

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers

Melbourne – Wednesday 6 August 2025

MEMBERS

Joe McCracken – Chair

Michael Galea – Deputy Chair

Ryan Batchelor

Anasina Gray-Barberio

Renee Heath

Ann-Marie Hermans

Rachel Payne

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Jacinta Ermacora

David Ettershank

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Aiv Puglielli

Sonja Terpstra

Richard Welch

WITNESSES

Gerry Noonan, and

Richard Cameron.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings of the Legal and Social Issues Committee. I declare the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing of the Inquiry into the Redevelopment of Melbourne's Public Housing Towers open. Please make sure that any mobile phones are switched to silent so we minimise background noise.

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

We will now go and introduce the members of the committee. I am Joe McCracken, the Chair. We will go to my left.

Renee HEATH: Hello, my name is Renee Heath, and I am a Member for Eastern Victoria Region.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: I am Ann-Marie Hermans, Member for the South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

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

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

The CHAIR: Online we have also got Mr Batchelor and Ms Ermacora. I do not know if they want to say hello. They are both there as well. We will also be joined by Mr Galea, who is moments away, I am sure. He just got caught on the Monash, so that is just a bit unfortunate.

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 say the same thing, you 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. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript, and the transcripts will ultimately be made public and put on the committee's website.

Just for the Hansard record, gentlemen, can you please say your name and the organisation, if any, that you are appearing on behalf of? If not, just individual capacity. Gerry, over to you.

Gerry NOONAN: Gerry Noonan, individual capacity.

Richard CAMERON: Richard Cameron. I was the convenor of a major consortium which was trying to save the Elgin Street towers, including 76 professionals from the construction industry. I was the convenor. However, apart from that, I am just an architect and I am representing myself.

The CHAIR: No worries. Thank you.

Richard CAMERON: Well, just an architect.

The CHAIR: Would you like to do an opening presentation at all for a few minutes? I will go to Gerry first and then Richard. Gerry, I will hand it over to you, then we will go to Richard and then we will go to questions, okay? Over to you, Gerry.

Gerry NOONAN: All right. I am an engineer. I graduated from the Bendigo School of Mines in 1956 – not 1856, as somebody might have thought – and I subsequently joined CSIRO's soil mechanics section. I should think that very few people in this room would know what that is, because when I got the job there, all my schoolmates reckoned that soil mechanics were blokes who worked in underground garages. But we are not

here to tell any more jokes. But it was really a science within civil engineering pertaining to soil and rock and building foundations and things of that ilk, which was new. It really only emerged in the Second World War, particularly for the building of airstrips in a hurry in Europe, and in Australia to some extent too, and so forth. But that is of no great consequence.

My boss was a bloke called Dick Parry, who was an Australian who graduated from Melbourne University and then went to the UK, got a PhD in this newfangled science of soil mechanics and joined CSIRO at about the same time as I did. After three years, Parry, having got a PhD at London university Imperial College, was fairly well known in the very small world of soil mechanics because there were English companies operating in Australia and one of them decided that they were going to start a soil mechanics specialist engineering business and they, as the term today would be, 'headhunted' him, because he was the only Australian with a PhD in this science and he was young and enthusiastic. I had worked with him for three years at CSIRO and he offered me a job with him. This company was called foundation engineering. In 1960 that started. We had three years at CSIRO prior to that.

During the early 1960s, about 1961 or 62, the Victorian housing commission hired our company to do soil foundation investigations for this new lot of flats. It was the slum clearance program, which I am sure you have all read about. And all these new apartments – or flats, we used to call them then, of course; they have got upmarket now and gone American and got 'apartments'. I tend to call them flats still. So we did 40-odd buildings, 44 buildings, whatever it might have been – took soils; the idea of that was we drilled holes, took soil samples, did a lot of laboratory testing and then designed foundations accordingly to put these 20-storey buildings on. That was an interesting project for me as a young, enthusiastic engineer in those days.

It was a bit accidentally that I got involved in this because I saw Richard Riordan, who is a member of Parliament – and I did not know this inquiry was going on because all you read in the paper is the arguments about politics at the top level and football, so something like this would never get in the press, probably, but be that as it may – and I mentioned to Richard one day, because his name appeared as a shadow minister, and I knew him through the Lions Club of Parliament, which I am a member of too, but I will not go into the details of that because we have got to be finished by 3 o'clock, haven't we?

