

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

Melbourne – Tuesday 5 August 2025

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Tom McIntosh

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WITNESSES

Harry Millward, Secretary, and

Jordan van den Lamb, Member, Renters and Housing Union.

The CHAIR: Thank you, and welcome back to the next session of the Legal and Social Issues Committee Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers. I am Joe McCracken, the Chair, and we will go through the members of our committee.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Good afternoon. Anasina Gray-Barberio, Northern Metro.

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

Ryan BATCHELOR: Ryan Batchelor, Southern Metro.

The CHAIR: And then we have got two members online as well. We will go from left to right, Sonja and then Michael.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Hi. Sonja Terpstra, Member for North-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Michael GALEA: And g'day. Michael Galea, Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore, the information that you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during 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 you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and then they will ultimately be made public and put on the website.

Just for the Hansard record, are you able to say your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of?

Harry MILLWARD: My name is Harry Millward, and I am the Secretary of the Renters and Housing Union.

Jordan van den LAMB: Thank you. I am Jordan van den Lamb, and I am a Member of the Renters and Housing Union.

The CHAIR: Perfect. Thanks so much for that. We will probably have about 5 or so minutes for a presentation or an oral presentation, and then we will take questions from there. So, Harry, I will hand it over to you. Thanks.

Harry MILLWARD: So, thank you, members of the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee for hearing us today. I want to begin by acknowledging that we meet on stolen and unceded lands of the Wurundjeri, Woi-wurrung and Bunurong peoples of the Kulin nation. I state this not for comfort but to connect this government's displacement policies to the ongoing colonial violence. I also acknowledge that this is Homelessness Week, something that is hugely relevant to the subject today.

RAHU, the Renters and Housing Union, is a union of private and public tenants with over 1400 members based in Victoria, and we strongly condemn the planned demolitions and privatisation of the 44 public housing towers. We call for the recognition of the primacy of the right to affordable and accessible and appropriate housing over the right to the interests of property investment and property held for the purpose of financial gain.

In listening to the previous proceedings, we note that the disabled community has been used as a battering ram to displace people, which we find disingenuous for the following reasons: the private sector is allowed to run rampant in abusing and evicting disabled people, including disabled children, with practically no guardrails, and the government has shown little interest in its long-term power in meaningfully building, retrofitting or

acquiring high-quality public housing. Disability is not a monolith – it is not one size fits all – so I would put to this committee that displacement harms disabled people who find the current flats to be appropriate for them.

Victoria already has Australia's lowest proportion of non-market housing. We ask that this government become a global leader in universal public housing access. Our submission goes over the following failures of this plan: the human and social costs, the predatory alternatives that have become policy and the undemocratic decisions that have led to the planned demolitions.

I note that this inquiry has heard from experts and academics that reveal none of the public evidence supports the government's proposal. Even reports commissioned and subsequently buried by the government have found the government's approach to be ineffective and that it should not be reproduced.

The inquiry has heard testimony from residents on the extreme lack of consultation from government over the demolitions of their homes, many who found out about the following demolitions of their homes through news reports. What has not been emphasised, however, is who the government has been consulting with. We can see published ministerial diaries, as well as evidence from class action that the government has consulted heavily with real estate and industry groups, including advisory firms such as Cushman & Wakefield, the same real estate advisory firm that advises Donald Trump, and firms like M21 Advisory, all with the stated aim of maximising the profits of their clients. It is clear from the government's emphasis on consultation with private industry, compared to their lack thereof with residents, that the government's motive here – I will quote from RMIT's report on the public housing renewal program – is:

...that the private profit motive is the primary driving policy directive ...

of this government's proposal.

At a time where there is a desperate housing crisis and over 4000 public housing units sit empty, this government should not be destroying what little public housing we still have. We would demand that we halt all evictions and demolitions; truly consult with tenants about the outcomes they want before any decisions are made; build public housing proportional to need, eliminating the public housing waiting list; and end means testing for public housing access. I will go over to Jordan.

Jordan van den LAMB: In addition to Harry's remarks I would like to bring to this inquiry my experience of speaking with thousands of renters from all across Victoria and Australia, and the terrible conditions that they live in in the private market. The issues that have come to light due to the government's managed decline of public housing are the canary in the coalmine when it comes to the government's handling of housing in general. The fake concern that we have seen on display during this inquiry from members of this government rings especially hollow when the profits of property investors, such as those on this panel, have carried far more weight in shaping government policy than the safety and wellbeing of renters.

