

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

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

Rachel Payne

Lee Tarlamis

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Melina Bath

John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

WITNESS

Ka Wah (*via Cantonese interpreter*).

The DEPUTY CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's public hearing for 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, I will introduce myself. I am Michael Galea. I am the Deputy Chair.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I am Ann-Marie Hermans. I am a Member for the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

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

Lee TARLAMIS: Lee Tarlamis, Member for the 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: I am now going to outline some things at the get-go before we get started. 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 during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you are to 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 please state your name and any organisation that you are representing.

Ka WAH (via interpreter): My name is Ka Wah, and I am not representing any organisation.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. And I will acknowledge that we have you here as translator today as well. Thank you for joining us. I would now like to invite you to share some short introductory remarks with the committee.

Ka WAH (via interpreter): I have been living in the public housing of Flemington for more than 20 years, and I know a lot of residents here very well. I live here quite happily. I also have a good job. The people here are like a family for me already. We have been here for a very long time, and we have very good friendship between us. But now suddenly the tower is going to be torn down and all the people will be relocated, which would leave many of us confused and not knowing what to do.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Are there any further remarks you would like to make?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): I want to know whether there is such a law in Australia about how land is used in different ways. In Hong Kong land might be used for farming, for public housing or private development. There are clear laws about how to use the land for different purposes. I am not sure whether Australia has the same, or a similar set of rules. If there is, how come the government is able to tear down public housing towers and give it to private developers for use? Can they just use the land in whatever way they want? The government has the obligation to protect people, especially those unprivileged ones. Not everyone is wealthy. Some people are poor and not earning much. The government has the duty to protect them, instead of pushing them to private developers. In doing that, the private developers would have more money, which is disadvantageous for those who are poor already. If this happens, the wealth gap between the two different classes would become bigger. Now the government is going to spend \$20 million to tear down an existing public housing tower, which is still in very good condition, and give it to private developers. In the future there

will be no public housing, and people in Victoria will not be able to live in public housing buildings. In that case, how can we survive?

I have a story to share with you. In our building there is a family of three. The husband had a good job, and they bought their own property, but one day the husband had an accident at work and became disabled. They were not able to continue repaying the mortgage, so they had to apply for public housing. The wife was not able to work because she had to look after the husband. In this case, in the future if there is no public housing, people like them will not be able to survive.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Are there any other opening remarks?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): If the government spent \$20 million to maintain an existing public housing building, there would be a lot of surplus left. Then the government can build more public housing towers with the money that is left for more people in need to apply for. At the moment there are at least 50,000 families waiting for public housing. If the government do not want to protect their people, then they can build public housing and sell the properties to the existing public housing residents or those from a poor class. In Hong Kong they have a very good public housing system, and I do not know why Australia do not have the same.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you very much. We are now going to go to some questions from members of the committee. We will have a few minutes each to ask, and I will start. Thank you for sharing your experiences there, Ka. Can I ask you: what do you like about where you live, about your neighbourhood, about your house, and what would you like to see changed or better, whether it is about the building, whether it is about the community or anything else?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): I have lived in the Flemington public housing for over 20 years. I have a very good routine. I have got used to the life here. I live quite happily and everything is great. I know the people in Flemington quite well and we are good friends. If I have been here for over 20 years, do I think, is it good or bad here? Of course I am happy with it, and that is why I stay here for so long.

