

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers

Flemington – Tuesday 24 June 2025

MEMBERS

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Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

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Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

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Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Katherine Ceballos;

Reem Yehdego; and

Ruth Eyakem.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues committee's public hearing into the Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

To begin with we will acknowledge the committee members. Hello, I am Michael Galea. I am the Deputy Chair of the committee and Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan.

Renee HEATH: My name is Renee Heath, and I am a Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: My name is Ann-Marie Hermans, and I am also a Member for the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Ryan Batchelor, Member for the Southern Metropolitan Region.

Lee TARLAMIS: Lee Tarlamis, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Good afternoon. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metro region.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Aiv Puglielli, Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore, the information that you provide today is protected by law during this hearing. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you each please state your full names?

Katherine CEBALLOS: I am Katherine Ceballos.

Reem YEHDEGO: I am Reem Yehdego.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you both. I am now going to invite you each to make an opening contribution of around 5 minutes. Have you decided who is going to go first?

Katherine CEBALLOS: I will go first. My name is Katherine Ceballos, and I am from the Carlton estate. I come in solidarity to discuss the topic that is causing so much heartache and stress for our residents in public housing.

I have lived in Carlton since 1980, and I have seen the beautiful trajectory of people that come and go. Each one has played a part in our community. Our homes have been made for one purpose, and that was to build homes for the needy and the low of income, and they were built large enough for our large families. Our buildings are rich in history of all Australians, migrants, immigrants and refugees that are present and those who have called and call our places home. Men, women, children and large families, young and old, have put their differences aside, broken down cultural barriers and put religious views aside to build a holistic community and to build a rich and diverse community where our children can play safely without any stigmas or feeling less of.

We are a people of various ethnicities, various faiths, statures and walks of life, past and present. All of them have placed a stamp on our community and have helped us build what we have. We are multicultural – Hispanic, European, Middle Eastern, Asian, Polynesian, Melanesian, African, First Nations Australian – people who have built our community, not the government. We carry history, we carry stories and all of us have come from some war-torn country or some country with an issue and have come with a common goal to seek a place to call home and a place to belong. These buildings were established not only to address the housing shortage and the affordability issues in the 1940s, like we face today. The Commonwealth Housing Commission, established in 1943, promoted the idea that all Australians have the fundamental right to housing. That is what I am here to defend. I stand here next to her and everybody else, and we speak for all the estates in Victoria.

My apartment is not a residential address – it is not just that. It is my sanctuary. It is my security. It embodies my identity as an Australian citizen. It is the foundation that helps me call this country home. Housing Victoria has violated that. It has violated our rights, our sense of belonging and the years of work that we as a community have built to establish the communities that we have today. They have come with this great idea to demolish old buildings and make them more efficient. They have come with a plan to destroy what we and the people before us have built. Not only are they planning to build something that is visually pleasing but with no depth, but they are going to reconstruct it as social housing.

I am not sure whether any of you come from public housing, but I know we do. There is a great big difference. To all those that are not aware, social housing is very different to public housing, and it is not public housing. It is a different ball game, which many of our communities do not know and have not been educated about. It comes with its own terms, discriminatory terms, that many of us will not meet and cannot meet. The financial cost that it requests of us is not the same as what public housing demands of us or expects of us. There is flexibility in public housing, where we all can live comfortably. For that reason I come before you. I come to save public housing, I come to save the land and I come to save the system not only for me and those that live with me right now and around me but all those to come, because they are coming. There are financial issues in this country. We need to acknowledge them, and public housing plays an extremely important part in this.

Homes Victoria plan to integrate people with various economic status to build their vision of inclusive community. This demonstrates the disregard for and the disconnection they have with our community. I would advise any of you to go and sit at 38 Elgin Street, at the park there, sit down and see this social experiment that they have done and see how it does not work. The children that play there are public housing children. The families that actually interact there are public housing residents. There is no interaction. Carlton used to be rich in diversity and inclusive, and that section of Carlton is not that anymore. I am not sure if you have a history of what we have all gone through, but much like Carlton and Kensington in the 80s and 90s, we were enriched with culture. Then that got remodelled in the 2000s, and it was destroyed, never to be the same again. Kensington is not what it used to be, and neither is Carlton.

