

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

Richmond – Tuesday 22 July 2025

MEMBERS

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

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David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Cr Stephen Jolly, Mayor, and

Cr Meca Ho, Yarra City Council.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings of the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers. I declare the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee open. Please ensure that all mobile phones are switched off or switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would first like to acknowledge the original custodians of the land, the Aboriginal peoples, and pay respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I will now go through and introduce the committee. I am Joe McCracken. I am the Chair.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Good morning. My name is Anasina Gray-Barberio, MP for Northern Metro.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Hi. Aiv Puglielli, North-Eastern Metropolitan.

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

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Member for Eastern Victoria.

John BERGER: John Berger, Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: And I believe we also have Ann-Marie Hermans, who is almost here; she is not quite here yet.

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 do provide today in 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 are not protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee is considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof transcript at the end, so you have the opportunity to fix minor errors and those sorts of things. The transcripts will ultimately be made public and put on the committee's website. Just for the Hansard record, can you please state your name and any organisation that you are appearing on behalf of.

Stephen JOLLY: Yes. My name is Stephen Jolly. I am the Mayor of the City of Yarra.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. I know we might have Cr Meca here.

Stephen JOLLY: He thought it was 10:30, so he will be here soon.

The CHAIR: Yes. Okay. That is fine. When he comes in, we will just deal with that as it happens. Now, I know you put in a submission, and I understand you would like to make a verbal submission, then we will go to questions. So I will hand over to you, Cr Jolly, and then we will go from there. Welcome.

Stephen JOLLY: Thank you and welcome, all of you, to the City of Yarra. We have got the highest percentage of public housing, within the City of Yarra, of any municipality in the state of Victoria, and you are sitting here in the midst of the North Richmond public housing estate, which is the biggest public housing estate in Victoria. According to Richard Wynne when he was the MP for this area, he told me that it was also the biggest public housing estate in the Southern Hemisphere, that even no estate in South America is bigger than this particular public housing estate. It is not just for the public housing tenants of the residents of Yarra, a question for the people who live in the three massive public housing estates that we have here – at North Richmond, the biggest; Fitzroy, in my ward; Collingwood – and also the whole plethora of public housing walk-ups, from the richest areas of Yarra up in North Fitzroy and North Carlton, right down to here in

Richmond, but also the open space that surrounds the public housing estate. Especially in my ward in Fitzroy you will see thousands of people or hundreds of people every day, not just public housing tenants but people who are not public housing tenants, accessing the green open space around the towers.

One of the advantages of being a public housing tenant in Yarra is that we are blessed with many services – health services, mental health services, every type of service – in Gertrude Street, in Brunswick Street. We are literally sitting in the largest community health centre probably in Victoria, if not Australia, here at North Richmond, and that is one of the great advantages of being a public housing tenant in this area. God knows there are problems on the public housing estate. There is literally not a day that goes by that I am not meeting, either individually or collectively, with public housing tenants in Collingwood, Fitzroy or North Richmond about a million and one day-to-day issues – the lifts are not working, the cooker is not working, there is somebody sleeping in the collective laundry facilities. I am sure you have heard these stories again and again and again, but our position as a council is that bad public housing needs to be replaced by good public housing.

We need to refurbish wherever possible rather than demolish – retrofitting the towers for earthquake, for disability access. By the way, as somebody who works, as I do, in the commercial construction industry, there is probably not a single high-rise tower in Melbourne that I have not worked on in the last 26 years, and 80 per cent of private high-rise apartments in Melbourne, in Victoria, do not reach the minimum standards that are being used against the public housing towers right now as a reason for demolishing. What we do is we retrofit. We fix them. If there is a problem, we fix it. Demolishing has always got to be the last option. According to OFFICE – and it was in the *Age*, and many other people have said it – it will be \$1.5 billion cheaper to retrofit than to demolish, plus it keeps the open space, which is exactly what Richard Wynne, when he was the housing minister and MP 15 years ago, did at Fitzroy, at Atherton Gardens estate. When they said there were problems there, they did a massive program of retrofitting, of refurbishing on that estate, and that is one of the reasons that structurally it is probably the best estate in the state of Victoria. But of course that actually misses the point, because it is not about protecting green open space or the best interests of public housing tenants. In my view this attempt by the government, this announcement that they want to knock down all the towers, is about giving prime inner-city real estate land to developers.

