

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

David Fidel.

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

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

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

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Eastern Victoria Region.

John BERGER: John Berger, Member for Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: Cool. Thanks very much. Now, I have got to read this out so you know what the situation is here with your rights and everything like that.

All evidence that is taken today 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 today 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 that same privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and at the end of this you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript, so if there are any minor changes – mispronunciations or that sort of thing – we can make those there as well. The transcript will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

Just for introductions, are you able to just say for the Hansard record your name and any organisation that you are appearing on behalf of, or just as an individual.

David FIDEL: I am Dave Fidel. I am representing myself, and I am representing AGRA – the rebirth of AGRA, the AGRA steering committee. That is where we are at the moment.

The CHAIR: Okay, thanks very much. Would you like to have 4 or 5 minutes for an opening statement to talk about the situation and that sort of thing? And then we can go to questions.

David FIDEL: Yes, sounds good. Let us do it.

The CHAIR: All right, David. Over to you. Welcome.

David FIDEL: Thank you. I think it might be poignant to acknowledge that in this country just recently it was officially recognised there was – and is; in a sense it is still going on – a genocide. So it is kind of like we are in a war zone. That is how I feel. I grew up knowing that that was the case, and I am very surprised that just recently it has been officially acknowledged. I want to say that because I think that is the biggest thing that is going on in this country at the moment.

As far as housing goes, I am hearing it is a housing crisis. It is a crisis, right? So we need some management to deal with that. We heard Michael talk about them being ghettos, but ghettos are where there is one type of ethnicity. This is a housing project, and as far as the project goes, it has not been managed adequately. I think it is fair to say that. I would even go so far as to say that it is pretty hard to convince me that this thing called managed decline is not occurring. Michael was quite eloquent on that topic, and I may support that sort of case in some anecdotes.

Now, there is also a bit of hypocrisy happening – inconsistencies. For example, in the flats they get people – I mean, they need to home everybody, right, that is the goal. Obviously that is not happening. I hear there are like 40,000 people on a waiting list. But I guess some people are a priority. The reason I got a place is because I have a son and I needed some stable accommodation for him. I even say to some parents, single parents that

have problems with their kids, it does not matter, you have just got to keep reaching out to them, even if they do not answer the phone, just so they know that you are there. You have got to create that stability. Stability for children is paramount.

Now, they say that there is no money for things and stuff like that – I will move on. But it seems also there is a mismanagement of funds. This inquiry just now, it is acting as if all this research and information does not already exist. I mean, for example, here is a book that our Fitzroy community put together. This is all community, this is thick as. Now, I do not really like reading, you know. What I do like is hugs and kisses, and I get that in the flats.

I also want to point to the Housing Commission of Victoria, some history. When they initially knocked down over 250 buildings, what was found in the HCV annual report between 1939 and 1940, so this is like over 80 years ago, it states:

Housing for slum reclamation ... is a social service. The problem of the slums is the problem of poverty. Slum abolition involves more than an expenditure on bricks and mortar and its real nature can only be appraised and dealt with if at all times full consideration is given to the most exacting and difficult questions affecting economic needs and social welfare.

So we have been here before. And just as I said with my first statement, it is a displacement kind of tactic and a disinheritance. You have got Whelan the Wrecker going and knocking down all these beautiful old buildings in Melbourne, and this is our heritage, this is my heritage. For the last 10 years I have identified as Aboriginal. It is only this year that I have reverted to my father's name, who is Norman Frank – no, that is not his name, but Norman Norfolk people. So I am an ethnic mix of the best and worst of Australia, and I feel a deep responsibility to do the best that I can for my community. I was born in Williamstown in the Yalukit Willam. I was acknowledged by Ngarra Willam, but I was raised in Seddon, schooled in Yarraville and schooled in Footscray as well as Melbourne. Now, Yarraville and Footscray are a massive, multicultural, multi-ethnic community, and everybody had their own rich culture. But then there was me, and I would say, 'I don't know, I'm just from here.' I grew to sort of understand that there was a stigma about saying that you were from convict descent and Aboriginal descent. You tried to not talk about it. There were a couple of Aboriginal kids in my community, but they preferred not to talk about it. In Victoria most Aboriginal people are more of lighter skin and you cannot really tell. Anyway, a lot can be done to sort of understand the nuances of ethnicity in this state.