To build community you need to involve community. You need to discuss first and then work together in building something new. Homes Victoria did the opposite. They, in their ignorance, took it upon themselves to think up what was best for us and plan for us. This is with no regard for or insight into what it means to be a public housing resident, of the struggles and the challenges we face. It is not the way our building looks, I can assure you; it is affordability and it is space – and this is what they are trying to take from us.

Once they planned, they had the audacity to ask us and try to persuade us with air conditioning and the efficiency of a new building. Now they are in the situation that they are in, where they are evacuating, physically and forcefully, people – our people, our community. And I will say this, on their behalf, is reckless, arrogant, foolish, undermining and insulting, in a time when there is so much insecurity, trauma and displacement in the world, in a time where there is so much financial crisis across this country, and it is escalating. It is not a time for anyone in this country, particularly the low income, to feel insecure, ignored, discriminated against and marginalised. It is not a time to be stripped away from our sense of belonging to this great nation. We need to come and stand in solidarity and defend and preserve the legacy left behind by all those people that carried the heavy burden and the stigma put by society on public housing. We need to fight for the community they raised up to build that I live in now. And this is why I am here: to stand up for them and to stand up for myself, for our families and for all those to come. So thank you for your time.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Katherine. I understand that Ruth is in the room with us as well. Would you like to please come up? And whilst you get settled in, I will invite you, Reem, to say a few words.

Reem YEHDEGO: Hi. I am Reem, and I am a resident of the 33 Alfred Street building. These public housing buildings, or what we call flats, have long been seen by the state as an eyesore, unsafe and not aesthetically pleasing against Melbourne's backdrop. But to me – to us – as a child of black African Muslim immigrants who was born and raised in Flemington and North Melbourne, these buildings are home and make Melbourne a place I am proud to be a part of. These buildings are places of survival and belonging, especially for people who have always been pushed to the margins. Despite the decades-long government neglect, which was deliberate in order to make these buildings appear unsafe and beyond repair, community and residents still thrived. We support each other through this government's neglect, through crisis and through deep, orchestrated uncertainty.

The long-term disinvestment and neglect are now being used as justification for demolition. The government is telling us that this is about safety, renewal and increasing housing, but I fear it is about profit for them. This is evident with the government announcing that the three buildings in Flemington and North Melbourne being demolished will not have any public housing stock present. Many have celebrated this announcement, saying it is progress for Melbourne, but these demolitions do not feel like progress, they feel like erasure. I also want to highlight that these demolitions should not be seen in a vacuum. They are part of a legacy of harm, abandonment and violence inflicted by these systems of the state against my community.

In the 2020 hard lockdown, we were locked in without warning or support. No services came. We were the first responders. Residents and volunteers organised health care, food and welfare checks, while loved ones risked COVID and police violence to get supplies in. We built our own crisis response while the state sent police instead of care. We have been racially profiled, overpoliced, surveilled and spoken about like we are a burden rather than people who belong, who have families and who contribute to the wider Victorian community. And this is not happening on neutral ground. These towers stand on unceded Aboriginal land. First Nations people have experienced generations of forced removal, surveillance and displacement, and often in the name of development, public order or progress. The legacy has not ended. Today, First Nations, black, brown, migrant and working-class communities are facing similar patterns of dispossession under new names and new policies. The announcement of the redevelopment of the 44 towers is the most recent of this.

From the outset, this announcement was made without warning. The relocation process also feels rushed and confusing. It has also been coercive and lacked consultation. People are being told different things from different Homes Vic staff. We are being pressured to accept housing that does not meet our needs, far from our doctors, our schools, our mosques and our community-based support networks. There is no consistency and no transparency, and it leaves many of us feeling anxious and pressured. The shift from public housing to social housing is a part of that erasure. It allows the government to quietly dismantle public housing while masking it in softer language, but what is being offered is often privatised, insecure and far less accountable. We know the difference and we feel it – this shift lets the government offload its responsibility to provide long-term, stable housing and avoid direct accountability whilst mitigating risk. This is not a failure of policy, it is a continuation of policy in Victoria and wider Australia that strips agency from black, First Nations, poor and working-class people, so it's actual policy working as it is intended in this country.