Instead of kids playing soccer around Atherton Gardens, around North Richmond estate or around the Collingwood estate, we will have high-rise for rich people in penthouses overlooking, in Fitzroy, Gertrude Street with a beautiful city view. Can you imagine how expensive it will be and how much the state government can make from selling that land? The open space will be built with new apartments, and we have seen an example of that on the Carlton estate, where private was put on a public housing estate in Carlton – outside of the City of Yarra, it is the City of Melbourne – and what we have seen now is that the green open space is largely gone. There are plenty of other places in the City of Yarra for us to reach our target. We were recently told by the planning minister of Victoria and by the Premier that we have got to build 44,000 new homes in the City of Yarra. We actually surprised them by saying we welcome that. There are plenty of places to build 44,000 new homes in the City of Yarra – for example, the old police facility on Wellington Street; for example, by rezoning ex-industrial sites, of which we have got many around the City of Yarra; and also in our activity centres, where with a little bit of a setback you can build apartments. It is like we are doing in Johnston Street right now and what we would especially like them to do in Victoria Street.

The other issue is that by knocking down these towers, the public housing tenants that return – if they ever actually return – will be in social housing, not public housing, and there is no legally binding deal guaranteeing that every resident has the right to return to a home with the same number of bedrooms, which is a vitally important thing because many of the families that live on all the public housing estates in Victoria are massive. They are large families, like where I came from back in Ireland there were massive families. It is the same for many of the families that come in particular from Africa, so that issue is really, really important.

Social housing is privately run and has fewer protections for residents from eviction than does public housing. Residents will pay more – on average about \$1680 a year more – in rent if they are in a social housing-run facility than if they are in public housing. This, by the way, shows the hypocrisy of this government and lots of politicians around the issue of rental affordability. It is like a Catholic having to bless themselves walking past a Catholic church or everybody having to say they are in favour of world peace. Everybody now, whether they are on the left or the right, whatever party they are in, says, ‘Oh, the rental crisis’. What is this about? This will mean, even if these people are allowed to come back and move back into the area that they will have to move from when the buildings are built – and we all know – that they will be paying higher rents than what they are

at the present moment in time. Therefore I think, as an aside, this inquiry should call for parity between public and social housing rents, rents at an identical percentage of income. I think that is something that would be very powerful if this committee made that call.

Yarra council has come in behind our public housing tenants, not just in words but in action. We established at our last council meeting a public and community housing advisory committee, with members to be elected at our next council meeting. That is not just some talk shop, where public housing tenants from all over Yarra will come together, backed by the council, to say what they think about this issue and generally public housing issues. We are seeing it as a model for an organising committee, similar to what we did 15 years ago when we stopped the east–west tunnel campaign, when the council came in behind the community of Clifton Hill and Collingwood to say, ‘No, this tunnel is not good for a whole bunch of reasons.’ We organised a massive campaign, including community pickets on the ground. But we have to do it with the community and not over the heads of the community. So this committee that we are establishing is the germ, is the embryo, of a mass mobilisation of local people, not just public housing tenants but non-public housing tenants who totally support, overwhelmingly support this. We have seen in all the elections recently – council and federal – that the vast majority of votes in the City of Yarra are for candidates of whatever party or no party that support the public housing tenants and support the public housing towers.

