

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

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John Berger

Georgie Crozier

Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

WITNESS (*via videoconference*)

Sahra Aden.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the redevelopment of public housing towers. I am Joe McCracken; I am the Chair of the inquiry. We are going to go around and introduce the rest of our committee members.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Hi, Sahra. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Member for Northern Metro.

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

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Member for Eastern Victoria.

John BERGER: And John Berger, Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Sahra, for your time here today as well. I just want to read this out for you so you know what your rights are.

All evidence taken in this inquiry 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 the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false or misleading evidence may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. The transcript will ultimately be made public and put on the website.

Just for the Hansard record, Sahra, can you please state your name and any organisation, if any, that you are appearing on behalf of.

Sahra ADEN: My name is Sahra Hussein. I am appearing as a part of people living in the high-rise. I am one of the people who support the communities. I am a member of the Australian refugee family reunification organisation. That is who I am.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thanks very much for that. But you are appearing on your own behalf? You are not representing any other –

Sahra ADEN: Yes, I am coming on my behalf.

The CHAIR: As an individual, okay.

Sahra ADEN: As an individual.

The CHAIR: Yes. Thank you very much for that. We have got an opportunity for you to give an opening presentation if you would like to talk for maybe 5 minutes or so. Then after that we will go and ask you some questions from the committee members. Does that sound okay?

Sahra ADEN: That sounds okay.

The CHAIR: Okay. Sahra, I will hand it over to you. You can start your presentation, and then we will go to questions.

Sahra ADEN: My presentation: I was one of the people living in this high-rise for the last 18 years. I took as a guarantee that the government here provided me a house and that they assigned me a contract saying I will live there as long as I want. Recently we heard that Victoria is going to demolish 44 buildings, including the building that I live in now. That makes us upset. Nobody ever told us or consulted with us and said to us, 'This is why we are doing it.' We were not expecting that the government or the state government or the federal government will accept to demolish these buildings, which a lot of the population is living in, while we witness

that there are a lot of Australian citizens and permanent resident people living with no houses. We are worried about our lives, we are worried about our safety, we are worried about our wellbeing, and I also am worried for myself and for the other people why you have to demolish. Why have you decided to demolish a settlement with houses that people are living in, although you have more than more than 60,000 people who are homeless? Why have the government accepted to make another group of people to become homeless or to give them a hard time? That is where I am coming from. I am fighting for the whole community, and I am fighting for myself.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thanks very much, Sahra. I appreciate your comments there. We are just going to go through some questions now. I will start off, and then we will go through the rest of the members of the committee. I guess I want to ask you about the communication and how you found out that your building was set for demolition. Can you explain to me how it was communicated to you?

Sahra ADEN: Really the first time I ever heard was from the news, when Daniel Andrews left the job and decided. I always listen to the news, and I heard that 44 high-rise houses would be demolished, and that struck me. I was confused. And in the morning I was walking. Exactly the day I heard from the news, around 3 or 4 o'clock I was walking in the park and someone from the news, a lady, stopped me and said to me, 'Do you live here?' I said, 'I live here, yes.' And she said to me, 'Are you aware that these houses are going to be demolished?' I said, 'I heard from the news, but why? And who?' And she did not say, 'How do you feel?' She asked me some questions, and I said to her, 'I have no idea. Nobody came to us. Nobody told us.' That was the first time I heard. And then the second time I heard was so many people confused and shouting and saying, 'We have to defend ourselves. We have to go to the government. We have to say, "Why are the houses being demolished? Where are we going to go?"' But the organisation [Zoom dropout] claiming that they buy this and they are destroying it. First of all, they did not contact us.

The CHAIR: Sahra, can I ask you: to the best of your knowledge, did you get anything in written form, whether it was an email or whether it was a letter or something like that?

Sahra ADEN: No, we did not at first. We did not. But later we saw – after a lot of confusion, after fighting; after that – they contacted people and they put some brochures on the walls, but that was after we made a lot of noise. But before, no-one came to tell us.

The CHAIR: So at the point when you saw the brochure you still had not received any letter from Homes Victoria?

Sahra ADEN: No. But later – that was after maybe three or four months – we saw that they were putting on information sessions to come. We saw papers. But that was after a long confusion. We did not know who they were. We did not know which organisation was taking this. We did not know that.

The CHAIR: There is a lot of confusion, by the sounds of things. I only have about 40 seconds left, so I want to ask you what your view is of the quality of the current apartments as they exist now. Do you think they are fit for purpose? Do you think the current stock is fit for purpose?

