

# **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**

South Yarra – Tuesday 1 July 2025

#### **MEMBERS**

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

Rachel Payne

Lee Tarlamis

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

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John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

**WITNESSES**

Heaven Waters, and

John Lowndes.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the redevelopment of public housing towers. I am Joe McCracken and I am Chair of the inquiry, and we are going to go through and introduce the rest of our members on the committee.

**Michael GALEA:** Good afternoon. Michael Galea, Member for South-East Metro.

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

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metro Region.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Aiv Puglielli, Member for North-Eastern Metro.

**Renee HEATH:** Renee Heath, Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

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

**The 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 during the hearing is protected by law. 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 that same 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, if there are any minor changes that need to be made, and the transcripts will ultimately be made public and put on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, are you guys able to state your full name and any organisations, if any, that you are appearing on behalf of?

**Heaven WATERS:** My name is Heaven Waters.

**John LOWNDES:** John Lowndes, President, Park Towers Tenant Management, the tenants organisation. We have been sidelined of course, but we still exist. We are still incorporated. We have still got a voice – just.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for that. Now, we have probably got about 5 minutes to do our opening, so I think I will hand it over to Heaven, if that is all right. Over to you.

**Heaven WATERS:** Thank you. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge First Nations people, the Wurundjeri and Bunurong of the Kulin nation, and pay my respects to the elders past, present and emerging.

I would also like to point out that here we are talking about displacing people. I live here, but I have done the calculations. I have asked around what the calculations are of how many people are going to be displaced. My calculations are 19,000. I would like to ask: what if 19,000 politicians were asked to leave their homes? What if the whole of Southbank were asked to leave their homes? I believe that these buildings first – the idea of them – came about in the 1920s, and that is coming close to a hundred years of community. It is multigenerational. There are so many different cultures. Many of these people are voiceless, powerless, and they struggle day to day to survive.

Prior to coming here I lived in Lilydale. When I was in Lilydale I was in and out of psych wards and not seeing my nine children, and since I have been living here I have been seeing my nine children. I would know at least 200 people here where I can say, 'Hello, how are you? How's your day?' My mental health has improved out of sight. I am not on medication anymore. I had never been happier until I heard that they were going to crash the buildings down, which is daily anxiety. Every meeting we come to they give us no indication of where we

are going or what is happening, and it is frightening because I had finally found a place where I felt safe. The community around me – I just love it. I just cannot believe how blessed we are to be living here. The cultural aspects, the ocean, the river, the amenities – I could make a list that would take me 5 minutes to go through of all the things that are important to me living here, for which I could not tick any of those boxes in Lilydale. If I get shifted out for another five years, I do not know how that is going to go for me personally and all the residents that I have talked to. Everybody has the same feelings as I do, and a lot of them cannot speak very good English and they do not feel like they have any say. They do not know where to go. They do not know what to do. So a lot of the meetings become a bit of a shambles because they are just confused.

**The CHAIR:** We can explore some of these things through questions as well, if that might help.

**Heaven WATERS:** I have written a couple of things down. The biggest thing for me is the value of the community, and the business cases miss out on that. They do not take that into account at all. We are more than buildings. We are a community. You cannot quantify the relationships, the safety nets, the informal supports, the access to services and the cultural precincts. This is a place of belonging. It is more than bricks and land. There is a large Aboriginal community here too and there is great trust between residents and workers and the local organisations, and dismantling our community erodes this invisible infrastructure. I do not know how you are going to rebuild it. We have just been given lip-service so far. The measure of trauma that is forced on relocation is not taken into account. Moving people out, especially those from migrant, refugee and First Nations backgrounds, can result in disconnection, anxiety and loss of cultural and social identity. And there is a cost to breaking us apart. Displacement leads to isolation, mental health strain, disruption to employment, education and care networks – costs that will surface later in health, justice and welfare systems.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I will start off with questions, and then we will go through the committee members as well. I have only got about 3 minutes left, so you will have to excuse me if I am trying to move questions along a bit. Firstly, thank you both for appearing today. John, I will start off with you. You talked in your submission about your want to preserve the towers as they exist at the moment, perhaps with the need for refurbishment. How have you come to that view?