We will also be going to the construction unions and looking for green bans. We will also make the point that whatever undemocratic decision is made at state Parliament in Spring Street on this matter will not necessarily mean it will actually happen on the ground. Fifteen years ago, the then Liberal state government said they were going to bring in the east–west tunnel campaign. It had majority support in state Parliament, but it actually did not happen because of the resistance on the ground. So I am sending a warning to the state government that this mobilisation will happen. No matter what they decide at state Parliament, we are going to be fighting this, and you have got to expect, I think, a massive campaign of street resistance and also a political backlash against any candidate in next year’s state election or any future election – not only in this area but in any area where there is public housing – who turns a blind eye or supports the demolition of the towers. I say: stop before it is too late.

What we are asking you guys to think about are: number one, a moratorium to properly look at consultation – we have not had proper consultation – and a retrofit instead of destruction of the towers. We want you to call for the release of the cabinet submission documents relied on to justify this policy – make them public. Without these documents, how can this inquiry be expected to fulfil its terms of reference, especially the obligation to examine the rationale and alternatives to demolition? This is an example of policy on the run. This announcement, by the way, was made by Dan Andrews. The spectre of Dan Andrews is long gone, but that spectre still lies over this government. This was policy made seven days before he resigned as the Premier. It was policy literally on the run – literally as he was walking down the road – and this government seems absolutely paralysed and fearful of challenging that decision by Dan Andrews. It is the worst decision that was made by the last government – full stop – knocking down 40-plus towers, 12 of which are in the City of Yarra, and devastating the lives of thousands of the poorest people.

Let us put a racial component to this. I am a councillor for Fitzroy. Everybody who is rich and everybody who is white in Fitzroy does not live in the public housing. Almost everybody who is poor and almost everybody who is a person of colour in Fitzroy lives in one of the four high-rise towers. This is ethnic cleansing. This is class cleansing. If those towers go down, Fitzroy will be wall-to-wall rich people. It will be no different than Camberwell and parts of the inner east. God bless them, they are great areas, but they are different from here. This is a richly cosmopolitan area with people from all classes and from all parts of the world, and that is why people love living in Richmond and in Fitzroy and in Collingwood and in Yarra in particular. We will fight this. We ask you to be brave. Get these documents released, ask for a moratorium and support the public housing tenants that almost unanimously are saying, ‘This is bad policy and policy made on the run.’

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are happy to go to questions now. I will start off. I also just note that Mrs Hermans has made her way in too, so welcome, Mrs Hermans.

Stephen JOLLY: Hi. Hello.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Nice to meet you.

The CHAIR: I want to touch on consultation. You said it has been poor, to say it diplomatically. What has been the consultation that you have seen, or what are you hearing?

Stephen JOLLY: There is a special, extra importance on consultation when many of the people on the public housing estates have come to Australia from countries where there has been war, where there has been civil unrest and where the governments are not democratic and they are fearful of government. So they have heard rumours that – I mean, you guys have not even got the policy documents and the cabinet submissions on this, so you can imagine what it would be like if you have just, you know, come over from South Sudan or Somalia and you are living on the estate and you are glad to be here because you know you are not going to get killed. But when you hear that the government is going to knock your house down and they are going to take away all the green open space – because I am stating the obvious here; you do not have any gardens when you are living in a public housing estate, so the open spaces around are the gardens for those kids – it is massive fear. I get rung all the time – ‘What is happening? When are we going to be moved out?’ And because it has been done so sneakily – so for example, the tower here in Highett Street has basically just been systematically emptied out of people.

The CHAIR: So how have they been actually told? How have residents been told, communicated with?

Stephen JOLLY: I am going to ask Meca to respond. Meca lives in this area.

Meca HO: I am the representative councillor for Melba ward. I grew up in the public housing, back 40 years ago, so a lot of my friends and relatives still live in the public housing around Richmond and Collingwood. My understanding is that they have been misinformed, misled. They fear the government will evict them, in a way, like kick them out, move them far away from where they feel belonging. There is a sense of place here, where they grew up. They were refugees, like many of us with Vietnamese background, and now the Sudanese and Somalis. But who do they listen to? There are both sides of the party: one says they are going to get evicted, the other says, ‘We are going to relocate you’.

