

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

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WITNESS

Michael Walpole.

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into the redevelopment of public housing in Victoria. I am Joe McCracken. I am Chair of the inquiry, and we are going to go through and introduce our committee members as well. I will go over to Anasina.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Hi, Michael. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metro.

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

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Eastern Victoria Region.

John BERGER: And John Berger, Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: Thanks, John. All evidence that is 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 the hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same thing, those comments may not be necessarily protected by that same privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is going to be recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and the transcripts will ultimately be made public and put on the website. For the Hansard record, can you just state your name and any organisation, if any, that you are appearing on behalf of, please.

Michael WALPOLE: My name is Michael Walpole. I am representing myself.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Michael. Now you have got an opportunity for about 5 or so minutes to give any sort of verbal presentation you would like, and then we will just go through and ask you some questions, if that is all right with you.

Michael WALPOLE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Beautiful. I will hand it over to you, Michael. Thanks.

Michael WALPOLE: I am going to read from a text.

The CHAIR: Yes, please go for it.

Michael WALPOLE: I have come here today, this winter's day, to talk about my discontent.

Today is the opening day of the 48th federal Parliament up there in Canberra. I hope you, members of this inquiry, have your minds on the job down here in the back pocket of the country.

As this is a political forum, I will be talking politics. Even though I am theoretically of their ilk, I will talk about my discontent with the Victorian Labor Party's decision, in its role as the Victorian state government, to behave like a slumlord.

I will also here today express my disdain for the real estate agents that the Victorian Labor Party is using to demolish public housing, to diminish the rights and conditions of public housing tenants and to shuffle them from public housing into social housing.

Has anyone brought the Prime Minister up to speed yet about the differences between public and social housing? We have all heard about his upbringing. Has he forgotten his own, or is feigning ignorance convenient for him? I guess after all our Anthony is only employing some traditional political skills: the feigning of ignorance and the manipulation of language.

The Victorian Labor Party and government and its real estate agents – the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and Homes Victoria – also use those skills as a matter of course. As someone descended from lords of language, I deride their amateurish efforts. I scoff, but I am not amused, because their efforts are aimed at bamboozling the poor.

Shall I speak now of disenfranchisement? Disadvantage? The indignities heaped upon the poor? If you have sampled the 800 or so submissions received by your inquiry, you do not need me to repeat the obvious.

Economics, then? Structural integrity of buildings destined for demolition? What about environmental issues? I have read some of the submissions received by your inquiry. Those issues have been addressed by well-resourced parties opposing the proposed demolitions. Anything I would say about those issues would be redundant.

So, instead, I will talk about this. Generally speaking, we public housing tenants are not confused by lies or by the liars that tell them. Right before our eyes, here in the Second World, the Victorian Labor Party and its real estate agents have shown themselves to be morally bankrupt by purposefully neglecting to maintain public housing for many years. By doing so they have deliberately tried to create ghettos.

Then they use the seemingly dilapidated state of the public housing stock, which they have deliberately allowed to deteriorate, as a rationale for dismantling the communities that live therein, not for the good of those people who live there and make up those communities but to profit those who are content to enrich themselves on our loss.

By neglecting its lawful duty as landlord, the Victorian Labor Party is exposed. As I have said, it is behaving like a slum lord. By their neglect and by their cynical manipulation of language the Victorian Labor Party try to invent a new reality. Then, figuratively speaking, they pat us Second World inhabitants on our heads, lazily using a hackneyed phrase or two. They say, 'We're doing this because we care about you.' Well, I tell you, they need more training as thespians and writers to pull off their sad little act.

Lastly, concerning the walk-up flats in which I live, I received under my door last Tuesday 15 July a letter from the Victorian Labor Party's real estate agent, Homes Victoria. That letter is contemptuous of this inquiry – contemptuous. That letter states categorically that Homes Victoria this month and in August is going to do preparatory work to plan for demolition – not proposed demolition, not demolition that may be done after the proposed demolition plan has been scrutinised by your inquiry and considered by the Victorian state government after your report has been tabled.

No, none of those qualifications – just demolition. Could it be that Homes Victoria knows already what the result of the state government's consideration of your report will be? I know what I think. What about you? What do you think about that?

That work started yesterday, Monday 21 July. If I were you, I would be insulted. I would be telling Homes Victoria to cease and desist. Will you do so?

If you have listened to me today, thanks for that.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Michael. We will go through some questions now.

Michael WALPOLE: Sure.

The CHAIR: I will start off. You mentioned just now the letter that you got from Homes Victoria.

Michael WALPOLE: Yes, concerning the preparatory works to demolish the area I live in.

The CHAIR: Are you able to provide the committee with a copy of that letter?

Michael WALPOLE: I have that letter here.

The CHAIR: So you are happy to provide that then? We will organise it with the staff.

Michael WALPOLE: I sure am. Certainly.

The CHAIR: That would be good to see. Was that the first letter that you have received from Homes Vic?

Michael WALPOLE: Concerning demolition work, yes.