I also want to read a couple of things to catch my breath. This is from the Heritage Council criteria, as points of reference: importance to the course or pattern of Victoria's cultural history; possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Victoria's cultural history; and potential to yield information that will contribute to the understanding of Victoria's cultural history. Now, I did not know how much of a cultural influence is where things came from – whether it was Aboriginal or convict descent. Things like 'lag' – you lag someone in. That is a convict term. 'Screws' – the screws that hold down the iron men. That is what convicts were referred to. It is a divide-and-conquer method that is being used.

Okay. Let me talk about myself. The culture that I grew up with was mainly – I am an urbanite; I have always lived close to the city, so hip-hop I was attracted to. Graffiti – it is an art form, it is a form of expression, it is making something out of nothing. The rich make money, the poor make magic. But this sort of rich grassroots coming up, this underdog stuff, is being stigmatised, and then it has just been exploited. It is like you want the good stuff that we can do, but then you do not give us the credit for it.

Poor people need each other. We like living amongst each other; we like living in the flats. I like seeing my neighbours. We need each other to the point – like, we do not have money in our pockets to be able to fix those problems that, if you have got a bit more money, you can do. It is so vitally important to have these networks, these social networks. Now, there is economic capital, social capital and cultural capital. Social and cultural capital do not really, as concepts, get taught to the working class. I saw Angry Anderson get up at Whitten Oval and say the western suburbs were the most underprivileged region of Victoria – or Melbourne, I think he said. It kind of shook me a little bit. I was like, 'Wow, I didn't know that. I just thought this stuff was normal.' And then I got a bit older, and I went to the other side of town. Even me just opening my mouth: they would look at me like, yes, he looks okay, but then I would open my mouth and say some stuff – I have an accent that is a bit more broad – and then I would get snubbed. This stigma is real, and the way that they have been managing the housing projects is absolutely shameful.

So hip-hop, the Aboriginal advancement, William Cooper from Footscray and Kensington culture. Ken was a wonderland of a community that I grew up in. You would just go there. There were so many kids. People would whistle, and it was like you whistled and then you had 10 heads pop out of the windows saying, 'Oh, what's going on?' It was so rich. The coolest kids of Footscray City were from Ken or lived in Ken for some time, and now Ken is gone – Ken is wiped off the face of the earth. You took that away from us. I cannot pass that onto my kids anymore because it does not exist anymore. There has been a report saying that what happened to Kensington should never happen again, but here we go again. Just as I read about the commission – we already had results and stuff like that – why are we coming here and trying to state all this stuff?

I went along to brave Barry's class action hearing, and they had the head of Homes Victoria on the stand under oath. Now he is saying, 'One of the reasons we can't do renovations is because of the way that it will affect the structural integrity of the building, so we cannot break into the walls.' I tell you for a fact that upstairs in my building they have created a doorway between two apartments so they can accommodate a larger family than what is normally there. I heard about that in other buildings. It goes up to about 10 instances. So either he is not telling the truth or he is ill informed, and if he is ill informed, then it is kind of like if you are in a very important job and you have got many more resources than we have. I am working with community groups; we do not have a budget. This is all volunteer stuff. We went and doorknocked at South Melbourne, Flemington and here at the Richmond estate with the 22 floors. There are people there that have been there for over 40 years. We had someone over here that has been here for over 40 years, and there were stories of wheelchairing their partner down the street to the hospital. Now, if they cannot live here anymore, if they have to move out to the outer suburbs and become effectively fringe dwellers or whatever, they are going to be cut off from all these amenities. For the older people and for the younger people, they are not going to be connected to the urban culture. What will happen is you will have families and some of them will live in the city in public housing and some of them will live out in the outskirts of town, and then the people from the outskirts of town will come into the city and stay with their family and become a bit more kind of culturally rich. They will be around maybe some rich people, and they will not hate them as much. We are trying to integrate society. We are trying to stop the schisms.

