

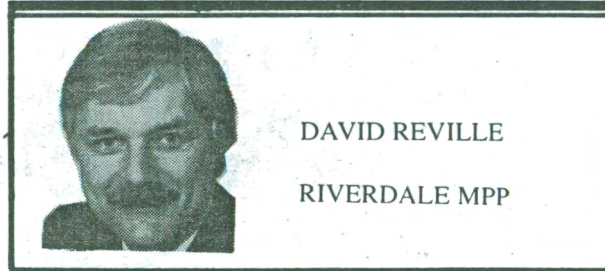
# Victory for roomers: How sweet it is

Amid the partisan catcalling that seems always to accompany the end of a legislative session, there was a little oasis of calm. Bill 10 — an act to amend the Landlord and Tenant Act — was reported out of committee of the whole House and received third and final reading without amendment and without debate.

In the big media, Bill 10's passage received only a mention. For the Roomers Association and the Coalition for the Protection of Roomers and Boarders, however, Bill 10 is cause for rejoicing. It marks a successful conclusion to an excellent campaign that raised the issue — the lack of security of tenure for roomers, boarders and lodgers — and delivered the solution — the inclusion of roomers, boarders and lodgers in the Landlord and Tenant Act. My own involvement in the Roomers question dates back to 1972. At that time a few of us had just founded Neighbourhood Legal Services. Then Ward 7 Alderman John Sewell, had stopped Meridian's block-busting, saving 51 rooming houses from the wrecker's ball.

Neighbourhood Legal Services was helping roomers get organized so they could protect their rights. Trouble was, they didn't have any. They'd arrive home to find their belongings on the street and the lock changed. The situation changed for a few roomers when the city purchased the houses as part of the deal for Winchester Square. But roomers who lived in privately-owned rooming houses were still at the mercy of landlords who responded to an ever tightening housing market by raising rents and by speculating. Each rent rise and each flip created casualties. As the housing crisis deepened, eviction from a rooming house often meant homelessness.

Just before the Legislature resumed for its third session, I happened to be talking with my friend (Ward 7 City Councillor) Barbara Hall. She was worried about a series of evictions in South St. Jamestown. It was the same old problem — because roomers weren't specifically mentioned in the Landlord and Tenant Act, they could be evicted without cause and without notice. Fortunately, my name had just come up in the ballot system (every Thursday morning while the House is in session, two members get to put forward a resolution or a bill which is then de-



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bated. Resolutions, even if carried unanimously, do not bind the government. Most bills, even if passed at second reading, die on the Order Paper because the government can refuse to call them for third reading. It had taken two years for my turn to come up.)

I drafted a simple amendment to the Landlord and Tenant Act to include roomers, boarders and lodgers — Bill 10. The bill passed on second reading, the conservatives voted in favor and the liberals against. I was delighted and surprised when my motion to send the bill to committee for public hearings carried. On the same day, Cam Jackson, the conservative housing critic, tabled Bill 59 which would have exempted some housing situations from the Landlord and Tenant Act. Because his ballot item had already been debated, there was no chance that Bill 59 would be dealt with, so the tabling of Bill 59 was just a statement of the conservative position on roomers.

The really surprising move was made by Attorney General Ian Scott who tabled Bill 87 — a government bill — on June 17, after the public hearings on my bill had concluded. The press went wild with speculation on just what the intentions of the Attorney General really were. If the government had views on the protection of roomers, why hadn't it raised them in committee? Why bring in a bill at the 11th hour? Was the government going to kill Bill 10 and let Bill 87 gather dust? Were roomers going to have to wait? How many would survive the summer recess? Would there be an election and would a new government give roomers a high priority? Roomers and their advo-

cates went into heavy strategy sessions. In the end, we decided that we'd play it as though everybody wanted to protect roomers and the difference in approach could be resolved. Imagine our surprise when that's precisely what happened. In committee, Bill 10 was amended and unanimously supported. It did come back to the House and was carried, again unanimously.

It's unusual for a private member's bill to pass into law. In fact, there were two private member's bills passed on June 29, bringing the total to eight. Why did Bill 10 pass? It's not as though the problem suddenly became clear to the Legislature. There had been pressure to include roomers in the Landlord and Tenant Act for years. A long line of NDP housing critics had pummeled ministers of housing about roomers rights. An equally long line of Coroner's Juries recommended roomer protection. Housing activists going back to Norm Browne (the first editor of 7 News), Barry Morris and Carmel Hili, both of the Christian Resource Centre, had raised the plight of roomers through the 70s and 80s. Janet Howard, when she was a Ward 7 Alderman, and Ginette Keenan actually got the Rooming House Tenant Project off the ground. The Christian Resource Centre followed up that work by getting involved with roomers in both public and private sector housing. The community legal clinics, principally Neighbourhood Legal Services and Parkdale Community Legal Services, played a role in organizing roomers and going to court with them, often in losing causes because roomers weren't specifically included under the Landlord and Tenant Act. All that history is part of Bill 10 but it doesn't explain why protection for roomers was possible in June this year and not in, say, February of 1974 or September 1982.

I've been part of many a long struggle, some as long as this one. I can't think of a victory that I savor more. Congratulations to the hundreds of dedicated people who worked over the years so that roomers could have the same protection from arbitrary eviction that other tenants have long enjoyed.

Thinking and working together to fight AIDS