The CHAIR: My question is, though, how are people receiving this information?

Meca HO: They have been misinformed, misled.

The CHAIR: Is it an email? Is it a piece of paper under the door? Is it a public noticeboard?

Meca HO: A piece of paper under the door. You go there and there is no interpreter. They just say, ‘Oh, this is where you’re going to move. This is where you’re going to – you have two choices. If you don’t do it, then we’re going to evict you in some way.’ That is what they told me. So they have two choices: to either pick a place they want to move, or a second time. If not, the third time it is, you know, ‘We’re going to put you anywhere’.

The CHAIR: Yes. I noticed in your submission – I have only got 20 seconds left – a big concern is about people not having the sense of community when they are asked to move far, far away. Is it a present, real threat?

Stephen JOLLY: Yes. People are born and bred here. I mean, most of these public – they have lived here longer than most of the people who are not public housing. They go to the local schools; they go to the local medical facilities; they go to the local shops. They are part of this community. It is not like they can just be plucked out and plonked over in some other part of –

The CHAIR: Yes. I am sorry, my time has expired, but I appreciate your response. Mr Batchelor, would you like to go now?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Mayor, Councillor, thanks so much for coming in today. I appreciate the opening remarks. You talked about how it would be better to renovate the existing infrastructure than demolish and rebuild and made a reflection that 80 per cent of the apartments in Melbourne that you have worked on do not meet current minimum disability standards, for example. At what point do you think that the condition of some of the towers gets to a point that makes it not feasible to renovate or retrofit? And are you familiar with what happened at Elgin Street with the two red-bricks?

Stephen JOLLY: Thank you for that question. There are two walk-up mini-estates, if I can use that description, in Noone Street. I know you know this area really, really well. If you are driving north of Hoddle Street and you cut across away from the city, there is Noone Street to the east and Noone Street to the west in east and west Clifton Hill. There are little one-storey estates on either side. Now, the one in east Clifton Hill –

Ryan BATCHELOR: On Rutland Street? Is it the one you mean?

Stephen JOLLY: Yes, that is correct – is in very, very bad condition. The government has recently announced – I am talking about a couple of weeks ago – that they are going to demolish them. I have got to say, the vast majority of residents in that area have been calling out for that for a long time. So there are times when an estate or any building – I mean, obviously sometimes a building has to be demolished – has to come down. What they are going to do is they are going to replace it onsite. The problem is they are replacing it with social housing, not public housing, and I am not going to repeat my points on that. But in that instance, should they come down? Yes, they should. They are a slum in the inner city surrounded by some of the richest people in Melbourne living in east Clifton Hill. These towers, according to many experts – for example, you would have seen the report from OFFICE –

Ryan BATCHELOR: I have.

Stephen JOLLY: and reported in the *Age* as well.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I have got a lot of concerns about the OFFICE report for a number of reasons, and I am sure we will have the opportunity to ask questions of them. The concern that I have – what has been expressed to us, and we have had evidence from some community legal centres previously that the government does have an obligation and a duty of care to the residents of these communities – is that when there is accommodation that is no longer fit for purpose, it needs to be, essentially, pulled down and rebuilt. I take your evidence that you agree that there are circumstances where that can occur in public housing. There are circumstances where public housing may become not fit for purpose.

Stephen JOLLY: But the reason that you and I are not 100 per cent certain whether or not the towers have got to that stage or not – I do not think they have; you may think they probably do –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Well, the one in Elgin Street, for example.

Stephen JOLLY: is because the government –

Ryan BATCHELOR: What is your evidence to us about the condition of the Elgin Street tower?