The CHAIR: David, I am just conscious of time. Are we able to explore some of these through the questions as well? Is that possible?

David FIDEL: Yes, sure.

The CHAIR: You are happy if we go to questions?

David FIDEL: Yes, I do not want to run out of time. You asked me to start a bit early, so –

The CHAIR: Are there any final points that you want to raise before we go into questions at all?

David FIDEL: Yes, it is a frog-in-the-pot situation. This is what I was trying to get at just now. If you reject a child from the village – because it takes a village to raise a child, right? – they will come back and burn down the village just to stay warm. And I do not want to live in a society where we have got people that are angry on the outskirts of town coming in to rob you or whatever. It is just going to wreck the fabric. Plus, I also want to say that we are about to go into a media renaissance in Australia with all these iPhones and stuff like that. It is a great opportunity, so we need this mix of cosmopolitanism. We are not like Sydney; we have spread things out. When I said 'inconsistency' – there is an inconsistency of policy where they get people that are problematic individuals and they put them, mix them, on the different floors. So you have got a whole floor of families and then all of a sudden you have got an ice dealer there. Now, I only got the apartment because I have a son and I had 25 per cent contact with him. I only got 25 per cent because I took him to karate on Thursdays, which allowed me to reach the standard of getting a place. Most single parents do not even qualify for public housing. So what is that? Is that some sort of scam? That is how it feels.

They moved this guy onto this floor, a single man, and then straightaway he started selling ice. Why are you doing this? When I moved in, the manager of the housing, when I was signing the lease agreement, said, 'We know everything.' If you know everything, how could this even be happening? So it is really hard to convince me that managed decline is not happening. Kensington was a beautiful community, then it became riddled with drugs and then they knocked it down. You have got a situation here in Richmond where you have got the safe

needle space. I understand people need something like that, but it is right next to the primary school. And then you have got, in the flats, an emergency door that just does not lock.

The CHAIR: I am going to ask you some questions now, David, because you are raising some interesting points. You talked about life where you live at the moment, and you said that there are people, drug dealers, moving in and those sorts of things, as you just described – an ice dealer. Is that what you said?

David FIDEL: Yes.

The CHAIR: Yes. And then the comment was that Homes Victoria know everything. Is that –

David FIDEL: The lady at the housing office where I signed the lease agreement said to me they know everything.

The CHAIR: Okay. I am thinking of a way to put this. The condition of the buildings which are up for demolition – in your experience, they are quite livable?

David FIDEL: Yes.

The CHAIR: Functional?

David FIDEL: Well, the thing is, we do not get a sense of ownership. And it is just like when you say to anyone who rents a place, ‘Wow, this is a great garden. You should be doing this, that and the other.’ And they go, ‘Well, it’s only a rental. I can’t really do anything.’ That is the sentiment.

The CHAIR: Can you describe where you live? What is it, two-bedroom, three?

David FIDEL: It is a two-bedroom apartment. It is a vibrant community. And the floor is – yes.

The CHAIR: Are there problems with the building? Like, we had one person before say the carpet had not been replaced for 18 years; there were issues with the laundry. Are you experiencing those sorts of things?

David FIDEL: It has been recently renovated, and it was very traumatic to be able to go through the constant drilling and stuff like that. But we sucked it up because, you know, this is our home. They moved me down to another floor. They asked me whether I would like to go back to the floor that I was on. I ticked the tick box. The next thing you know, someone else has moved into that apartment. So, you know, the whole trust level thing is completely on the ground. We do not want to be apart. We do not want to create a schism. We do not want to not trust you. We do not want to demonise you guys. We want to work with you. We want to feel like you guys are family, but it is –

The CHAIR: And you want to be part of your own community as well.

David FIDEL: This is the first time I felt like I was part of a community, coming and living in a dense urban environment, and I understand it is a whole cultural thing, living in dense urban environments.