**John LOWNDES:** Because all the evidence is public that the towers are in perfect condition structurally.

**The CHAIR:** We have heard evidence in this inquiry that the towers are not in perfect condition.

**John LOWNDES:** What, from the department?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, but I am more interested in how you come to the view that they are in condition – at least fit for purpose?

**John LOWNDES:** I have been living in Park Towers for 20 years. The only things that are wrong with the apartment are because of the department's ineptitude.

**The CHAIR:** Can you give me an example?

**John LOWNDES:** Well, they did an upgrade and they took out all the copper piping and waste pipes except for the downpipes and then fused PVC to one copper downpipe through the building. That failed and turned into black mould. I mean, they replaced easy-to-clean surfaces with difficult-to-clean surfaces. When I first moved there, there was one chap that had a mop and a bucket and a broom and kept the entire building tidy, and everyone respected him. They did not throw their rubbish around. Then we all of a sudden had to have an \$84 million contract across our building and other high-rise buildings, and we have six cleaners and they cannot keep up, because people throw their rubbish everywhere because of the sorts of people that have been moved into the building, who quite frankly just do not care. There are no consequences if they break every rule in the book – and vandalism, of course.

**The CHAIR:** And graffiti and those sorts of things?

**John LOWNDES:** Yes, but if you put people into high-rise, high-density housing who should not be there, who should be in specific housing –

**The CHAIR:** That suits their needs.

**John LOWNDES:** That suits, exactly.

**The CHAIR:** I have another question, and I am sorry to interrupt but my time is running very short. It is about consultation and engagement. We have had a number of different witnesses appear that have said that it is, for want of a better word, lacking. Is that your experience? Heaven, I will get you to respond to that one.

**Heaven WATERS:** Totally – totally lacking. I also want to ask Anthony Albanese, because he is from public housing: if he was relocated from his community, would he have ended up having the opportunity of being the Prime Minister? I do not think so. Why isn't he standing up for us too?

**John LOWNDES:** Well, once people climb the ladder, they tend to kick it away behind themselves.

**The CHAIR:** In terms of the engagement, can you describe the engagement to me and what has been your experience?

**Heaven WATERS:** None. They just have these meetings here and they just do not answer any of our questions or our concerns.

**John LOWNDES:** We have not been engaged with at all.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. All right.

**Heaven WATERS:** And I have been to 10 meetings.

**The CHAIR:** My time has expired.

**John LOWNDES:** Flyers through the postbox or a poster on the wall.

**The CHAIR:** My time is up, I am afraid, so I am going to hand it to Mr Batchelor.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you both for coming in. I really appreciate the contributions you have made and the honesty with which you have come and told us about your experiences and what these homes mean to you. Thinking about what makes your community a place you love to live, how do we ensure that as more and different housing gets built, we maintain those elements? What do you think we need to do? What do you think government needs to do to keep those elements?

**Heaven WATERS:** I am sorry, but I cannot help but mention the fact that there are 40,000 other people on the waiting list. If they want to do something, they can do something else.

**The CHAIR:** Sixty thousand now.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Okay, so –

**Heaven WATERS:** Leave us. Let us stay here.

**John LOWNDES:** Look, there should be a complete freeze. These tower blocks just need to be upgraded. I can tell you how; I have seen all the studies – secret studies I have been a part of through RMIT, because the department did not want them to happen because they are too positive about the buildings.

**Ryan BATCHELOR:** Right. What were those studies?

**John LOWNDES:** The studies about the thermal dynamics of the building being incredibly high, which means easy to heat and easy to cool if we had split systems, and the department has always lied to us and said, 'Oh, you can't have split systems, it's impossible.' Well, I have had air conditioning engineers and building engineers walk through the building over 10 years ago and they said, 'Oh, yes, we could place them there, there, there and there.' They have just got to be accessible. Because our apertures are low, our external windows are smaller than new high-rises, and we are also solid concrete – every internal wall is solid steel and concrete. We are not going anywhere without – they say deconstruct; I just think they would have to level us with dynamite. I mean, these buildings are full of concrete. Not to even think about the green factor in that – you have got another 50, 80 years of life in these buildings. The ceilings are higher, the rooms are bigger and the hallways are wider. They have internal, separate laundries, separate loos, separate bathrooms and decent-

sized – well, the second bedrooms are often very small; I think they were initially designed for children. But I have been in some of the new ones, and they are minuscule. They are whacked together. Even someone was held at gunpoint and carjacked by another tenant in the High Street block only a month ago – at gunpoint. I do not know; you ring up the *Age* and they say, ‘Oh, do you have any CCTV?’ Like I would have any CCTV.