When Victoria has the lowest density of public housing in the entire country, it means that more renters are forced to live in private rentals and that those private rentals become increasingly unaffordable. If this government's housing policy was truly about the wellbeing of tenants, we would have seen an explosion of investment in public housing decades ago. We have known since this government first came to power that families in the private market are living in homes covered in black mould, people with disabilities are sleeping on the streets and the market is demanding laughable amounts of people to live in share houses that are in far worse condition than any public housing flats. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will start off with questions and then we will rotate through the panel. You had a few different recommendations. One of them was to ensure that all local government areas in the state have a minimum of 15 per cent public housing dwellings. How would that happen?

Harry MILLWARD: The government would build and acquire public housing until at least 15 per cent of housing was public housing. This was done in the past, and there is no reason that it could not be done in the future if that were policy.

The CHAIR: In all local government areas?

Harry MILLWARD: Why not?

The CHAIR: Well, I mean, I represent a country seat. We go all the way from Melton out to the South Australian border, and I am just trying to think about the practicalities of how you do something like that. I am not trying to shoot you down or anything like that. I am just thinking, how would you roll out a program like that when there are labour shortages in some parts of the state? I mean, you look at somewhere like, you know, Kaniva out in the West Wimmera shire, for example, compared to Melton – two local government areas, both in my electorate but both vastly different in terms of labour supply, connectedness, public transport. I am just trying to talk through how you might consider rolling out some of those ideas.

Harry MILLWARD: Sure. I would not suggest that this is something that could be done tomorrow, and I acknowledge that labour shortages are a factor in how we build anything over the years. I think that for someone like yourself, investing in construction within your local government area is a net positive, both for the population as far as housing goes, as well as in getting jobs in the area. I think that can only be considered a net positive for your constituents. I would also say that we have spoken to many people in small, remote communities who are doing it tough and who are paying more than they should be in private rentals, so to have an alternative model within different communities could only be a positive thing. I would also say that the mixed model, mixing public housing tenants with public community tenants, as was testified before – that is how you get that mix to work. You do not do it in a single building or a single estate; you do it across communities.

Jordan van den LAMB: Yes. I would also say that if state governments could do it under Robert Menzies, then we can probably do it again.

The CHAIR: Yes. Robert Menzies was a federal MP, but –

Jordan van den LAMB: And it is a state government responsibility. I feel like when we had a Liberal Prime Minister and, you know, that was a policy –

The CHAIR: And a Liberal Premier that built a lot of the towers.

Jordan van den LAMB: Correct, yes.

The CHAIR: I understand where you are coming from. I do have a lot of sympathy with you. Unfortunately, my sympathy has expired because my time has run out. I am so sorry. I am going to hand it over to Mr Galea, I think.

Michael GALEA: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, both, for joining us. Recommendation 6 of your submission says or calls for the elimination of all means testing for public housing. How would this work? And more to the point, how do you ensure that those who most need it will be able to access it?

Harry MILLWARD: Well, that would just be reversing a policy change that has come into effect within the last century. Public housing was not means tested in the way that it is today; a lot of workers were able to access housing that today would not have access to that. Acknowledging that the most vulnerable should have priority access does not mean to say that anybody who wants to be should not be on the waiting list. And if our recommendations are taken as a whole rather than individually, then working towards ending the public housing waiting list by building and acquiring public housing would mean that there would be opportunity for more people to get out of the private housing market, either through purchasing their own home, which would be more affordable if there was more public housing, or by living happily in public housing if they so choose.

Michael GALEA: So you would not be advocating this as a first measure; this would be further on down the track. Is that correct?

Harry MILLWARD: I do not see an issue with dropping that requirement as a first measure, so long as it is taken in as a whole with the other recommendations for building public housing. If we were to remove that requirement today, that would not dictate that the people who are most in need would not still be at the front of the line.

Michael GALEA: So you would need to do that work to prioritise that in that process.

Harry MILLWARD: Correct.

Michael GALEA: Yes. Thank you. You also state that the forced relocations harm the current public tenants. How would you propose to fix the issues in the public housing towers, the severe structural issues, without relocations – or should they stay there whilst that is going on?

Harry MILLWARD: I am not an expert on construction or redevelopment. People who are better experts than me have already testified, and I have seen their evidence and I believe that it is compelling. When this plan was first announced I was speaking to a government representative. I told them that this was something that was really important and that for us to be able to accept that this was the decision that had to be made, public information about why the towers could not be retrofitted and could not be kept would need to be provided to us. I was assured at that time that that information would be given to us. We then never heard from the government since. Given the publicly available information that has been given to us by other groups, yes, I think that retrofitting could be done and with far more minimal disruption to the lives of tenants.