My experience living in these flats was that it really gave me a sense of community, identity and understanding of the world as bigger than myself. I would not be the woman I am now, I would not be so grounded in my values and principles of care, compassion, justice and love, if it was not for the way the people, specifically black women, raised me in these flats. Housing is beyond infrastructure. It is about stability, memory, safety, connection and the possibility to live with dignity. When governments tear down housing without care, without listening and without a commitment to building something just, they are not just removing buildings, they are cutting into the roots of our communities. And every time they do, they make it clear what they value: land, profit, control over the lives of those they have always pushed to the margins.

We deserve better than this. We deserve housing that is public, not privatised; housing that is permanent, not temporary; housing that is that is improved with us, not done to us. The government has the resources, the land, the responsibility to invest in real public housing – not demolitions disguised as progress, not social housing that erodes security, but true, accountable public housing that centres dignity, community and care. We are not asking for charity. We are demanding justice for the communities who built these flats, who survived the neglect, who raised generations of children here and who deserve to stay. If the government truly cares about safety, belonging and equity, it starts with protecting, investing and expanding public housing, not erasing it.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. And welcome, Ruth. I will ask you first if you can please state your full name for the Hansard record.

Ruth EYAKEM: My name is Ruth Eyakem.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you very much. And do you have any opening remarks as well, anything you would like to say at the outset?

Ruth EYAKEM: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Please, go ahead.

Ruth EYAKEM: Thank you very much. Thank you for you guys coming and hearing us. What I want to say is the public housing is part of our life, our community and our mental health, because we are together and feeling home and supporting each other, community, and a lot of activity we do is with the part of the aged, elders, mothers and children. That was like home. And now all of a sudden they come and are separating us everywhere. That is a big mental issue for us, and a lot of elder people cannot afford the separation and to let go the housing benefits as well. A lot of people who live here are disadvantaged people, but our children are very educated. We teach them manners, we teach them religion, we teach them everything. They are lawyers and doctors and handies and everything; they are giving to Australia back what they give to them. So now the people who live there, to take them away from their house is like shocking. As I see a lot of elder people that are not accept it; it is very sad, and they do not know what they are going to be, the new house, and the beneficiary of the government help is all being taken away from them, as I have been told. So they have been shocked. I am like, on behalf of them – it is very cruel. Australia is very supportive and very giving, and all of a sudden they come to us and knock our homes on our heads. It is not fair. As I see it, it is a developed country. I have been travelling in a few around the world, where my family are, and the housing commissions are still there in the middle of the city. For example, in America I went, and they are giving all services – it is part of one of the developed country signs.

We come here for a better life and for relief from war and from all trauma. After we have been living very nice and happy and together, taking away our home is very sad and unfair. The new community is like a studio; it is not a house. Very suffocated – the room had no space. I saw it. It is unfair. It is like a students dorm or some studio for the office or something like that, not a home. As Africans, we like to gather. We like to come with our grandchildren together, our cousins and our family members. Where are we going to sit? There is no dining room. There is no space for that and to be having, as before, what we have there in the public housing.

Also, there is the safety. So many houses that have already moved, they get robbed. Some robbery comes when they are sitting and jump into the sitting room. This has scared them. They have already told the people that are responsible, but nothing happened for them. Security is bad and everything is not safe. They do not know each other, the neighbours. They do not know who they bring in. With a family, there are new people or I heard some come from prison – our neighbours. So these things make them scared.