**Heaven WATERS:** That is a point. I have got a little doorbell ringer with a video, and that I think would be a really good idea – for residents to have those. I feel so much safer, because I can just record anybody that goes past.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to keep our questioning going and pass to Ms Gray-Barberio.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Heaven and John, for being here. Heaven, I want to start with you. From your perspective, what should the Victorian government be doing instead of demolishing the public housing estates?

**Heaven WATERS:** Consulting, initially.

**John LOWNDES:** May I? Building more public housing – that is what they should be doing, but they are actually reducing it down to 10 per cent with what they are doing now. They are privatising public housing.

**Heaven WATERS:** My feeling is always – the first thing I think of is – only the people, the residents, care about it. Nobody else really cares.

**John LOWNDES:** It is our home.

**Heaven WATERS:** In terms of the vote, people probably do not like the eyesore of the old buildings, or the reputation.

**John LOWNDES:** That is true. I mean, where I live people do not want our children going to school with their children, or they do not want our children – they refuse our children joining their Auskick. So we created our own Auskick, free.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** I will just bring you back to the architects –

**Heaven WATERS:** We do not have that in this building.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** The architects have proposed a plan to refurbish the building to add balconies and make them more accessible, with heating and cooling and energy efficiency. Would you prefer to move out of your home temporarily to refurbish your home, rather than spend seven years or more as per the proposed demolition plans?

**John LOWNDES:** We do not have to move out of the buildings. They did a refurb on Park Towers, but they screwed it up. What they did was basically just let a couple of floors become free and they moved people around within the building. It would go through a floor; they would do that floor, move on to the next floor and then move people back into whatever flats.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** And, Heaven, your thoughts on that?

**Heaven WATERS:** Seven years is a long time.

**John LOWNDES:** No. Excuse me if I – this is just for refurbishment, so it might be six to seven months. You would move to another flat in the building temporarily.

**Heaven WATERS:** I do not even think it needs to be refurbished.

**John LOWNDES:** Well, look, I agree with you. They could wait for a long, long time because we are so desperate for new public housing. But really, we just need –

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Sorry to interject. I have actually got 30 seconds to ask my final questions. I am sorry. Do you think the government’s plans for demolition actually benefit public housing residents? Who do you think will benefit the most from the government’s plan to demolish?

**John LOWNDES:** Developers. They are going to make a motza. They are rolling their hands with glee.

**Heaven WATERS:** And they are already telling us that it is going to be 35 per cent of income, and then a whole range of other costs on top of that.

**John LOWNDES:** And non-profits managing social housing, which sort of smacks of social welfare – it is bad enough we have gone from residents to tenants to now renters. It sort of depersonalises you, and as far as people like Better Health Network South Melbourne – I can only speak of South Melbourne – they are terrible. They are just a mouthpiece for the government.

**Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO:** Are you talking about Better Health Network that we just finished speaking to?

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, we are going to have to move on.

**John LOWNDES:** I am talking about the South Melbourne office. As an organisation we were threatened not to go to the press, not to speak to the police, to do this or do that, or our funding would be cut and we would be evicted. We said, 'Well, we can't agree to that' and we were evicted. And Star Health – 'Oh, Star Health is going to do this now.' They have just hired tenants, all with criminal backgrounds, all white, for \$25 an hour to be the tenants advisory group, who have no power, who have no say. They were just ticking the box for the department, so they are just an extension of the department.

**The CHAIR:** I am going to have to move on to the next questioner, which is Dr Heath.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you so much for coming in today. John, you said that there were studies from RMIT that the government does not want people to see. Can you provide us with these studies?