Sahra ADEN: Okay. Some of them are fit for purpose. 130 and 126 are not bad, but 120 – I used to go there; I have a lot of friends there. I used to see their houses have a lot of mould. They have a lot of problems. I do not know why. 120 and 12 Holland Court – the condition of the houses was not good. There was a lot of mould in the houses, on the walls and in the toilets, but 130, where I live now, is awesome – no problem. If the government looked after them, 130 and 126 would look very good. They can be refurbished. There is nothing wrong with them. For example, the house I live in now – I have lived almost 18 years in there – has never been painted, they have never changed the carpet, and it looks a good standard. There is nothing wrong with it. So I do not know why they would demolish that 130 building and 126. I do not see any problem if they look after it, if they clean it. For example, not this Friday, the other Friday, I fell down in the laundry because the cleaning of the laundry is very bad, and I injured my head. I ended up being three days in the hospital. Up until now I am not good, and that comes from the negligence of not cleaning and looking after it.

The CHAIR: Sahra, I am so sorry to hear that. That sounds awful and I hope that you are okay. My time is expired and I am going to pass it over to Ms Gray-Barberio now, so she will ask you some more questions.

Sahra ADEN: Thank you. Thank you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thanks, Chair. And thank you very much, Sahra, for joining us this afternoon. I think you have answered my first question around how this plan has had an impact on your health and wellbeing. My second question to you is: how has the displacement impacted young people in your community when it comes to things like education and employment and access to culturally appropriate support services?

Sahra ADEN: To me, it makes me a little bit depressed because I do not know where I will end up, and I have been living here for a long time. My children grew up here. I am a member of the community in which we are all connected together, so it gives me depression. And up to now I do not know whether I will have my house left, this building still standing, or where I will end up. For example, at the moment I have a young boy who is 13 years old, who has finished his primary school here, and he is in year 7 now.

When we heard that we are going to move, he really cried. He said to me, 'I am not going with you. Even if you move, I will stay here. I want to stay with my friends that I finished my primary school with. I want to be here. I am not going with you.' I said to him, 'It's okay. Everywhere we go, we will be okay. You will have a new school.' But he is up to now confused. He says to me that he is not going with me. He is not like a 22-year-old; he is a 13-year-old. I am looking after them. They are saying to me, 'If you move, we are not moving.' They do not understand. I say to them – I did not give them pressure. I said, 'Wherever we go, we will be all right.' But they said, 'We don't care. We are not moving with you. We will stay here.' And I say to them, 'Then where would you stay? You will be homeless.' They said, 'We don't care even if we are homeless. We are staying here.'

There have been so many other children since I was here. So for example, where they are building, like, the new houses, the public houses that they are building now – when they were being demolished, all the time I would go before. And this news – they promised the community when they demolished these houses, if they still wanted to come back, they would come back.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Who promised the community, Sahra? When you say they promised the community, who is 'they'?

Sahra ADEN: The people who were living in those houses before. You know, there were people who were there when they were two-storey houses. There were a lot of two-storey houses, which were Victoria housing.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Okay, Homes Victoria.

Sahra ADEN: And they demolished them and they built like six or seven. They have built the new houses now. Some of them they are bringing back because Victoria housing signed a contract with them that if they are not still happy where they were in Werribee or in other areas, they said, 'We will bring you back when we build the houses.' Some of them, they fulfilled the promise and they brought them back. Although they gave them big houses, they decided to come back to these small houses that they built. They said, 'Our children and our security were at risk. That is why we came back. Our children were never happy.' They said, 'We wanted to go back.' Some of the children left the parents and they came back to this area, living around with their friends. But some of them, the government brought them back. They have their houses. Some of them did not get their houses. So that is what I am seeing. A lot of young people moved from the area, but the young people are still here.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Sahra, I have run out of time. I appreciate it.

Sahra ADEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I am now going to go to Mr Berger, online. Mr Berger, I will hand it over to you.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Sahra, for your appearance this afternoon. Sahra, you mentioned at 120 there were a number of issues, in particular the mould. Are there any other examples of serious issues at that particular facility that you might be able to elaborate on?

Sahra ADEN: I did not go to every house because I wished to help people with my language, interpreting for them, so maybe three or four houses I went to, and some of them had the mould, and they were complaining that there was water coming in and the children were sick. And at 120 they said there is asbestosis – asbestosis?

John BERGER: Asbestos.

Sahra ADEN: Asbestos, sorry. Asbestos in the play area which is just in front of 120. So there were a lot of health concerns and for a year and a half now that play group is closed. They said, 'We found asbestos', that thing, a poison, which is very dangerous for the lungs if they breathe it, so that was like a health concern thing. But there was nothing else. I do not know in detail, really, but that was the complaints that I heard.

