Preface

The roots of my long odyssey into Canadian housing policy lie in early childhood memories of the destruction of cherished valleys, orchards, vineyards, and historic buildings. The scenes I witnessed were part of a significant Canadian environmental controversy, the loss of the lands of the unique Niagara fruit belt. To understand what drove this process, which appeared to me as a destructive force of bulldozers unleashed on the land with the acceleration of urban sprawl after the Second World War, I delved into the St Catharines public library. Here I discovered even more disturbing urban-renewal and transportation studies, which called for the levelling of most of the urban core and interminable road extensions. But discovering a method behind the apparent madness of ecological and architectural degradation helped to spark an interest in urban history.

As a graduate student in history at McMaster University in 1979, I planned to examine more fully the evolution of environmental land-use problems in the "Golden Horseshoe" arc of southern Ontario, from Oshawa to Niagara. Aware — from the writings of James Lorimer and Humphrey Carver — of the connection between federal housing policy and the problem of urban sprawl, I originally hoped to combine a study of both problems. Fortunately, however, I was steered by the three wise men of my MA thesis advisory committee, John Weaver, Lou Gentilcore, and Harry Turner, to the more manageable topic of housing. My research was supported by generous scholarship assistance from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Cor-
poration, and guided by my adviser John Weaver. Housing policy remained the focus of both my master’s thesis and my doctoral dissertation. After graduation I had an academic’s dream come true: a chance to combine study with direct government experience by researching a history of the Metropolitan Toronto Housing Company. This was helped immeasurably by the frank recollections of its president, George Barker, and notable social-housing pioneers Albert Rose and Clare Clark.

My experience of service in the voluntary sector, with the aim of protecting the rural landscape, has continued to reinforce my academic and professional research. The importance of combining both can be seen in the common tendency to disparage any reform in the land-use planning process as an infamous booster of housing costs. A partner in both academic research and social activism whose work proved critical to mine was the late Anne Mason Apps, whose brave research into the dark areas of organized crime and politically connected land speculation should provide inspiration for generations of Canadian intellectuals.

Although this book frequently seemed an impossible task, and despite the pessimistic view suggested by the title, the history I retraced in its writing was frequently inspirational. For while Canadian housing policy has been characterized by a zeal to uphold the private marketplace, a cause championed mainly by the powerful federal Department of Finance, there is a brighter side to the story. Its history has been full of heroes who challenged the ideas of the anti-hero of much of this book, W.C. Clark. While social housing was long delayed by Clark’s ingenious machinations, the final arrival of subsidized shelter helped countless Canadians to escape the poverty trap. Although originally social housing in Canada was virtually designed to proclaim that it was inferior accommodation intended to serve a low-income group, the vision of the generation of “flower power” helped to spark a vibrant third sector that aimed to make high-quality shelter affordable for all.

Writing the history of Canadian housing policy has made me more conscious than ever of the importance of the “Red Tory” tradition to Canadian social history. The unhappy contrast between the dazzling new public-housing projects of the New Deal and the relief camps where Canada’s homeless were wasted was one of the conditions that led to the continentalism of that critical shaper of national consciousness, Frank Underhill. Later events, such as the burning of American ghettos and the demolition of poorly maintained public-housing projects, served to stimulate the distinctive ideals of Canadian Tories. The American early-warning system sounded an
alarm that halted the urban-renewal bulldozer in its tracks and replaced it with small-scale, income-integrated housing projects built by municipalities, native housing corporations, non-profit associations, and co-operatives.

The Red Tories I have met and read about in the process of drafting this book have been quite refreshing. It seems appropriate that many of the critical ideas shaping heretical social-housing policies should have been formulated in the magnificent chateau Chorley Park, which housed the lieutenant-governor of Ontario, Herbert Bruce. This Kremlin of Red Toryism was, with appropriate symbolism, closed down by the most Whiggish of Ontario premiers, Mitch Hepburn. The delight that this foe of tradition took in evicting the king's representative from a palace where radicals gathered seems to have been surpassed only by his pleasure in organizing strike-breakers to assault industrial unionism in the infamous Oshawa General Motors-UAW conflict.

The ideals Bruce nurtured in Chorley Park first sprouted in the public-housing innovation of Regent Park and then blossomed more luxuriantly in the co-operative Alexandria Park. Along the path of these three parks trod Harold Clark, a Bay Street financial wizard who was the antithesis of W.C. Clark. French Canada had its own Red Tory champion in Paul Dozois, a businessman and respected social reformer who brought public housing to Quebec over enormous opposition. In western Canada similarly socially responsible business figures brought public housing to hostile environments by uniting with labour and social activists over a fierce chorus of protest from real estate interests; the same alliances triumphed in the Atlantic provinces. An ethic of community united diverse and even conflicting social groups.

Creative class coalitions searching for alternatives to the housing market eventually won out in the most adverse circumstances. Polarized conflicts sparked protests over evictions and rent increases, but led to only short-term victories for working people. Social solidarity set the conditions for longer-term gains through the establishment of innovative measures for social housing. While Communists in Vancouver and Montreal in the midst of the post-Second World War housing shortage organized dramatic squatting occupations of vacant properties, their comrades in Toronto more quietly and discreetly worked with the conscience of big business to bring about the nation's first public-housing project.

Although W.C. Clark waged a determined battle to prevent the construction of a single unit of social housing, he did so out of a deep, even fanatical personal conviction, not in service to the inter-
ests of any identifiable sector of capital. Indeed, his lordly crusade resembled the ascetic craft of a high priest or the ruling ideologue of a Marxist regime. For the small-scale building, retail lumber, and real estate interests that benefited from his opposition to social housing Clark had supreme contempt; he hoped to replace them with more socially responsible large-scale developers who would plan entire communities. Much of Clark’s success came from demonstrating a concern for urban form similar to that of his opponents. Later critics of federal policy in the 1960s would wrongly seize upon the big developers he fostered as the key villains on the urban scene – a mistake they would soon realize when residents concerned with real estate values challenged even the most sensitively designed mixed-income projects.

While Red Toryism has had many visible successes, its survival, as George Grant noted, is always uncertain in the shadow of a powerful United States with a very different philosophy. Much of the often weak Red Tory legacy is now being assailed by the Reform Party, emerging out of Alberta, the province that resisted the introduction of any social-housing programs longest. Indeed, the party is headed by the son of the Social Credit premier who blocked the construction of a single unit of public housing in the province during the long period from 1949 to 1966, contemptuous of federal legislation used in other jurisdictions. But even the most clever alliance of narrow-minded interests, focused on the primacy of pecuniary land values over human suffering, will have to contend with the enduring strength of a social-housing movement that continually seeks new forms to realize the values of community.