Stephen JOLLY: I mean, if you talk to the ward councillor, who is a party comrade of yours, Cr Sarah McKenzie –

Ryan BATCHELOR: Sorry, I mean the ones in Elgin Street in Carlton that have been up for quite –

Stephen JOLLY: No, I do not know enough about the Elgin Street ones, but in terms of the ones in Clifton Hill, I can say that. But the reason that we are having this debate about whether or not these towers should come down and are they fixable for retrofitting or not, the reason that we do not actually know the answer to that, is that your government have not released the cabinet papers. If we had those papers – maybe you are right and maybe I am right, but who knows? Because for some reason unknown – I do not know; maybe you know, but I do not know – they will not release this paperwork. If they were proud of their decision, if they thought this was better for public housing tenants and for the state of Victoria, they would surely release these papers to the media, to the public and to us. As a consequence, because they have not, Mr Batchelor and I have got to have this hypothetical debate about issues that people at Spring Street literally know the answer to. Will they release that paperwork?

The CHAIR: Now I will pass over to Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Mayor Jolly and Cr Meca, for being here. Yesterday there were demolition crews that brought in diggers and bulldozers to pull down fences, dismantle a playground and fell trees at the Richmond walk-ups at Williams Court, which are part of tranche 2 of the state government's plan. Residents, as you know, are still living in these buildings, and community members

mobilised to stop the works yesterday and this morning. My question to you is: were you and your council made aware of these demolition works yesterday?

Meca HO: No.

Stephen JOLLY: No. The first I heard about it, I will be honest with you, was when I saw the state member's – your party comrade's – Instagram last night. We have had no consultation. Nobody at the state government has come to us, or from the department, and said to us what their plans are for that site in terms of the last 48 hours.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Do you think it is appropriate that the demolition works are starting while residents are still living there?

Stephen JOLLY: No, obviously not. I agree with you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Have you contacted the government to advocate for these residents to stop these demolition works?

Stephen JOLLY: We found out late last night about what is going on, and this morning I am here. After this we will – but not so far, no.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Okay. Thank you. I would like to ask you a question, Cr Meca. You are a proud resident here. We have also recently celebrated 50 years of Vietnamese migration here in Yarra. They also make up a large proportion of the public housing residents here in the City of Yarra. What impact do you think the demolition is going to have on the displacement of residents but also on the Vietnamese culture that is so visible and proud here in the City of Yarra?

Meca HO: My understanding is that they will be very bitter about being relocated, because this is where their identity is, their place of belonging – as I say, their place. I grew up in this area, on Victoria Street. My family had a business there for 30 years, and I grew up in the area. We still have the unique Vietnamese culture here, but as the years have gone by, demographics have changed. If you displace them – most of the families still live here at 110, 106, 108 and Williams Court. But for example, at Williams Court – I have been there – there are a few Vietnamese and Timorese and African families who live there, but the squatters are the biggest problem. I have been asking public housing to move the squatters there in Williams Court. Three squatters live in that walk-up house, but no-one has done anything. It is a fire hazard, and I do not know who to blame. That is the problem. As I said, it has always been the communication between tenants of the public housing and the people in the government: they do not listen to the people who live there. A lot of Vietnamese people still live there and are proud to be part of this great City of Yarra, and I am proud to be living here, you know, 50 years on.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will now pass over to Mr McIntosh.

Tom McINTOSH: Thank you both for being here. Thanks for your opening comments, Cr Jolly. I am just hoping you could go into a little bit more of what you think and just give some examples of what you think about these buildings. You sort of alluded to issues in buildings that have been raised in the past, where we have had fails with sewer stacks and these types of things.

Stephen JOLLY: Sorry, I did not catch that last sentence.

Tom McINTOSH: We have got issues with buildings – whether it is sewer stacks, whether it is access. You talked about your experience in construction, and we could perhaps go into that later in the question. When we are talking about energy efficiency, when we are talking about the quality of the built environment for people to live in and when we are talking about the essential services that are in that building and the way they are functioning and operating, what do you think is the right balance between the conditions that people live in and lifting those standards? And what do you think we should be aiming for in the standard of accommodation for people to be living in?