The other thing that I heard was that they bring forms, and they said, 'Sign here, sign here'. They did not explain who they were or what they were going to do. They said, 'We are going to demolish, so in order to give you a house, sign this document.' They did not know where the documents were from, or what they were signing. The community was also complaining about that. I have not signed anything for myself because I am at 130.

John BERGER: Yes. I just wonder, Sahra, is there a better way the communication could go to get to those people at 120 that might be helpful?

Sahra ADEN: At 120 no-one is remaining now, except maybe two families. They all moved. They gave them wherever they had to give them accommodation. There is no-one in 120. I think one or two cases are still remaining, waiting for a house, and they promised they would give them something. Twelve Holland Court is also empty I think, so these two are gone. What is remaining is 130 and 126.

John BERGER: Well, thank you, Chair. Thank you, Sahra.

Sahra ADEN: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Mr Berger. I will now hand it over to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Hi, Sahra. In your opening remarks – just to make sure I have understood you correctly – you said that when you first moved into public housing, you were told by the government that you could live there as long as you wanted. Is that right?

Sahra ADEN: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: On a personal level, given the government's plans now to demolish your home, do you feel that you have been lied to?

Sahra ADEN: Yes, I feel that I have been lied to because what they told me on that contract is not true. And 18 years, most of the time I was working, and I paid a lot of rent. So I believe this house is belonging to me now, because 18 years I was paying rent and I was signing a contract saying I would live here as long as I want. Okay. So I feel that I have been lied to, I have been cheated. That is how I feel, really.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. What is so special to you about the community in the tower where you live? Tell us about your community.

Sahra ADEN: My community is a community who have been living together for a long time. We help each other. We know each other. We have been looking after each other for a long time. Our children play together. Our older people visit each other. We look after our elderly people. We look after young women who have no relatives or extended family here. We support each other. We go funding together. We have our own cultural activities in this high-rise, which are free for us. So we are losing a lot of things.

We feel like we do not know where we will end up. We have been here in this cohesive community for a long time. For example, I never feel – we have security guards, we have everything at our fingertips. The hospitals are here, the trains are here – everything is close to us. So we do not feel like we are oppressed. We are not afraid. The security of this area is very good. It does not matter if you come from the city at 2 o'clock or 3 o'clock in the morning. Sometimes I used to see younger people in the park, and they would say to me, 'No, no, we know you. We're not harming you. Go, go, go, no-one is stopping you.' So we feel secure.

I do not have that security. I do not know what will happen to me. I see so many bad things happening in the news all the time. People have been robbed. People have been killed. Gangs have come to houses. That is how we feel. We are all afraid for ourselves really. We do not know where we will end up.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Do I have time for one more question, Chair?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can I ask, Sahra: do you feel that the government's plans are actually in the interest of residents, or are they serving someone else?

Sahra ADEN: I heard that these houses are being taken by rich people. I think at the moment what is happening is they are serving business, not people, really.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Business, not people. Okay.

Sahra ADEN: Yes. That is how I feel. Before I felt like I loved Labor. I have been seeing this, and I believed that Labor cared about people, but not anymore really. I do not feel like the government is looking – priority to the people. They are giving priority to business and nightclubs and money. What brings money to the country is the people. If you look after your people very well, you will be wealthy forever. But if you neglect your people, you will end up – population accounting is very important. So I think the government, whoever they are, whether they are new or old, look after their people.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That is my time.

The CHAIR: Thanks. I am going to now hand over to Mr McIntosh.

Tom McINTOSH: Hi, Sahra. Thanks for joining us today. My name is Tom. I am in the Labor Party. I am a member of the government. I am a Member for Eastern Victoria, and I take in the outer suburbs, our regional areas and our rural areas. Homelessness, housing affordability and access to services are an issue that goes right across Victoria, Australia and the world. But I have a lot of people who come to me who cannot afford to put petrol in their car to get to services. I have people who are struggling to find accommodation for their kids, who are struggling to find accommodation, who cannot be anywhere near their families; they have to move a long way away. I think that if we are going to house people in an issue that is being faced around the world, we simply have to build more housing.

We heard earlier today about the services that are provided to this area – and there are a lot of services – and it is able to do that because of the proximity. Distance becomes a problem to get to services for public transport, so we can support people to the best that the government can support people – to help them, either with past trauma or issues they face in their lives as they go on. So, as you said, we are accounting for people and we are trying to make our society as happy and as wealthy and as prosperous as it can be. So what I would ask your opinion on, Sahra, is: to house all of this population we need more space and to bring more people in. There will be more housing going into the sites, and yes, some of that will be private housing, but there will also be an uplift in social housing. You might not agree, but I am just putting to you that we all have to make room for more people to live in our city and our state, and I would just ask for your reflections on that. Thank you.