The CHAIR: It is something that I struggle to understand, because I am from country Victoria. It is very different. But we have gone through this process. You learn a lot from the different witnesses that come forward. And my life experience is in very stark contrast to someone like you, who has embraced a very urban, cosmopolitan environment. I am trying to understand if this environment that you are in – we are trying to come to a view that the government bulldoze and start again, essentially. Is that the right pathway? A lot of people say no; a lot of people say yes, it is justified. You are saying no?

David FIDEL: Well, if some buildings need addressing, then they need addressing on a direct – like, specifically. You cannot just come out on the news standing next to the Prime Minister, right, saying, ‘After we’ve locked you down for whatever, got cops to bash you, choked chicks on the street, we’re going to knock down all the flats, and now we’re going to knock down the low-rise too.’ And then yesterday they started knocking stuff down, chopping down trees, as was said before. And this process is not even finished. Like, what are you doing? You are just like bullies and like gaslighters. In Australia it is like ‘You can’t trust a politician’. What kind of society are we living in where people feel that way about their own representatives? The only reason you guys have a wage is because the Eureka Stockade happened. The soldiers moved in.

The CHAIR: Mate, I am from Ballarat; I know very well.

David FIDEL: Yes. You know, right? The soldiers moved in when most of the rebels or whatever you want to call them were back with their wives and there were only a few guys there. And then they got the leaders of that resistance and then said, 'Hey, how about we give you some money? You can be a politician. You haven't got any money to be a politician? We'll start giving people a wage.' That is why you guys have wages: because people said, 'No, that's enough.' and they brought up arms.

Now as before, we do not want to fight the government. But you know, look at all the crazy stuff, like tobacco. Do you know how many tobacconists were in Melbourne? If you look at the old photos, they are all signs of tobacconists – like, the only signs you see are tobacconist stands. We used to have a vibrant tobacco-growing industry out in Myrtleford, and now it is illegal. You have to buy it from overseas, and we are going to tax the shit out of it – sorry. And then, you know, this whole black market thing pops up, right? People firebombing is like – I have got ADHD, right? Tobacco kind of calms me down –

The CHAIR: I am just conscious of time, and I do not mean to diminish what you are saying, but I want to pass it over to Ms Gray-Barberio, who might ask you some questions as well.

David FIDEL: All right. Thank you.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you so much, David. It sounds like you are really connected to your community at Atherton Gardens. What has their response been to the government's plan?

David FIDEL: Fear. Apathy. Because when you get overloaded with issues, you start to be like, 'I'm checking out. I can't deal with this stuff.' So there are a lot of apathetic people. Some people believe that it will never happen, and some people want to move out – 'Yes, give me a house; I can't wait to have a backyard.' But that is a small number. And that is what I experienced, broadly speaking, when I went and doorknocked on the other buildings.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Okay. Thank you. What do you think the impact of this plan has been on First Nations and migrant and refugee communities and other unique cultural groups?

David FIDEL: It is piling on the trauma – just piling it on. It is disgusting. It affects me deeply – it really does. When you start telling people what has been going on, they get so fired up. The thing is that the whole thing is a big smokescreen – this 'social housing'. So, 'We are going to build social housing.' You mean you are going to build community housing, which means taking the assets out of the hands of the people again.

My dad went to school with Jeff Kennett because he got a scholarship – he was a smart guy, right? He said he was not a very nice guy back then either. That guy, not only did he sell off all the – like the Labor Party has been doing as well. Everybody in my neighbourhood backed Labor, but they have turned out to be the biggest class traitors in Australia, and it is so, so sad. What effect does it have on these people? Can you imagine coming to Australia, and like you say, you promised, 'Okay, you are safe.' I talk to people in the lift, and I say, 'Oh, you know such and such,' and they say, 'Oh well, it is better than bombs coming down.' That is Lucky Country syndrome. You have got to look at the place and where it is going. What is the trajectory? What do we have? Five per cent of our GDP is manufacturing now. We do not make anything anymore. Manufacturing is where you get the most value out of the supply chain. That is what afforded Australians to be able to have that – like you do not have to be an educated person to be able to get a decent wage, because they were working in factories. They are not factories anymore; they are just warehouses, just big sheds. It is a chance to do some warehousing. We are not making anything. We are importing everything. We need to export, and we need to create opportunities for people, not take them away like this plan is proposing. Not plan – this is already underway, knocking stuff down and kicking people out coercively. Anyway, any other questions?