Stephen JOLLY: I think there are three main things that need to change with those towers in terms of retrofitting. One is to make them earthquake-proof or better than they are at the moment in terms of dealing with earthquakes; second of all is double glazing on the windows; and third of all is disability access, which is often quite poor in the towers. There are other issues, like security issues and lighting in the car parks, especially here at North Richmond, and stuff like that. But they are the three main structural changes that I think would mean that people can stay in the towers. Obviously when the refurbishment is taking place, they will have to move out. But they did that 15 years ago at Atherton Gardens. They just moved people out to other public housing and then moved them straight back in once the refurbishments had taken place, and that can be done again. But the state government look at – let us just look at the one in my ward. They look at Atherton Gardens, and they just see juicy real estate. If you could put a private block of units on the south side of the estate overlooking Gertrude Street, facing the CBD – you are protected from high rise to your south, because you have got heritage-listed homes and residential and so on, all the way down to Victoria Street – those would go for an absolute song. They would go for an absolute song. And I think this is all about filling their financial black hole rather than what is best for public housing.

Tom McINTOSH: Just to come back to the conditions of living, because there are some people who for decades have said it is too expensive to lift standards, it is too expensive for energy efficiency – this is across housing, right across the state and across the country. It is an argument that is going on around the world. So where do you sit on the quality of the built infrastructure, the homes, versus just getting people into a house? If you are looking at homes for people, are there certain conditions that you are willing to sacrifice that people live in – again, whether it is energy efficiency or whether it is how we upgrade mains water, mains electricity and sewers or even within the environment of just that dwelling or that home?

Stephen JOLLY: I mean, we are getting mixed messages from the government. One minute they tell us, ‘We’ve got to build 44,000 new homes in the City of Yarra,’ and in other municipalities that will be replicated to whatever –

Tom McINTOSH: Sorry, can I bring you back, because I am just really interested in the broader –

The CHAIR: Your time is up, but I will just let you finish that point.

Tom McINTOSH: It is almost a broader philosophical question. Should we lessen standards on housing? Should we achieve best practice, or is it okay to have a lower standard of housing?

Stephen JOLLY: Well, it is not a question of having a lower standard – they want to demolish them. We are trying to retrofit them to make them better and in parallel with that meet our target of 44,000. You cannot tell us to approve 44,000 new homes, as the state government has asked us to, and then simultaneously knock down 12 towers. That makes absolutely no sense. We need to protect the towers and improve the towers. No-one is saying they are perfect. I am an ex public housing tenant. He is an ex public housing tenant. All these people here – many of them live in public housing. No-one is ever going to say they are perfect. But this has to be done in parallel with trying to reach our targets. As the mayor I can give you loads of examples as to where we can build and reach our 44,000 new homes target. It is not an either/or in my opinion.

The CHAIR: Okay. I will now pass over to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Was council made aware, even prior to the announcement that 139 Highett would be demolished next, that there were a lot of vacant homes in that tower?

Stephen JOLLY: Just state that question again, the very start.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Just in terms of the amount of vacant homes in 139 Highett, even prior to the announcement last year that that tower was going to be demolished next, was council aware of just how many vacant homes there were in that building?

Stephen JOLLY: To be honest with you, I do not know if council were directly told. I mean, I knew. We all knew it, because it was like the word on the street, wasn’t it? There are only a handful of residents left there now. We have had some timescale given and reported to us from officers at Yarra – two councillors.

Politically speaking, I think it is highly unlikely. It would be absolute political suicide for them if they were to demolish that tower prior to next year's state election. I think it is almost certain they are going to try and do it after next year's November state election, for obvious reasons, because they are trying to have a crack at this seat here. But what happens is that they systematically empty out where they want to knock down – they do not advertise that – and then we hear it through the grapevine.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask what you think the impact is of leaving dozens of homes empty in a tower like 139 Highett, a building that is not being looked after, frankly. What does that then do to the community that is still living there?