Renee HEATH: Roughly

Gerry NOONAN: He said, 'Oh, you know a lot about this.' So that was my little bit of knowing of that.

I did have another involvement, because in latter years I moved to Parkville to live after a bit of history of moving around in other parts of the world – Parkville is opposite the university, as you know – and I got involved in the St Vincent de Paul Society there, and a significant part of their work, back in the 1990s and stuff, was assisting people in need, and a lot of the need was coming from the housing commission flats, as you would call them. So I visited them quite often in those years, for some years, probably 10 or more – 20, I lose track of time – helping people there with food, boxes of food and stuff, veggies and fruit and groceries and then transport tickets and phone cards and all those sorts of things. We used to get supermarket vouchers from Woolies and Coles and so forth. I was often offered cups of tea, and you would get to talk to the people, as you would understand. I come from the Mallee so you sort of you always lean on the fence and talk to everybody, don't you? I did not inspect the apartments of course for structural and all that sort of thing, but you are sitting there talking, and they were in impeccable condition and well cared for and they did a great job, and the people loved their housing, and they loved their communities, and you could tell there was a very strong bond in living in these flats where there might be two or three blocks of them, as I am sure you are well aware. Recently, when this came up, I visited the Atherton Gardens flats in Fitzroy and inspected one of the flats; it was absolutely in perfect condition. Then I walked down the stairwell, and because you have got the bare walls of the concrete walls and all that, you can see if there is any cracking or faulting; there was nothing at all. I have walked around the outside of several other buildings – the ones in Flemington, the ones in North Melbourne and so on – so I have sort of bothered to have a bit of a look at those sorts of things. So that is pretty much my involvement.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Gerry. Richard?

Richard CAMERON: Thanks very much for asking us to come and say hello.

The CHAIR: Pleasure.

Richard CAMERON: I will basically give you a rough idea of who I am – architect extraordinaire and retired from everything else, apart from writing reports. What I am primarily interested in is the cost benefit, which in fact we are supposedly getting from this particular exercise of demolishing all the towers. I was involved, as I mentioned, with the architect Peter McIntyre, who designed the brick towers, and he was a professor of architecture and a gold medallist et cetera, and he and Clements Langford were the first design and construct group that actually were appointed by the housing commission to actually to work on the towers et cetera. They were the last design and construct group to actually do it, because what they were doing is they were proving pretty closely that the traditional form of construction et cetera was highly economic and in fact quicker and more flexible than the system which the housing Victoria group was actually using at the time. They did not get another job, as you are obviously aware, because there was an enormous amount of capital tied up in the Holmesglen factory.

However, Australia has the largest houses in the world. We in fact are the biggest consumer of housing space by area in the world. We in fact have around 2300 metres per house. The next one is New Zealand at 2100 and third is America. Then you go down into Spain et cetera, in the next group, and they are at about 1200. So we are used to huge areas to actually live in. We also, like the rest of the world, have a major housing crisis and an ever-increasing debt burden. What we hear on international news are those sorts of things.

Our youth are expressing doubt regarding their future, be it climate change, social unrest, law and order and, for many, just purely the meaning of life. This inquiry is immersed in each of these areas, I believe, and it is hoped that the contributions of the numerous participants will alert the government to our concerns and to question the direction we are going in to ensure that a rational analysis of the housing crisis is endorsed and fundamental rights to shelter, safety and sustenance – the three rights which we enjoy – are actually maintained.

Now, if we have a look at a very quick analysis with regard to the history of this particular exercise, the Elgin Street and Nicholson Street towers were vacated in 2022. By the way, I do have hard copies of what I am presenting. I will give you a USB for your records as well, and if you would like, I can give you an advance copy right now if you want.

The CHAIR: Sure. Whatever you are happy with.