The CHAIR: Just a quick one.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Okay, I have to be quick because I am running out of time here. But just quickly, just picking up on the end of your sentence there. You said people are getting kicked out coercively. Can you just expand to committee what you mean by that?

David FIDEL: Okay. I love the fact that they had the lawyers down here. I am not sure if they are involved with this, but I have heard stories that they hired an interpreter and the interpreter was basically saying, 'No, just take the deal. It says take the deal.' They have gone to a lawyer to get help, and this is the sort of – once they became aware of that process, then they fixed it, but that initially was what was going on.

There was a job offer going out. It was a hundred grand to be one of those relocation officers – a hundred grand. I applied for the job, right? That is a lot of money in my mind. They are doing sneaky stuff, and this whole social housing thing is like this smokescreen to be able to cover up what is really going on.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I am going to hand it to Mr McIntosh here.

Tom McINTOSH: Thank you, David. Thanks for being here. My great-great-great-granddad was arrested at Eureka and brought to Melbourne to be hung. Yes, my family were there, mate.

David FIDEL: That is rough, mate.

Tom McINTOSH: I thank you for saving me from having to raise Jeff Kennett. Most of my colleagues know that that I normally do that in Parliament, so thank you for doing that.

David FIDEL: The Labor Party, I can tell you a little something about them.

Tom McINTOSH: Now I just want to explore a couple of points with you. You talked about giving people the opportunity to live an urban lifestyle.

David FIDEL: Yes.

Tom McINTOSH: I am sort of a bit hesitant to repeat this, because I am sure you probably do not mean it this way, but you talked about fringe dwellers in the outer suburbs.

David FIDEL: It was probably a bit of a rude thing for me to say. I am sorry to people that are online –

Tom McINTOSH: That is okay. But just to flag, you talked about people being in the outer suburbs.

David FIDEL: Pushed out to the outer suburbs with the lack of amenities, yes.

Tom McINTOSH: Would you not see that by increasing the amount of housing in the inner city, we are giving more people an opportunity to be close to services? And you have been here, you heard me.

David FIDEL: What people are we talking about?

Tom McINTOSH: Victorians.

David FIDEL: Victorians. People most in need or are we trying to create a cosmopolitan culture in the city? What do you mean?

Tom McINTOSH: All Victorians. Well, we are expanding the social housing.

David FIDEL: No, that sounds like some smokescreen stuff. You got another question?

Tom McINTOSH: Well, do you want to explain what you meant by fringe dwellers then?

David FIDEL: People that are pushed to the edge of town because they cannot afford to live anywhere closer.

Tom McINTOSH: And why is that?

David FIDEL: Why can't they afford to live anywhere closer?

Tom McINTOSH: Yes.

David FIDEL: That is the only place they can afford. It is cheaper on the outskirts of town.

Tom McINTOSH: So if there was more housing close to town, would they be able to come back closer to town?

David FIDEL: Affordable housing?

Tom McINTOSH: Affordable housing for all segments of society, yes.

David FIDEL: The idea of knocking down existing homes while there is a housing crisis does not make sense on the surface.

Tom McINTOSH: So you do not support getting more housing onto existing land?

David FIDEL: It basically comes down to the triple bottom line, which is something I learned 20 years ago.

Tom McINTOSH: You seem like a smart, intelligent, articulate guy.

David FIDEL: Thanks, mate. Do not worry about that. Twenty years ago I was taught about the triple bottom line, which is the economic benefits, the social benefits and the environmental benefits. That is the prime tenet of sustainability and sustainable best practices. It was 20 years ago I learned that.