**John LOWNDES:** Sure.

**Renee HEATH:** Okay. Thank you. When will you – how accessible are they?

**John LOWNDES:** I could email them to you.

**Renee HEATH:** Awesome. That would be great. Thank you.

**John LOWNDES:** I mean, the Greens have them.

**Renee HEATH:** Oh, okay. Good.

**John LOWNDES:** I have emailed them to other people, but they probably went through the shredder.

**Renee HEATH:** Oh, well. If you send them to the committee, they will come to the committee.

**John LOWNDES:** Yes. the Greens have them.

**Renee HEATH:** Also, Heaven, what have your relocation options been?

**Heaven WATERS:** None.

**Renee HEATH:** None. Can you explain what –

**Heaven WATERS:** Only that they will be a lot smaller.

**Renee HEATH:** The unit will be a lot smaller?

**Heaven WATERS:** Yes, if there are options. We already have to know that they will be smaller. They do not know where we are going, just that.

**Renee HEATH:** You mentioned that you do not even think your place needs refurbishing, so you are happy with it how it is. Would you say that it is fit for purpose?

**Heaven WATERS:** I am so happy.

**Renee HEATH:** You are really happy, yes. And what was it about this that you said – you were living in quite a bad situation personally?

**Heaven WATERS:** Suburbs can be really isolating.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes, so what has been the difference coming here?

**Heaven WATERS:** The community.

**Renee HEATH:** The community, yes.

**Heaven WATERS:** And everything. It is just ideal.

**Renee HEATH:** Yes. Are you concerned with how this has been handled and what might happen? Are you concerned about going back?

**Heaven WATERS:** Every day I wake up stressed about it.

**Renee HEATH:** And you have not had any options for relocation, or –

**Heaven WATERS:** No.

**Renee HEATH:** Okay. Thank you.

**John LOWNDES:** But you would never be relocated back. It is a third social, supposedly a third low-income rent, which will still be high, and market rent. Well, that is only to please private landlords, because if they leave these towers, build the amount of new public housing we really need –

**Renee HEATH:** I think we need new public housing, though.

**John LOWNDES:** We do, on top of this.

**Renee HEATH:** On top of this, yes.

**John LOWNDES:** We do. We need this plus this.

**Renee HEATH:** Thank you. That is my time, just about.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much. Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you very much, both of you. Can I just check at the outset: are either of you in the current tranches of towers that are currently going through the relocation process, or are the towers you are living in going in the future?

**John LOWNDES:** No, we are in limbo. A lot of the elderly people in the building and even me – like you, I suffer from clinical depression and anxiety. I take medication every day – I take about the max I can – and I exercise et cetera. I am probably like 52 per cent of the population in that respect. But I love my home, and I have it got to a stage where I have put my own kitchen in and my own bathroom in, because the department fought me on it but I needed the ergonomics for my health problems. People come into my home, and they say, ‘Gosh, you could be anywhere. This is fantastic.’ The other flats are done sort of circa 1985, as you would expect the department to do, but people are happy with them. It is the plumbing and the wiring and things like the flooring that need to be dealt with.

**Michael GALEA:** I know there is some difference about what we want in terms of a renovation or an upgrade or not, but are you saying that you would be happy for wholesale works to be undertaken to the building whilst residents are still living in it?

**John LOWNDES:** Well, that is what they have done before.

**Michael GALEA:** And that is what you would want to see, having to move into different apartments, different floors to permit works in the same building?

**John LOWNDES:** But the thing is now I think we can go along for another 20 years as they are. The windows – if you wanted to make them more efficient, there are ways. I have forgotten the term, you know, the PVC with the glass and you have got the split aluminium –

**Renee HEATH:** Double-glazed?

**John LOWNDES:** Sorry?

**Renee HEATH:** Double-glazed – no?

**John LOWNDES:** It is not really double-glazed in the old-fashioned sense. It is a new version, a new Euro version. But with the right window treatments you are really fine. Certainly the department – they stopped us. We had a non-profit that was willing to spend a million dollars on putting in photovoltaic cells and computer systems reading into our smart meters, and they said, ‘Oh no, because we do that.’ Well, that was in 2017, and they have never done it. They have committees and they have lunch once a month, but they never do anything. You would think the state of Victoria would cover all public housing roofs with photovoltaic cells, but no. There is middle-class welfare when it comes to private homes.