The CHAIR: Your time is up, Mr Galea. I am sorry about that. It goes very quickly, I know. I will hand it over to Ms Gray-Barberio now.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you, Chair, and thank you both for your presentation today. The select committee today has heard a lot about the need to have consulted better with residents. If the process was done in a more respectful way, would that make the project overall acceptable?

Harry MILLWARD: It might have made it different; I do not think that respect would have made it acceptable. I do not think that respectfully telling people that they will be moving is something that would have solved the issue. I think that it would have had to have been a collaborative process from the start for this to be something that would have changed things for the better. We cannot go back in time, but what we can do is say that none of the towers have fallen so far, so we can step back and say nothing has happened yet. People have been removed, but we can stop this; let us start doing the right thing now.

I do not think that it would have made it good, but talking with residents probably would have been a really good start. I would also note that I represent a lot of private tenants; I am not aware of any public studies or information on the effect of the demolition of the towers on private tenants as well.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Is it simply the case that Homes Victoria should have treated residents – well, I think you already just spoke to that – with more respect; do you think that something more fundamental about this plan has produced such a strong public backlash?

Harry MILLWARD: I think fundamentally there are a lot of factors to this public backlash. I think the lack of transparency has been big. I think that the lack of fair communication has been a big factor. I do not think that this could have ever been done right if the information that was leading to those decisions was not released to the public. It is fundamentally undemocratic and goes against everything that democratic institutions are supposed to be standing for.

Jordan van den LAMB: At the end of the day, there is no respectful way to privatise and demolish someone's home. I think had the government done a consultation process respectfully, they would have probably come to a different conclusion and one that did not involve public housing residents locking themselves to machinery in order to avoid their houses being demolished.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you both for that. This inquiry has focused a lot on the conversion of public into community housing, but the majority of homes that will be built across these demolished estates will actually be market rate private housing – in the case of the ground lease model, private rentals run by corporate landlords. In your opinion, is it appropriate for private market rate housing to be built on public land?

Harry MILLWARD: Put simply, no, I do not think it is appropriate that the government is investing more into market housing – or business housing or community housing, whatever. I think that the government's role is to make sure that there is a way for people to access accessible, affordable and appropriate housing that does not involve a group that requires profit to run, essentially.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you. I have run out of time.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I am going to pass it over to Mr Batchelor now.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks, Chair. Thank you both for coming in. I just wanted to ask, do you believe the reports that have been made publicly available by building surveyors and engineers about the existing condition of some of the buildings? For example, the report that was tabled in June last year from April 2022 from Approval Systems on the Elgin Street towers said that there was evidence that the sewer stacks and risers were failing and subject to significant leaks, dampness in the walls and the formation of mould – the sewer stacks appear to be the source of that internal dampness – that there was evidence of extensive corrosion of concrete reinforcement, that there were noncompliant ceiling heights in common corridors, that reduced ceiling height is a health and an amenity concern and a consideration for smoke layer in the event of a fire. Do you believe that? Have you read it? Do you believe it?

Jordan van den LAMB: I think it is uncontroversial that RAHU believes in evidence of the government's managed decline of public housing.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Have you read it?

Harry MILLWARD: I have not got it in front of me, so I am not sure.

Ryan BATCHELOR: You have not read these reports in preparing your submission, your position and the evidence coming before us today.

Jordan van den LAMB: I have seen those reports.

Ryan BATCHELOR: I asked Harry if he had read them.

Harry MILLWARD: I am part of a group of people. I am not the only person required to read reports. That is not my role.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Right.

Harry MILLWARD: My role is to speak for my members, and we have got a lot of people who have read all of these reports.

Ryan BATCHELOR: And are you concerned by them, and do you think that it demonstrates that the government needs to take action to improve the condition of those who are tenants of the public housing towers?

Harry MILLWARD: I could not hear the question, sorry. Could you speak up just a little bit?

Ryan BATCHELOR: Do you believe these reports? Do you think it demonstrates that the government needs to take action to improve the condition of the tenants who live in these public housing towers?

Harry MILLWARD: I believe that there are a lot of improvements that need to be made in the public housing towers. I do not think that is a controversial statement. I think that it has been pretty well documented that the estates have been basically run down and not maintained for many years. Am I believing that all alternatives have been looked at and that has been part of the decision-making process for the government? Not necessarily.