All what we ask is we need the old house. It has been excellent – nothing wrong with it. We are very happy. We need to keep it, that one, and we need to be in public housing. The build is high to the roof. We are complaining for that. We are comparing for houses and a way, way high build they have. So as soon as they get in there everything changes. For a lot of people, the mental health is not good for them. So I hope with these things the Australian government gives it back again. Think about it once more and give a chance for our people with what they have, the house, and not to knock it down. Keep the public housing and let people be happy. Let people feel Australian and not be isolated or like they do not hear the voice. Sorry, but my English is not that much good, but yes, we want you to hear our voice. In corona what happened was we were never being heard, and a lot of bad things were happening. I do not want to go there, but this time we want you to hear us. We want you to feel us as a part of Australia and show us our rights and show us our power. Please leave this public housing as it is. Thank you very much.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you to each of you for your opening remarks. We will now go to some questions, and I think as you put it, Ruth, it is very important that we hear from you, so we do have a bit less time for our questions. I will start with myself and something that two of you in particular mentioned. Katherine and Ruth, you talked about what is important in a home. Ruth, you said it was about a dining room and having people in. I think you, Katherine, talked about having community spaces around. If I can put it broadly to you,

what is the most important thing that makes a home a home, and what is it that you want to keep that is special, whether it is in a new build or in your existing home? What is the most important, I guess, tangible thing that is home for you?

Katherine CEBALLOS: Home for us means maintaining the size that we have. I do not know whether you guys have seen Carlton. I am not sure whether you have ever entered a public housing apartment.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: We have.

Katherine CEBALLOS: They are quite spacious. COVID was the perfect opportunity for us to really get creative and use every space available. Especially for people that have four-plus children, you got to use every nook. We were able to, and we lived comfortably. When you look at the new modifications of what an apartment looks like for us, they do not fit the mould. Our families are large, our children are tall. Look around you: all our brothers and sisters from Africa and so forth, their children are tall. The tiny bedrooms that they are confining themselves in here, the spaces they are cutting down to make more efficient, open, beautiful spaces – they do not necessarily fit our mould.

In some of the cultures around me, we have people that cannot be in the same room as their counterpart, as their spouses and so forth; they share differently due to their culture. That was never being taken in. They will build open spaces and not take into regard our cultural background, you know, who we are as a people. This is what to me was really, really unacceptable. You want to build culture, you want to build community, you want to redo. Why are you not hearing? Why are you not asking? Why are you going backwards? That is why space is important. And following space, affordability – that is important to me. But space is one of the biggest things that I think we are all in agreeance is quite important.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Yes.

Ruth EYAKEM: I want to add something. Australia is about multicultural, and where is the multicultural? In our culture gathering is very important. We gather. That is our life, part of our soul. So where are we going to gather? There is no more community meeting area, which is where we celebrate birthdays, christenings, and grieving and small gatherings. We had that in the previous one, the old housing commission, but in the new one there is nothing. And we like to sleep. Our children sleep at the weekend together, and that is not enough for the people. They leave themselves. It is very, very suffocating. I called it suffocating. The first time I went there to see it I was going as a community member with some people to see it without any furniture, and I said, 'This is not a home. Where are we going to put our furniture? Where?' As a part of our history, we are going to put some stuff. By itself it is like one bed – that is it. You cannot move.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I am hearing 'space'.

Katherine CEBALLOS: Yes. Space. It is a matchbox.

Ruth EYAKEM: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: My time has expired. I am going to have to be tough on everyone, including myself. Dr Heath.

Renee HEATH: Thank you. Do you know what, I am actually happy listen, so you can pass on to somebody else if you like.

Ruth EYAKEM: Most of the houses – 90 per cent – do not have dining rooms at all. There is no such dining room. A small couch, one couch and TV – that is it.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Katherine, you said in your submission:

We are the face of immigration in this nation, the face of diversity, and the face that has been ignored for years ...we have been stigmatised, stereotyped, and disregarded by the government ...

Do you think this plan is discriminatory?

Katherine CEBALLOS: A hundred per cent. When you come into our community after what you did with COVID, and you come into our community and show us a pamphlet of what you think our lives should look like – mind you, the posters did not even identify who we were. They identified with the families of 2.5 children. I think that Homes Victoria has had plenty of time to discover who we are as a people. Fitzroy, Collingwood, North Melbourne, Flemington and all the others around, they all are unique in their own special way, and they have not taken the time to get to know us, to ask us, to inquire. So I would say that, yes, we are marginalised, we are put in a jam-packed box. And you presume that this is what we want.