**Michael GALEA:** You said 20 years, and I realise that is not a specific point you were saying, but this program is scheduled to go over the next 25 years or so. At what point would you say that these towers would need to be rebuilt?

**John LOWNDES:** I can speak for Park Towers, and I could say that we certainly need, because they put porous tiles on the floor, the sealed concrete we had before, which was really easy to clean – things like that. We are also fed up with the level of criminal activity in the building. The police attend at least four times in every 24-hour period. We have shootings, stabbings, people going floor-to-floor shopping with the different drug addicts. Really lovely families have moved out into housing they cannot afford – even 40 k out – taking the kids away from good schools and amenities and jobs and things. You have to build specific housing for those people, and it has to be really resilient because they smash it up and then the department put them in a hotel and they renovate it. All the drug addicts that are legal tenants in the building, I know for a fact, are also on the NDIS, but they can refuse any help they like. So they do not have to take their medication. I would be all for it if they wanted to go to rehab, but they do not. They go into prison. The department hold their flat rent free, even though they have attacked the woman next door to them – and they do it up while they are there. Then they come out of prison, back into the flat, and it all happens again. I think that really has to stop.

**The CHAIR:** We need to go to our next questioner, which is Mr Puglielli. Over to you.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you. Good afternoon. I just want to get something really clarified here from evidence we have heard so far. Is it the case that the government should be doing this knockdown and redevelopment plan better, with more consultation, more sensitively and extra support, or is there actually just a fundamental problem with what the government is doing here?

**John LOWNDES:** Absolutely fundamental problems. Someone had a thought bubble at some stage and thought, ‘Well, we’re sick of this. We don’t want to handle it anymore. It’s too much trouble. We don’t want to build specific housing for people with drug problems or serious mental health problems.’ We have lots of people with mental health problems, so they take the medication and they are great neighbours. But there are some who will run at you with a machete, and we saw what happened with that person, who is not even a legal tenant. And his mate drove into a police officer and pinned him against a wall. That happens all the time. I think we have to get rid of the department. The department must go. Then we break it up into public housing Victoria or whatever in metro south, which is handled by the South Melbourne office, and we just get rid of engineering. We get rid of asset management. They could not manage their way out of a wet paper bag. These people have wasted millions and millions of dollars and have put people’s lives and health at risk. They are responsible for the death of people, and they just get keep getting away with it. There are no consequences for these people.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Can I ask Heaven the same question: is the plan fundamentally flawed?

**Heaven WATERS:** I can be quite scattered in my brain. What I am thinking about is that Melbourne was voted as the best city in the world for a number of years. Isn’t it funny that since the towers were announced to be gone, the 44 towers, we are no longer the top. Are they thinking too about what is going to happen with all

these people and why they are displacing 19,000 people over we do not even know what period of time – you were just mentioning 20 years. I do not know. But next door here, they are supposed to be out by the end of the year. It is creating a lot of anxiety. I am more worried about the anxiety of the community than I am the crime. I do not feel unsafe. I have been brought up in a church that looks after people like that, so they are not threatening to me. They are human beings that have their own struggles. It is not us against them. I am trying to stay positive, because I do not want to have to go back on medication. But fundamentally I do know why they need to. Who gave them the idea? Who gave them the right to have the idea? It is like a dictatorship.

**John LOWNDES:** Well, it is authoritarian, and we have got an authoritarian government.

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, Aiv. We are at the end of questions.

**Aiv PUGLIELLI:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** We are out of time for questions. I do apologise for that. Thanks so much for your time.

**Heaven WATERS:** Thanks so much for having me.

**The CHAIR:** You will get a proof version of the transcript in case there are any minor corrections that you need to make. Thanks very much for your time today. We appreciate it so much. That closes this session.

**Witnesses withdrew.**