Sahra ADEN: So I have to look at all the people that you are housing and say my opinion – is that what you mean?

Tom McINTOSH: Yes. You directly referenced the government and why decisions are being made and that it is all for certain reasons. I just would put to you that those reasons are to provide more housing for people so we have less pressure on housing. The fact is that we will be able to build more houses and get more people into homes through doing this work.

Sahra ADEN: Okay. If that is what the government is doing, since we have so many people who are already homeless, why did you not build the houses first and prepare houses for people who are homeless? Australia is a very big country. We have a big land. Why did you not create houses for the homeless people? Why are you increasing the homeless people? Why did you not prepare the houses first and then move people when you have a guaranteed place? Then you also consult with the people and tell them why you are moving them and what you are giving them – 'This is the place we are preparing for you.' Before you move them you say to them, 'This is the place we've prepared for you. You are going to be settled here. This is your transport. This is your home.'

Tom McINTOSH: Yes. You are right, Sahra. For too many decades we have not built enough houses. Yes, I think you are right. My time is up, so thank you for your time.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Sahra. We have finished the formal part of the questions, but there are still some other members that might want to ask you some short questions before we finish up. I will hand over to Mr Puglielli first, who will ask you another question.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Sahra, from the community members that you engage with and that you speak to, are you seeing residents prepare to fight back against the government's plans?

Sahra ADEN: We are not saying we will fight back against the government's plans. We cannot. No-one can fight with the government. The government is very strong. We will end up with nothing if we fight with the government.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No, I understand.

Sahra ADEN: But we are fighting for our rights. We are showing what our rights are. We are complaining to the government. Maybe we want the big government to hear our voice and look at our issue as a general issue. We are not fighting with the government – absolutely. We respect the government and we respect the community. We are not against each other or against any government laws, but we are fighting for our rights. We have the right to live here. We have been living here for a long time, so we know this is the city and you are pushing the poor people from the area and bringing in rich people, young people – we understand that. But at least we need some explanation, not just, 'We're going to demolish these houses.' We need respect, we need explanation and we need a convenient area to us that you show us before you upset us and say, 'This is the house we are giving to you. We are bringing you together as a community.' That is what we would like to have if it is possible. My idea is not to fight with the government. I am always saying to the community, 'We cannot fight with the government.' The government welcomed us. They gave us these houses before. We appreciate what they do for us. But still, we are citizens now. We are fighting for our rights.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Sahra. This will be the last question, and it is from me. I asked you before about the communication and how you had been informed of what was going to happen. My question this time round is more about the quality of the building that you live in, noting that not all buildings are the same and they have different levels and different degrees of structural integrity and need different maintenance work and those sorts of things. How would you describe the building that you live in? I know you said before that it was awesome, but I want you to describe the place where you live in terms of the facilities that it has, perhaps some of the work that might need to be done to make it better and some of the things that you think are good features of where you live.

Sahra ADEN: I live at 130. It looks like one of the best buildings in the area because the house I live in – I have lived there almost 18 years. No-one has ever come to paint. No-one has ever changed the carpet, although I would like it, and I raised that issue many times. Before the organisation said, 'We're going to demolish this for a high-rise,' the laundry cleanliness was much better.

The CHAIR: Sorry, can I interrupt you for a second, please. I do not mean to be rude, but I want to hone in on a point you are talking about. Do you think that things have been maintained well in the building?

Sahra ADEN: No.

The CHAIR: You are talking about carpet not being replaced for a number of years and the laundry having difficulties. Do you think the building has been maintained to a good standard?

Sahra ADEN: No, it has not been maintained to a good standard. For example, it was better before they said 'We're demolishing'. The maintenance was much better. Since they said 'We are demolishing,' we are not getting the maintenance.

The CHAIR: Just to be clear, once the announcement was made that the towers were going to be demolished, you are saying that the maintenance was not kept up.

Sahra ADEN: Yes. The maintenance became very low – no cleaning, no repairing things like the laundry. I am on level eight. On level eight we share two washing machines and two drying machines. Before, whenever we rang and said, ‘This machine is bad,’ they used to come and fix it. Now if you call and call and call, no-one is coming and fixing it and no-one is coming and cleaning it.

The CHAIR: Thanks.

Sahra ADEN: The standing of the building is good. There is no problem if they maintain the carpet, if they give the place a painting. If they look after it, it can stand another hundred years.

The CHAIR: I get the picture. Thank you very much, Sahra. That also brings a finish to this session. I want to thank you for your evidence that you have provided today. We will of course take it on board. Thank you very much for your time.

Witness withdrew.