They came in like Willy Wonka with the golden ticket thinking that we want some efficiency. We want, what was it, air conditioning; that was what they were selling. They came – whoever was present in the first meeting that we had in the Carlton residency – they booked a tiny room, undermining the fact that the majority of the housing people would be concerned, and jammed us all in there with no sufficient translators. People were talking over each other. We could not really talk. It was jam-packed. It was just a horrible situation to be in when you have people of all age groups scared. Where there is a language barrier, there is fear. And they had no answers for us. I do really believe that they are ignorant. I do really believe that they are arrogant, because they came into our community trying to sell us candy, but to us unfortunately it is poison, because you are not taking into consideration who we are. I am a Hispanic person, but I talk on behalf of everyone behind me. Every culture behind me I speak of. It is not about racial identity, it is about who we are. Look around us. We are large families, and our families do not go away. We just incorporate, and we keep on adding. This is what each and every one of our cultures share: we include. This is why our communities have been so rich, because we include. I do not know how they want to establish inclusiveness when they are breaking it down, when they do not know the definition, when they do not even see it when it is in front of their faces. I am sorry, but I do stand by my statement.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. I appreciate the honesty. Reem, I am going to come to you because I am conscious of time. You mentioned in your opening remarks that the approach by Homes Victoria has been coercive. Have members of your community felt pressured or misled by Homes Victoria during the relocation process? If they did, can you share some examples for the committee?

Reem YEHDEGO: Yes to ‘pressured’. Examples would be sometimes they would offer a house, and before even allowing them to look at it they would say, ‘You need to accept it before we show you.’ They would not know where the suburb is, or they would say, ‘It’s somewhere around Craigieburn or Essendon.’ Some of them would be like, ‘But we haven’t seen the house. How can we accept it without even seeing it?’ Other examples are they may have rejected several offers because it just did not meet their needs, but the relocations officers would be like, ‘Well, if you don’t accept this offer, then we don’t know what will happen next.’ That is how it has been coercive, if that makes sense. It is not really in your face or quite blunt, but it is quite subtle. Even this idea of having this deadline of 30 September – because I live in 33 Alfred Street – as soon as we got the letter a lot of us were scared and anxious. And that is where that coercion comes into play as well.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Did Homes Victoria do anything to allay –

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I have to stop you, Ms Gray-Barberio. I am sorry, we need to move on.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Okay. Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Mrs Hermans.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you for coming in. I want to be brief given that we are running out of time, but I just cannot help thinking that if the houses that you are living in – and this is home for you – if they were in a really run-down, bad condition and you felt angry that you were being cheated by the government, wouldn’t that be then the outcry: ‘What are they doing? They need to give us something better.’ So what I am hearing from you, and correct me if I am wrong, is that you do not feel that way. You feel these are adequate homes, that they actually could be refurbished. You actually think they could be repurposed, and you feel that this is somewhere you could stay. Can you clarify that, because there was a little bit of ‘Well, if it was bigger, if it was this or if it was that we might consider or if we had more consultation we might consider’? I am just trying to clarify where that is going. Would you stay if it was refitted and repurposed? Or if you had better consultation and were shown where you could go and it was better, would you be prepared to move?

Katherine CEBALLOS: May I answer?

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Yes, sure.

Katherine CEBALLOS: Personally, I think they could be refurbished. I do not see the reason to demolish them. The fact is people are answering according to what is being demanded of them. No-one is saying, 'We can actually save these buildings.' 'All right. So let's work together to build something.' The way they are answering is by what they are giving to them. So yes, they can be refurbished. Personally, I am more than happy to stay in my building. It is amazing. We are happy. Yes. We have made it our home. And the fact of the matter is that if you are given ultimatums, you are going to have to answer to those ultimatums. If you are given what they consider options, you are going to have to answer according to those options. No-one has ever said, 'You can stay.' No-one has ever said, 'We can fix these buildings.' The context of it would have been totally different. You have people in public housing that want to leave – 100 per cent – for whatever reason.

