

All of these elements are critical to the development and implementation of an effective rights-based framework. The proposed amendments to the National Housing Strategy Act help ensure that Canada gets it right.

It has taken several decades for economic and social rights to be at the forefront of the Canadian imagination. The federal government's leadership in this regard is appreciated, and continued momentum towards ensuring that Canadians are protected by economic and social rights is critical.

I'll leave you with a quotation from former Supreme Court of Canada Justice, Louise Arbour:

“The values of freedom, equality and tolerance reflect a very large consensus in Canada. They are values which have been entrenched in the Constitution through the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and embodied in our international commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, amongst others. I want to ask you today, however - perhaps somewhat provocatively - if we have done everything within our power to give those values, and those legal commitments, effect in our day-to-day life as a nation.”

My response? With the National Housing Strategy Act, if passed with the proposed amendments, we are finally starting to get there.

Maytree
77 Bloor Street West, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON M5S 1M2 CANADA

+1-416-944-2627 | info@maytree.com | www.maytee.com | [@maytree_canada](https://www.instagram.com/maytree_canada)