Tom McINTOSH: Did you got to uni?

David FIDEL: Yes, I went to uni. I went to TAFE as well.

Tom McINTOSH: I did not; I went to TAFE. But that is good you went to TAFE as well.

David FIDEL: That is great, mate. So you are from Ballarat. Is there anything else you want to know?

Tom McINTOSH: No.

David FIDEL: All right. Great.

Tom McINTOSH: Sorry, I do have more questions.

David FIDEL: Yes. Go for it.

Tom McINTOSH: Actually, I am running out of time. You made the comments about the ice dealers and about the people using the injecting centres. I am just a bit confused on your politics – whether you are supporting people who are down on their luck or whether you want people who are down on their luck to go to the outer suburbs and get out of the way.

David FIDEL: It is the inconsistency of policy.

Tom McINTOSH: That is an inconsistency in your story. I am lost as to – people do not have to be on a particular political spectrum –

David FIDEL: Do not put it next to a primary school. And if you are going to put it next to the flats, then make sure the door locks.

Tom McINTOSH: So where should the injecting facility be?

The CHAIR: Sorry, but that is a bit out of scope.

Tom McINTOSH: Well, he raised it.

The CHAIR: We are out of time for Mr McIntosh, so I will go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Hi. You are not the first person, I think even today, to use the term ‘divide and conquer’ in relation to how the government has engaged. Can you speak to us a bit more about why you have used that term?

David FIDEL: Yes, absolutely. In the community housing that they are building, they do not have wire doors – they do not have security doors. So in order to have a conversation with someone, you will have to open the door. There are plenty of instances when a neighbour might be having some problems and will come to your door and want to talk to you. Now, if you do not have screen doors where you can safely address someone face to face and you have only got a peephole – you are trying to talk through the door – you may just be more likely to open up the door, compromising your security. For the person knocking at the door, they need to have a conversation, but the person behind the door needs their security. There are just little, subtle things like that – a big range of little, subtle things like that that occur – that make people divided. Is that sufficient as an example?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is helpful. Are there any others that you might want to provide?

David FIDEL: People have complex needs. There are always going to be people who do things just to survive, whether that is taking substances or distributing substances. I am like, 'Let's not pretend that it doesn't happen.' Now we are going to have legalised marijuana. It looks like it is going that way. That is only because of the recognition of this that has already been going on in the community. So demonising people for just surviving and doing whatever they need to do and then trying to put it somewhere where you cannot see it or talking down to it – it is like the way they used to talk about graffiti. Now it is like a beautiful art form – 'Let's paint some walls and stuff like that' – but back then it was like 'No, it's bad. These bad people are doing these things.' The people that are getting oppressed cannot come together to create collective bargaining against the people who do not need a whole lot of people. If we are all islands and individuals, we are just powerless.

There was a pub sign in Richmond that said, 'Alcohol is not the problem. Blame and shame the individual.' No, it is a societal problem. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and we can do better, guys. I am 41 years old. I have hardly had opportunities to do stuff. I worked in the construction industry as a traffic administrator. Then then the mandates came in, and I got fired because I would not take the jab. Then I got a job at the Victorian Aboriginal chamber of commerce, and I got fired from that when the office mandates came in. That was supposed to be a space of community. Anyway, I am not going to talk about that traumatising experience.

We just need to realise who we are, where we are and what we are doing, because it does not seem that way. We have gone and done all the research. We know how things work. Let us just not pretend anymore – no more gaslighting. We are working on the same team to make this a better place for everyone. We are very special in Australia. We have got great opportunities, but we do not take advantage of them. In the flats we get opportunities for tight-knit communities, and then we can model that, reach out to the broader community, bring them in. According to the Fitzroy Residents Association, which is the broader community association, the flats are the heart of Fitzroy. The flats are the heart of Melbourne, and Melbourne is the heart of Victoria. Victoria, I would say, is the heart of Australia, but that might be a little contested.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Am I out of time?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is all right. Thank you, Chair.