The CHAIR: Was there any other method of communication that they have sent to you, electronically or any other sort of way – a public notice?

Michael WALPOLE: About the demolition work?

The CHAIR: About the demolition work.

Michael WALPOLE: No.

The CHAIR: So what you would be showing to us would be the very first thing that you have seen?

Michael WALPOLE: About the demolition work?

The CHAIR: About the demolition, yes.

Michael WALPOLE: Yes.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you very much. We will make sure that we can organise to get that. You said in your submission a number of different things. You made the point that you do not have confidence that you are going to be relocated and, in a sense, get like for like for what you have already got.

Michael WALPOLE: Correct.

The CHAIR: Why do you have a lack of confidence in that?

Michael WALPOLE: Have you got another 15 minutes?

The CHAIR: I have got another minute and a half.

Michael WALPOLE: Well, there you go. In that case I will not bother trying to answer the question.

The CHAIR: Well, anything that you can provide –

Michael WALPOLE: I have had so many negative experiences in my dealings with Homes Victoria that I cannot begin to enumerate them here. I have covered some of it in my submission.

The CHAIR: Yes. But just so I have clarity in my own mind, it is because of past experiences that you do not have confidence in future performance. Would that be fair?

Michael WALPOLE: Correct. Yes.

The CHAIR: Okay, thank you. You also talked in your submission about the impact on vulnerable residents and the very real, tangible impact that is going to have. Can you expand a bit more on that and what you have witnessed?

Michael WALPOLE: I said at the beginning that I am here to represent myself. I am not going to try and interpret other people's realities for them.

The CHAIR: That is fair enough. What impact has it had on you?

Michael WALPOLE: I have made that clear in my submission. None of the impacts have been positive; that is a certainty, but I can stand on my own two feet, and when it comes time to negotiate with Homes Victoria I will do so.

The CHAIR: So you would say that you have not had a positive experience, and it has been – I do not want to put words in your mouth, but it has been challenging?

Michael WALPOLE: That would be good. Thanks for that.

The CHAIR: Would you say it has been challenging?

Michael WALPOLE: Would you like an anecdote?

The CHAIR: Sure.

Michael WALPOLE: I have had plumbing issues in my unit that have been going on for two years. I reported it a couple of times. I remember reporting it in June of last year, and I reported it again. I did not expect anyone to turn up, and they did not. I have had a few goes at repairing it myself, just amateurish efforts, and I rang Homes Victoria maintenance on 7 July, two days or so before I received the invitation to talk here, and they told me that the work would be put on a priority list and that the maintenance people had until 14 July to fix it; it is the 22nd today. Nothing has happened, as I expected, because of my experience of them.

The CHAIR: Thank you for sharing that. I will pass it on to Ms Gray-Barberio.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Michael, for your honest account of your experience as a public housing resident. This inquiry is focused on the 44 towers, but there are also many walk-ups also planned for the demolition, including where you live. The government says all these buildings cannot be refurbished, that they must be demolished as though they are one homogenous group. Are they?

Michael WALPOLE: Not fit for purpose to dwell in – is that what you mean?

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Yes.

Michael WALPOLE: I have written in my submission – I could read from that submission if I wanted to make it clear quickly. I am not a structural engineer, but I have lived in the building for many years; it seems structurally sound to me. If it looks dilapidated, it is because of the neglect that it has been subject to over an extended period. I think it is comfortable, it is roomy – high roof, the premises – and I find it eminently liveable.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Just to be clear: do you think this committee should be telling Homes Victoria to cease and desist any demolition or associated works at any of the public housing sites?

Michael WALPOLE: I have specified my own, but I think they should respect the inquiry and cease and desist doing it to any of the sites until your decision has been tabled, scrutinised and decided upon by the state government.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. Can you describe what works at Williams Court the demolition crew has done since notifying you that they would be doing pre-demolition works?

Michael WALPOLE: In the letter they sent to me dated 15 July and very efficiently put under my door on the 15 July they described the preparatory work they were going to do. I do not know exactly what they are doing, but in that letter they did not specify the pulling down of fences or the felling of trees. They have done that; they have just got a cheek. I actually spoke to one of the guys from Homes Victoria. I said to him, ‘Are you Homes Victoria?’ He said, ‘Yes.’ I said, ‘What gives you the right to do these works here today?’ He said, ‘We give ourselves the right,’ – he, being Homes Victoria – and I said to him, ‘Oh, great answer. You know there is an inquiry?’ And he said, ‘The inquiry doesn’t apply to this area.’ And I said, ‘Yes, it does, and I will give your feedback to the inquiry.’ And now I have done so.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: How does that make you feel hearing that from Homes Victoria?

Michael WALPOLE: Can you hear my tone?

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I can, but I would like you, if you can, to articulate it to us, please.

Michael WALPOLE: To articulate it? Well, I will delete all the expletives in my head. That is articulating it.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: I can see you are really upset, so I do not want to –

Michael WALPOLE: I am annoyed. I am not upset. I am annoyed.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Okay. And you are within your right to feel that way, Michael, absolutely.