Meca HO: I can tell you that when I was doing the campaign I walked up and down 139, and there are various squatters. I could see homeless who sleep in there. It is really filthy and dirty, and it is not a nice environment. If you leave an unfilled level of empty space, I can see it is a bit damaging mentally and unfit and a hazard. But for 106 and 110 you guys did a tremendous job with the clean-up. A lot of people live comfortably. They have open space, they have their own washroom and they all feel safer – because mostly the washroom is the one that is the most dangerous. People feel like a lot of squatters are living there and store their stuff, so they feel unsafe. If you leave it uninhabited and you do not do anything about it, that is when it is going to be really unsafe and unhygienic to live in and in a filthy condition.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Do you think these are intentional tactics used by the state government to get residents to leave?

Meca HO: Yes. I can see that.

Stephen JOLLY: I have got no evidence of that. Obviously I have got no paperwork that I can show you, but it makes sense to divide and conquer. Speaking as somebody who back in the day squatted – you know, when I was in a different situation than I am now – I understand why people squat, and I am not going to come up here and denounce people who squat when there is a homelessness crisis, as we have on this continent. However, you can see that when the squatters are living next door to people, maybe, who are paying rent for public housing in a public housing tower, it can create division and conflict, which can undermine the unity that is required to save these towers.

One of the key points that I made in my introduction is that to stop these towers coming down we need a mass campaign, not just of the usual suspects like me and other people like me but of the residents themselves, and that is why we are systematically, at Yarra through this advisory committee, building up the blocks to have a broad mass campaign to defend these towers. It has got huge support, not just in the towers but also amongst the 85 per cent of the locals here who do not live in public housing.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks. I am going to hand over to Mrs Hermans.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you. And thank you, councillors, so much for coming in. I think you are some of the most passionate speakers I have been able to hear in the room, and I want to thank you for your advocacy and your lived experience, which is very, very valuable to us when you are speaking about this area and what this means to the people. I hear the passion, and I hear the anger and the frustration. What is the thing that is making you most angry and most frustrated about these decisions and the way that the government has gone about them? Is it simply the lack of transparency, the lack of information? Is it the impact on the people? What is making you most angry and most frustrated?

Stephen JOLLY: I will go first, and then I am sure Meca will explain better than I can. I just hate bullies. I just think what we have here is the poorest people in our area, the people who have had – I mean, you talk to the kids around here, you talk to their parents. Some of their stories, like you would have to have a heart of stone not to be touched. What they have come through to get here, what they went through back home, and how they love living here and feeling the sense of personal security they have here.

The residents who live in the 12 public housing towers and the walk-ups in the City of Yarra are some of the most valuable members of our community. For example, our current Yarra Citizen of the Year is a resident from the Fitzroy public housing estate. They add massive social capital to this community, but they are also

very vulnerable, and they are very scared of government. And for the government, the planning minister and the Premier, to say, 'Oh yes, we want to build 44,000 new homes. We hear the young people of Australia telling us there's a housing crisis. We've told that NIMBY council and all those NIMBY councils we're going to build houses,' but at the same time demolish houses for the poorest people, the most vulnerable people in the area – that is a form of bullying. The people who do not live in public housing around here are mainly the professional managerial class. It is no longer a working-class suburb; it is a knowledge economy. They are very well connected. They have their associations and have their organisations. They are often in politics or in the media and so on. They are really well organised, and they put up resistance to the government. The people that live on the estate are not that well connected. It really breaks my heart as an ex public housing tenant to see the fear, and that is where the passion comes from for me. We will stand with them to the very, very end to ensure that the documents are released – and by the way, if they were really confident, the government, that we were wrong and they were right, they would release these documents. What have they got to hide, surely?

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I agree with you. Councillor, did you want to add anything to that?