Of course if a person comes from another suburb, they might think that there are bad people here in Flemington, but actually those people are friendly and they are helpful towards each other. We have a very close bond and friendship among us.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. I am now going to pass to Mrs Hermans.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you, Kah, and thank you for your submission. If the government wants to demolish these towers, why do you think that is? What is wrong with the buildings, in your opinion?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): What I am going to say might make some people unhappy, because I believe all the people here think that the government is collaborating in a bad way with businessmen.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Okay. So, he does not actually think that there is anything particularly wrong with the building that he lives in?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): I think the building that I live in is in great condition. It is very good. It is much better than the public housing buildings in other Asian countries.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: If there were three things that he was to miss about living in his Flemington housing tower or that he actually really enjoys, what are the three things that he enjoys most about this accommodation in this particular residence?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): First is the transport. Here we have transport such as trams and buses and we have a fabulous public transport network. Second is the proximity to hospital, because a lot of elderly people in public housing need to go to hospital. Sometimes they have urgent needs that they have to go to the hospital for, and therefore it is quite convenient for the elderly people here. And third, shopping is convenient as well.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs Hermans. We are going to move to Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Deputy Chair. Thank you, Mr Wah, for being here. My first question to you is: in your submission you mentioned you have friends who have been pressured to move into community housing. Can you tell the committee how they were pressured?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): Here there are a lot of elderly people like me who do not speak good English. All they know is the building is going to be demolished and if they do not move right now, in the future they will have to live in a remote place. That is why a lot of elderly people moved immediately.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. In your submission, Mr Wah, you also say:

From the very beginning, Homes Victoria have not provided us with enough information about what was happening and so it has been very hard for us to trust them.

You also go on to say:

It feels like a lot of information was deliberately kept hidden to keep us in the dark.

Can you tell the committee, can you give us an example of what deliberate information you think is being hidden from you and the community?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): Let me give you an example. A lot of the residents of public housing did not know that they had the option of returning to the public housing. A lot of people who have moved to community housing thought that where they are staying right now is public housing, but they did not know that it is actually community housing. In the community housing building, the cost is a lot higher and the facility is a lot poorer.

I have an elderly friend who had a fall when showering. They wanted to call for help but were not able to because every door needs a fob to access, and also to use the lift they need the fob as well, which was not very friendly for paramedics. Therefore my friend had to carry the fob with them wherever they go. This is not very friendly for elderly people, because they do not know how to use the door or open the door from inside.

Furthermore, there is a huge issue with the fire escape in the community housing building. It is problematic. Although I am not an expert, by looking at it I know that it has issues. If there is a fire, a lot of people will not be able to escape.

Also, the main entrance of each house does not have a hole that people can look through to see who is outside. There is no security gate at the door either. I have a friend who had someone knocking at the door, and when they opened the door it was a stranger, which is quite dangerous. What if that stranger is a bad person?

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Mr Batchelor.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thank you for coming in. Obviously the process so far has left you feeling stressed and anxious and upset, from the submission that you wrote to us. What practical things do you think that Homes Victoria could do to improve this for either yourself or for other people who face similar situations like you in the future?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): I hope the Victorian government can stop wasting money and keep all the existing public housing buildings for people in need.

Ryan BATCHELOR: At some point in the future, whether it is a redevelopment or even just a renovation, there may be times that residents need to be relocated. How could we improve the relocation process for residents in the future?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): That is easy. Like the renovation done last time, it was done one level after another. So if they renovate one level at a time, then only one level of residents needs to be relocated. And when it comes to almost the end, residents in the high levels can move to the lower level to make sure that they can continue staying in the same place. If the government is going to demolish public housing buildings, they need to rebuild public housing buildings instead of giving the land to private developers.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thank you. That is my time.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Deputy Chair. Good afternoon. Can I ask: in your submission you referred to an alternative plan to retrofit or renovate the public housing towers. Can you explain why you feel that this is a better option?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): Of course renovation is a better option. It can be done like last time, one level at a time, so that residents do not need to move far away, which can be inconvenient for their living and work.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask: have Homes Victoria officers made any relocation offers to you?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): I have been forced to move already. I started to fall sick one week after the move – until now. A lot of elderly people have felt sick since the move, and I heard that one of them even died.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. As you described it, when you were forced to move, in your words, were you confident that you were shown all of the information that you needed to see to make an informed decision?

Ka WAH (via interpreter): I had assistance from a legal team in North Melbourne. They explained it to me. I was not very happy to move, but I heard that the government said everyone had to move by September, otherwise we would have to move at our own cost.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The DEPUTY CHAIR: Thank you. That brings this session to a close. Can I thank you very much for coming in today and sharing your experience with us.

Witness withdrew.