Ryan BATCHELOR: My time is up.

The CHAIR: It is. I will now hand over to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Good afternoon. The government has been at pains to insist that their proposal does not in any way present the idea of privatisation in relation to the public housing estates. Is that your understanding?

Harry MILLWARD: My understanding is that the government is talking about leasing out these properties for 40 years. I think that it is pretty unrealistic to assume that when leasing out to private owners and different groups, there is any sort of indication that it is ever going to come back into public hands. In 40 years the government is not going to be in power – the government that is here. It seems like a pretty convenient way to

wash their hands of it. I think that it is, in essence, privatisation permanently. You can use whatever words you want – there is no indication that this will ever become public land again.

Jordan van den LAMB: Yes, I think privatising something for 40 years is still privatising something.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Hear, hear. Can I ask just a further question? What do you expect the impact of the government's plan to be – the relocation of thousands of residents, even with the initially proposed 10 per cent social housing uplift, as it is called? What do you think these things will have in terms of impact on the broader residential market across Victoria?

Jordan van den LAMB: Yes, it is going to be big. Public housing is a non-market actor. Its very existence reduces the cost of the private rental market, so demolishing 44 towers will directly increase the price of the private market. Also, I have had workers at Homes Vic reaching out to me talking about how they have engaged private real estate agents to take private rentals and reach out to landlords to rent these properties for public housing tenants. That obviously has an impact on the private rental market, particularly when vacancy rates are at 1 per cent.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. Do I still have some time?

The CHAIR: Yes, you have still got 40 seconds.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Perfect, thank you – 40 seconds! We have heard a lot through this inquiry – as you, I think, have been following along – about the impacts on residents and their communities in relation to the plan since it has been announced and about the relocations that have happened so far. If this proposal is successful in demolishing all of the public housing towers, plus some of the walk-ups that have recently been announced as well, what is this going to mean for the future of genuinely affordable housing in our state?

Harry MILLWARD: I think the answer to that has already started. I think that we have seen the erosion of public housing as a real alternative to private housing in the lead-up to what we are calling the housing crisis. Rents are a pretty disproportionate rate of people's income, far exceeding the increases in wages or unemployment. So, yes, I think the answer is something that we are already seeing, which is a crisis.

Jordan van den LAMB: Yes, it is going to be bad. All the evidence and all the literature says it is going to be bad, and this will make it worse.

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

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will now hand over to Ms Terpstra, who is online. Sonja, over to you.

Sonja TERPSTRA: Thanks, Chair. Thanks, Harry and Jordan, for your presentation. Thanks for coming in. It is Homelessness Week, as you probably both already know, and I would like to talk a little bit about that. Also, women over 55 are becoming the largest growing cohort of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria, and certainly in my region, the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region, it is a significant issue. Also what we are seeing is that there is a greater demand in public housing from people who want to access single-bedroom dwellings. There has been a change in demand in the mix for that. So what sorts of things do you think government should be doing to address that problem? Obviously with older women some of the issues that they are experiencing and some of the homelessness aspects are hidden due to things like gender inequality and family violence. Sometimes when they do get placements in public housing or if they are offered something, it may not be suitable. They may not feel safe. What do you think government should do to ensure that women over 55 get early access to public housing that is suitable for them? And what are you hearing from women over 55 in the work that you are doing?

Jordan van den LAMB: I think building suitable and safe public housing instead of demolishing it would be a good start.

Harry MILLWARD: Yes, increasing the amount of public housing across the board – a rising tide raises all ships. I think that it is not necessary to focus on any particular group to know that the increase in public housing will help everybody. Older women are definitely a growing number of homeless people. That just says to me that the housing system as it stands is broken. We have made –

Sonja TERPSTRA: No, it is actually about women experiencing family violence and gender inequality.

Jordan van den LAMB: Yes, and the lack of access to public housing gives these people nowhere to go. I have spoken –

Sonja TERPSTRA: They need crisis accommodation, which they get –

Jordan van den LAMB: For two weeks.

Sonja TERPSTRA: But they are after single-bedroom dwellings, which there is a shortage of –

Jordan van den LAMB: So build them.

Sonja TERPSTRA: and that is why if you look at the housing stock, that needs to change. One of the things government is doing is responding to that, so I am asking you what you think government should do to make it quicker and easier for women over 55, and I am interested to know what women over 55 are telling you about what they want to see happening.