Meca HO: Yes. I feel our diverse community is being divided at the moment. They feel like they are being displaced. They have a fear of being displaced. Where they are the most vulnerable people, they have to deal with fear of antisocial behaviour in the housing estate. Security is one of the biggest issues at the moment on the housing estate. The other is that the information out there is not according to what they have heard – from two different parties.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Sorry, can I interrupt you on that issue of information? What I am hearing from you is –

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mrs Hermans. Your time is up.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Just a quick clarification.

The CHAIR: If you want to just finish this.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I am hearing that there has not been information going out in the languages of the people that live here. Is that correct?

Meca HO: Correct.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: So there are a number of more vulnerable communities living in this area who are getting misinformation from the lack of interpretation of the actual information.

Meca HO: Yes.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you so much for your time. Appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Thanks. Now I will pass on to Mr Berger, who is online. Over to you, John.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Councillor and Mayor, for your appearance this morning. I only have a question in relation to safety and security and what measures will be available to promote that. Do you agree that these matters should be addressed?

Stephen JOLLY: Absolutely. Yes, I do agree.

John BERGER: Okay. I also want to go back to your position on retrofitting. I am just sitting here listening to some of the things that you are talking about, and a lot of the things go through my mind when you talk about retrofitting. It is easy to change a front door, something like that. But when it comes to double glazing of windows and things like that, where you have got to remove them, there is going to be a level of disruption that goes along with that, and that is provided that on this particular item it works. I am just wondering how you would account for the disruption that would occur during that process as opposed to demolishing and redoing the whole building?

Stephen JOLLY: There is a big difference between moving the residents out, demolishing a tower and then, if they are lucky, bringing them back to social housing, with more chance of eviction and higher rents,

compared to moving people out, retrofitting and improving the towers and bringing them back to their homes, which is what happened successfully 15 years ago. This is not just an airy-fairy thing: it actually happened at the Fitzroy estate 15-odd years ago.

I will put it to you differently. If we had a moratorium on this decision, if the documents were released, we could have a proper debate about what you are saying, what I am saying, what all the members of this committee are saying and what the community are saying, and then we could come up with the right conclusions. We are being asked to have a view on a matter where they are hiding the information from us. Let us just talk in the total abstract. What Mr Batchelor said to me and what you have said to me could potentially be 1,000 per cent correct and these buildings are about to collapse in 5 minutes time. Well, if that is the case, they should release the documents, because surely they would have a duty of care to those residents. It says to me, when they do not want to release the documents, that they are scared of releasing the documents because they do not back up their conclusion, which is to flog off these towers and put, in the main, private, expensive apartments for rich people on what is currently public housing land.

John BERGER: I think my point goes more to this, Mayor, and that is the disruption that would occur over both scenarios. It will occur no matter what.

Stephen JOLLY: Well, yes. That is true, although I have to say, with the disruption 15 years ago in Fitzroy they did it one tower at a time. They did not do it all at the same time. There are four towers in Fitzroy. There are five here, three in Collingwood. They moved most of the people into the other three towers, because unfortunately what we find – and I am sure Cr Ho will back me up here – is there are many, many empty apartments. Whether that has been done – as one of your members here said today – consciously, or whether it has been done through mismanagement, there are empty apartments throughout the whole of the public housing estate. Anab Mohamud, a councillor from the previous council, took me on a tour of her tower, 90 Napier Street, Fitzroy, and half of them were empty. So I think it is entirely possible to move people, even to other public housing units on their estate, while they are retrofitting tower X, Y, or Z. That is entirely possible. In terms of can it be done? Well, I mean, yes, it can be done.

The CHAIR: Mr Berger, that is your time.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: That concludes the set of questions that we have got for this session, so councillors, I want to thank you for your time this morning. I really appreciate the evidence that you have given, and of course it is going to be taken into consideration very carefully. Thanks so much for your time today.

Witnesses withdrew.