Ruth EYAKEM: I want to add: it is not long that they have been renovated and been modernised and been upgraded, the buildings. It is not even 10 years – maybe five, six years still within the renovation. The ones finished are very elegant and new, with new things going, so we are so happy that they were upgraded. But after you upgrade it after not even five years or three years, you demolish it – what is that?

Katherine CEBALLOS: It does not make sense.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: So you feel that this is a waste of government resources and money?

Katherine CEBALLOS: One hundred per cent. And I am not sure whether there is a huge confusion in your communities, but in our communities we are still getting certain places fixed. So people are thinking, 'Hold on, we're fixing them, but yet they're going to destroy them.'

Ruth EYAKEM: Yes.

Katherine CEBALLOS: So why don't we just fix them and let people – I am not sure, and I am guessing you guys know way more than I do, but there is a public housing list that is disgusting to get in. It is huge – 10, 15 years to get in. That means there is a great need behind that, right? That means why are we trying to break something that is efficient, that works? Yes, it needs a little scrub; yes, it needs a little wash – but it can be used, and that is at your end, not in ours.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Batchelor.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Deputy Chair. Thank you all for coming in today. Just on this point: we have had submissions – this is our first day of hearings – that we could refurbish, and some of the proposals have proposed some pretty significant refurbishment and renovation works, not just sort of cosmetics but some pretty substantial ones. Do you think that people would need to move out during large-scale renovation work?

Katherine CEBALLOS: Well, they have before. For example, many years ago – five, 10 – where I am from got renovated, and they moved everybody to surrounding apartments, and everybody was able to have the option to come back or possibly seek other areas.

Ryan BATCHELOR: And how did that work? So this was a process 10, 15 years ago?

Katherine CEBALLOS: Possibly.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So people were moved out.

Katherine CEBALLOS: Yes. My son was two, so that would have been about 12 years ago.

Ryan BATCHELOR: And they were moved out into alternative accommodation –

Katherine CEBALLOS: Alternative accommodation.

Ryan BATCHELOR: and then had the opportunity to come back?

Katherine CEBALLOS: Had the opportunity, but –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Did they all choose to come back?

Katherine CEBALLOS: I am not sure.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Okay.

Katherine CEBALLOS: I did.

Ryan BATCHELOR: From your observation, as someone not directly affected but as someone who observed this process, how did that go?

Katherine CEBALLOS: My experience was quite pleasant because I know how to speak, and I know how to stand up for myself, and I know how to demand, and I know what my rights are. My community unfortunately do not have the same benefits that I do. Okay. So this makes a big difference. When there is no education from your end or their end, and they are demanding, as she said, that you have got to do this, you have got to sign this, you have got to – there is a push. People are going to fight it, and they are going to go.

I would like to educate you guys that people are being asked to leave central, the centre of Melbourne, to go to Woop Woop, to go to Werribee, to go to places (1) where there are already issues: traffic issues, transport issues, education issues, medical issues. I am in Carlton. I am a 15-minute walk from the city, a 15-minute walk from the hospital, a 15-minute walk from wherever. That is my life, thank Jesus, right? That is just my privilege. But there are people that come from there who are not being educated that when they move to these new places not only will they pay what they never paid before, which will be for the water or different amenities, but they will also have to face transport issues and all the other things they come across. Many of us do not drive because we have lived in central places. So when there is a lack of education, there is going to be an issue, and Homes Victoria are not educating people precisely.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So what could they do better so that we can make some recommendations about the way that Homes Victoria could improve their processes? What do you think? Reem, you are going through this at the moment at 33 Alfred. What could Homes Victoria do better in the future to improve some of the things that you think have been deficient in the current process?

Reem YEHDEGO: I think it is common sense: talk to us like we are human beings, provide the translations of the materials. I mean, just as recently when they decided to start testing in 33 Alfred Street, mine was one of the floors that they announced that they were going to test on. That was done without our consultation, and we were kind of scared. We were like, 'Well, what about if we're exposed to silica or exposed to asbestos as a result of the testing?' Those were real fears we all had. I have family members who are immunocompromised. I have got neighbours who are getting cancer treatment, kids who have asthma, and that was a real fear we had. But that was done without our consultation. It was not until we had to sort of advocate and stand up for ourselves that they stepped back, and it is exhausting having to do that consistently.