Harry MILLWARD: Women over 55, our members, are telling us that they do not want these homes to be destroyed. They do not want these towers to be destroyed. They want an increase in public housing. We have got women, older women, who are on the waiting list for long periods of time, so I think that summarising everything by ‘build, acquire and maintain more public housing’ is an important part of the solution to the issue you raise, which is a very important issue.

Sonja TERPSTRA: None of those towers are in my region, in the North-Eastern Metropolitan Region, but certainly what we are seeing with women over 55 – and we talked about this earlier with some other witnesses – is that sometimes when they go into public housing or any housing, their mobility needs might change. You may have a disability, which may get worse over time. Sometimes people require a different housing mix and different disability access requirements. So how can government make sure that it meets the needs of all of those people, separate from the housing towers? I know you want to keep going back to that, but none of those towers are in my region. Could you speak to me about the sorts of things that people in my region might have been telling you?

The CHAIR: Ms Terpstra, sorry, your time is up, but I will give the guys 20 seconds if they would like to respond.

Harry MILLWARD: Sure. Just to be clear, our push to build, maintain and acquire more public housing is across the board, not particularly in the inner-city regions of Melbourne. We would want to see a commitment to more public housing across all regions, and we have set that out in our submission.

Jordan van den LAMB: Yes, I would say build public housing in your region. I have been in your region and into a number of empty homes that are perfectly suitable for people to live in. Acquire them too and give them to people experiencing these things.

Sonja TERPSTRA: So long as they are not ‘shit rentals’, Jordan. Love your work.

Jordan van den LAMB: Thank you.

The CHAIR: We have got time for a couple of last questions, so I will go to Ms Gray-Barberio first and then I will go to Mr Batchelor.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Aiv is going to ask our question. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Mr Puglielli, apologies.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. I will do one further. We have been hearing for quite some time, beyond just the timeline of this inquiry, that there are public homes in the towers but also blocks of walk-up apartments and standalone public homes that have been left vacant for significant periods of time – even years at a time. Do you think there is any justification for this, given the number of people who are waiting on waitlists right now for a home?

Harry MILLWARD: I do think there is a justification for this, and that justification is the same justification we are using to leave a lot of properties empty in the private sector. That is profit – profit for developers, profit for investors. It is a great reason if profit is your motive.

Jordan van den LAMB: Yes, and if profit is not your motive, then there is no justification. Public housing rents used to go to the maintenance, acquisition, repair and building of public housing; that was removed. Now public housing rents go to consolidated revenue, or whatever Victoria calls it, and are just not reinvested. Reintroducing that requirement that public housing rents go back into maintaining public housing would be great. I have been inside a lot of empty public housing, and it is shocking and it makes me really upset.

The CHAIR: Last question, Mr Batchelor, and then we will finish up.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Thanks. Just quickly to clarify something before: Harry, you said that disability is not a monolith and one size does not fit all, but we do have disability access standards; we do have a *Disability Discrimination Act*. They do have widths of doorways which should be made common and entry standards for getting into showers. Do you think that any proposal to renovate or retrofit the public housing towers should comply with current disability access standards?

Harry MILLWARD: Ideally, yes. I think that –

Ryan BATCHELOR: What does ‘ideally’ mean?

Harry MILLWARD: I think that ‘ideally’ in this case would mean that, where possible, you meet disability standards. I would say that when looking at this issue the private sector does not meet with a lot of disability standards.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Is that the standard we should hold government to, what the private sector gets away with?

Harry MILLWARD: No, but I do not think that the government or the public sector has held itself to any worthwhile standard as far as maintaining the stock that it has goes over many years, so I am trying to hold you to a higher standard than you are holding yourself. Yes, make them as accessible as possible. However, not everybody needs the same level of access, and the people that are there do find those homes accessible, as they have told us and as they have said before, and so if a home is accessible to the person living there it seems to me to be pretty disingenuous to want to tear it down and rebuild it and put it in private hands to make it more accessible. I will say that the new builds have shown themselves to be of far worse quality. We have been talking to people in the new builds that have happened in the last five or so years who are dealing with mould and leaks that the people in the current housing towers just are not dealing with because they were built differently. So I think that if we want to hold ourselves to those standards, then we need to hold ourselves to those standards across the board.

Ryan BATCHELOR: Harry, there is ample evidence of mould and leaks in the towers; let us not lie to the committee. I think we are done.

The CHAIR: We are going to call time there. We appreciate both your appearing today and giving evidence. Thanks very much for that. You will be given a proof version of the transcript to have a look over and make any minor corrections or anything like that, but apart from that, thanks very much – appreciate your time.

Witnesses withdrew.