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

John BERGER: Thank you, Chair. I do not have any questions for David, but I want to thank him for his informative contribution. I think it will be very useful for us, when we are making our deliberations, to take into consideration all of your thoughts, so I thank you for your comments today.

David FIDEL: There is one thing I also want to say. We talked about the shooting gallery, the needle exchange. I understand it is very important that we provide these opportunities for people to have a safe space to be able to do things, and it takes it off the street. I hear from users that there is not enough when they go and stuff like that, so it looks like it is definitely in demand and they appreciate it. I know you need to find a place for it, but now they are going to build a pill-testing place across the road from Atherton Gardens. It seems like a bit of a pattern, and it sort of talks to that idea of managed decline. Let us make these drug spaces, and then we can call it a slum and wipe it out. It is the same stuff that happened with the commission. It is just managed decline. It is like you are doing this on purpose. You are making this stuff bad on purpose. It is just to paint a picture of us and get rid of us.

The CHAIR: Sorry, I am just trying to understand. Please forgive me if I am paraphrasing –

David FIDEL: Pill testing is good, but maybe put it where all the clubs are and stuff like that, not across from the flats.

The CHAIR: Are you saying that the location of pill-testing facilities or the safe injecting room is designed to bring down the amenity or whatever of the housing aspects?

David FIDEL: It feels like that. It looks like that on the surface. I do not know the depth of managed decline, but it is really hard to convince me that it is not happening.

The CHAIR: I just want to make clear in my own mind what you are sort of not asserting but suggesting.

David FIDEL: Managed decline. That is the big one to remember.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I have a follow-up, just because we have got some time. You mentioned that you were an observer of the class action relating to the housing towers. Can you tell us, from your experience of observing, what that was like? What did you see?

David FIDEL: The head of Homes Victoria appeared as though he was very versed in the process of transitioning people from housing, so it looked like he already had that expertise. When they were asking him, ‘When did you come up with this decision?’ he was like, ‘What are you talking about? I guess when the money came through.’ It is because it seemed to always be part of the idea. When he got hired, that is what he was hired for, so he did not really understand the question. It is like this project was always on the books. As far as the documents used to be able to make the decision or deliberate it, he put in the submission to cabinet, and then cabinet played around with it and it became cabinet privilege. But we are thinking: why would a guy whose whole portfolio is the assets of Victoria then say, ‘Listen, let’s sell them off’? Kensington – was it 17 cents on the dollar that the land was sold for? It is really shady stuff. Why can’t we see the documents? If everything is aboveboard, then there should be open and vigorous debate and discussion about the pros and cons, the triple bottom line, everything. We should be making decisions together. The internet exists now. We can all have a say very easily with the click of a button. But it seems now we have got to have these levels of unaccountability put in place. Centrelink used to be a government department. Now it has got rebranding every few years. We have got Workforce Australia. What is that – ‘force me to work’ Victoria? What is the messaging here? Are you trying to do things and trying to get further and further away from being the people that are responsible for it? There is no trust in the community, brother.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: The provision of documents that you mentioned specifically came up first thing this morning in this inquiry process. As you said, if we are provided the necessary justifications for demolition of buildings, then perhaps there can be a robust community discussion based on facts about why those towers would be demolished, as opposed to now, from what I am seeing, when there is an absence of information that is fuelling panic and misinformation around the community.

David FIDEL: Yes. We are feeling like it is really oppressive bullying tactics that just make us shut up and do what we are told. That goes against everything that the whole government process is supposed to be about. When I went to law school I asked my teachers, ‘Okay, so do we own the government or does the government own us?’ None of the teachers would answer except one. Do you know what he said? ‘If I answer that, I could lose my job.’ What is going on? What are we doing here?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you.

The CHAIR: That brings an end to the questions, David. I want to thank you very much for your time. You were very confident in the way you presented, so you did not need anyone else to come up. We will bring this session to a close. Thanks for your contribution.

David FIDEL: Thank you for listening, everybody.

Witness withdrew.