Ryan BATCHELOR: So you would have an issue if they were doing floor-by-floor renovations too, I suspect.

Reem YEHDEGO: Yes. No – sorry, repeat that?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Just if they were doing the renovation – like, there have been proposals to do floor-by-floor renovations.

Reem YEHDEGO: No, not really the renovations themselves. We have had renovations before, but they were coming in with hazmat suits and high-vis. That terrified us. That is that is why.

Katherine CEBALLOS: Without any education.

Reem YEHDEGO: Without really consulting with us.

Ryan BATCHELOR: And what would have helped?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Batchelor, your time is up. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Regarding the plans that the government has for the towers – just to the whole panel – who do you think stands to benefit the most from those plans? Is it the residents?

Katherine CEBALLOS: The government, not the residents.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Sorry, can you just repeat that? I could not hear.

Katherine CEBALLOS: Sorry, did you just say, ‘Who’s going to benefit from it?’

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, the most. Who is going to benefit the most?

Katherine CEBALLOS: None of us. No residents.

Reem YEHDEGO: Property developers.

Katherine CEBALLOS: Property developers, the government itself, but not the people.

Reem YEHDEGO: And really privileged people.

Katherine CEBALLOS: A hundred per cent. I am sorry, from our perspective, you are trying to remodel Melbourne – kick out the minorities and remodel it to your convenience, to maintain. This is what it looks like, and I know I am not the only one seeing it. Do you understand? And this is not what Victoria or Australia is about. We are full of inclusiveness, and we are migrants. So is this of benefit for any of us? No.

Reem YEHDEGO: And these places, like growing up – I grew up in North Melbourne and Flemington – were not seen as safe. We made it safe.

Katherine CEBALLOS: A hundred per cent.

Reem YEHDEGO: And now we are becoming gentrified, so the government and property developers are seeing it as a cash grab, like, these are really profitable lands. But these are our homes, and I cannot imagine myself living elsewhere.

Katherine CEBALLOS: A hundred per cent. Why would we be stripped of what we have worked so hard for?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So when government speaks to these plans that it is in residents interests, how does that make you feel?

Katherine CEBALLOS: It is a lie. It makes me just realise that we have never been included. I cannot speak for them, but for me it is just we have never been included. You know, they speak for us, they do actions on our behalf, without ever, ever once including us. Do you understand? Our buildings are from the 60s. We are in 2025, and we are still not being included. I do not comprehend that. You know, the closing because of COVID in Flemington – I mean, if nobody had got angry about that and saw the injustice that was behind it, what the government did to save the majority, what was that about? What happens to us?

Being marginalised as a minority in this country is extremely hard to shake off, and it unfortunately is attached to being from a different race. And the majority, when I look at this panel, we are all multicultural, so I am sure every one of you had to really shake it off and work extremely hard to fight for your position. But when you are from public housing, you do not get that benefit as easily, and we are raising our children not to have that mentality. Our children do not have that mentality that they are poor or they are inferior or they are a minority. They just live. And being blessed in the place that we actually are in the centre of Melbourne, it makes us feel better. It makes us feel included, even though I tell you that the government does not include us. That is from my perspective. I am not sure about you, but that is from my perspective.

Ruth EYAKEM: Yes. When they knocked it down because it is old or it is not good, it is not safe, they did not give us consultation on what kind of building we need to move. They just already built something and then just ‘Go there’. And then it for worse, it is not for better. And there was no consultation, as my sister said. They did not take our opinion. And our children used to play around very wide space. That space is no more. A lot of things are taken, not given. And the first thing is it is not public housing. It is a lot of bombing, shocking news.

When you move someone from his own house, at least give an offer of what they want, what is better, not the worst.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Thank you, Mr Puglielli. I note that Mr Tarlamis has waived his speaking slot, which brings us right to a close.

Thank you very much to our panel for your time today. We appreciate your input very much.

Witnesses withdrew.