Michael WALPOLE: Thank you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Do you think that the government’s plan is actually for you and the current public housing community? Do you think it is actually for you and the community of – sorry, have I gone over?

The CHAIR: Just finish this one, please. It is fine.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you.

Michael WALPOLE: No, well, to be brief, I have covered that in what I have said. It has got nothing to do with our good. It is to profit those that are content to make profits from our loss.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I will now ask Mr McIntosh. If you would like to ask some questions with those comments.

Tom McINTOSH: I would just ask for your reflection on – you might have heard the last witness we had in the last session.

Michael WALPOLE: Yes.

Tom McINTOSH: You probably heard what I said about trying to –

Michael WALPOLE: I did, mate, so I do not need to hear it again. Thanks, anyway.

Tom McINTOSH: Thank you. So if you would like to share any thoughts on that.

Michael WALPOLE: No, not really. I said all I need to say in my submission and in my talk.

Tom McINTOSH: Sure. Okay. That is all, Chair. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Mr Puglielli, over to you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for appearing before us today and for your submission. We have seen from documents that have been made available to the Parliament that senior Homes Victoria staff and government MPs have met with community housing developers and their financiers in the lead up to announcing their plan to demolish the 44 public housing towers. But through this inquiry we have heard that they did not sit down and meet with any public housing residents in that same way. How does that make you feel?

Michael WALPOLE: Par for the course. It is what I would expect.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Why do you say that?

Michael WALPOLE: Because, as I have said before, my opinions of the way the whole proposal is being dealt with I have made clear, and that is why.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Can you speak to us a bit further about the – you spoke of neglect of public housing stock from the government. Can you speak more to what you have observed in that issue?

Michael WALPOLE: Well, I gave the internal anecdote about my premises and their neglect of that, even on the most practical of levels, but I look around and the fences are dilapidated and the paintwork is deteriorating. All the buildings, as I said, I believe they are sound. I cannot prove that, but I have lived in the area for decades. I know where I live, and I believe they are sound if anyone wants to use that. Anyway, I have said it in the talk.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you again.

Michael WALPOLE: They are trying to create ghettos to use that as an excuse to pull down those ghettos. It is a very self-serving method.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: We have been hearing through this inquiry about public homes being left vacant, particularly in towers, for example, that are about to then be demolished. Given we hear all the time that we are in the midst of a housing crisis, there is a homelessness crisis facing Victoria, in your mind how do those two things go together?

Michael WALPOLE: In my submission I have actually talked about that. I look out of my kitchen window, and I can see people trying to find nooks to sleep in outside units that are boarded up and have not been inhabited in some instances for years. It is a disgrace. The country, or the state, has no soul if it can do that to people, and it can.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes. And we have been hearing it through this inquiry, absolutely. I think that might be my –

Michael WALPOLE: I know what I am saying is not news to anybody. I might be saying it in a different way. The previous speaker was saying the same sort of things in her own way. I found her testimony to be quite good. I liked it. Good on her.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. I think that is my time. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Mr Berger, I will hand over to you.

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Walpole for your appearance today. I do not have a question as such, but I understand your submission 2624 is there and also your commentary today, and I take that all on board. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Fair enough. Do you have any other questions you want to ask? Otherwise, we will finish up.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Just one more?

The CHAIR: Just one more – yes, that is fine.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Mr Walpole, if you would not mind, how does it make you feel that the government would leave homes vacant rather than house people who are obviously homeless?

Michael WALPOLE: Well, as I just stated to your colleague there, I think it is a disgrace. Simple as that. How you can sleep at night if you are prepared to make people live in those circumstances – well, it is beyond my ken.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you.

The CHAIR: There are no more questions, Mr Walpole. That ends the session today. I want to thank you for your evidence that you have given. I can tell you care a lot about it.

Michael WALPOLE: Well, mate, I have a sense of social justice.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Michael WALPOLE: I wish it was more common. But the question I have to you at the end is – I have answered your questions, and now I would like you to answer mine, that I asked you at the end of the talk. Will you ask Homes Victoria to cease and desist doing the demolition preparations that they are doing on my site while we tenants are there? It is not good for safety and health. Who knows what they are going to be doing with their concrete testing and such. And as for pulling down trees and pulling down fences that they have not nominated that they were going to do – unacceptable. So are you going to tell them to cease and desist? That is my question to you.

The CHAIR: Well, as Chair of the committee, that is a matter for the committee to consider.

Michael WALPOLE: Well, okay. I am talking about your credibility. I hope you can take it seriously. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I appreciate it.

Michael WALPOLE: Good on you.

The CHAIR: And also, you are happy to provide the letter that you said at the start?

The CHAIR: Yes. Who would I give that to?

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. Patrick over the back there will take it.

Michael WALPOLE: Cheers. Thank you. Good on you.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Michael. Appreciate your time.

Witness withdrew.