Richard CAMERON: All right. In 2022 the Elgin Street tower was vacated. Reports were commissioned in January 2022 from several consultants to say, ‘Look at this, look at that and look at the other,’ and they ended up with a report by Hayball to examine four design options. The fundamental thing was that there was a certain brief which said, ‘You must increase the size of the rooms, you must do this, you must do that et cetera to meet our 2022 standards of area.’ When you actually look at that particular process, every bedroom which you add to a sustainable house, according to the government, requires 20 metres extra space – 20 metres extra space – absolutely extraordinary. I remember we used to have two people in the bedroom; you have now got to have a bedroom plus bathrooms and all sorts of things. The actual area analysis really does not stack up.

In 2021 the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing set up the Paving the Way Forward group to examine and form an assessment of a master plan for the future, predominantly in North Melbourne. This consultation continued till 2023, with a North Melbourne residents action group and definitive plan outlined in 2022–23. It was reported on in June 2023. In September 2023 the federal and state governments announced that the big build was to demolish all the billed blocks, with Elgin Street and Nicholson Street first. The drawings and development data were issued by Homes Victoria in 2024, and I basically used those drawings and that information to assess the business case. Primary demolition of the towers commenced in 2024, which was four months prior to the Heritage Council actually listening to my submission to protect the buildings.

The CHAIR: I am just conscious of time, Richard, that is all.

Richard CAMERON: All right. Okay.

The CHAIR: Apologies. I do not mean to push you on.

Richard CAMERON: No. Very quickly – my research reveals that the demolition of the two towers and their replacement by the development proposed by the current architects will see a net increase of residents of 30 people – not 240 houses, 30 people – because what they did was they actually made a whole lot of one bedrooms and have got rid of a whole lot of three, four and five bedrooms et cetera.

I have got a recommendation here that this inquiry immediately advise the Parliament of Victoria to pass a motion to pause the demolition and any further planning of the public and social housing proposed in the current policy of Housing Victoria, regarding the demolition and replacement of the 44 public houses, and to recommend the preparation and public release of an independent debate and detailed cost-benefit study managed under the auspices of the Auditor-General. That is how serious I reckon this is.

Now, if you are going to ask us questions, it may be that some of the answers I have got here will actually –

The CHAIR: Yes, I think we can explore some of that through questions, if you are comfortable with that.

Richard CAMERON: All right.

The CHAIR: I will start off, and then we will go back and forth between the members. Richard, you mentioned the Elgin Street towers. Have you seen the condition report at all?

Richard CAMERON: Have I seen the condition report?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Richard CAMERON: I have seen two reports. I have seen one which analysed – no, I have not seen a condition report. I have only been told that there is a leak in the sewerage.

The CHAIR: That is all.

Richard CAMERON: With regard to the condition report, I have read a report by building surveyors who in fact went through and looked at all the regulations and where things were not so-called ‘compliant’.

The CHAIR: My question really is getting to: why do you think the government are trying to cover it up?

Richard CAMERON: Sorry?

The CHAIR: Why do you think the government are trying to cover it up?

Richard CAMERON: Well, that is a very loaded question, and I agree with you – I do not know why. The critical thing is that I believe that there is an agenda to actually get rid of them, no matter whether it is good, bad or indifferent. In fact when you look at the current situation or status of the buildings, the only two things which are noncompliant are the staircase, which in fact is the width of a cigarette box narrower than current regulations, and the other thing is there is a potential for some acoustic treatment between the two floors et cetera. The reason why there was a difference with regard to the stairs is that we metricated.

The CHAIR: Yes.

Richard CAMERON: And they decided to make it easier for the builders, so instead of 3 foot 4 they called it 1 metre – that is the 37 millimetres – which in fact is the width of the staircase.

The CHAIR: I have only got limited time, so I want to ask you another one. One of the other reasons that has been given for demolition is because the buildings do not meet current regulations and standards. One of those standards is to do with earthquake.

Richard CAMERON: Well – earthquake. Australia is nominated as the lowest-risk earthquake zone in the world. In Melbourne there is a mixture of earthquake zones, and the dividing line runs roughly through Kew and Hawthorn et cetera. On the east side of that there is a moderate classification; on the west side it is low. That is where all our towers are, within that area. The definition of low-risk in fact is within 50 years there is a 10 per cent chance of a medium-sized earthquake – in 50 years. We have not had an earthquake here for 50 years.

The CHAIR: Before my time expires, I am just trying to think – in comparison to all the other buildings in Melbourne that are probably built to similar standards, how many would be at risk, do you think?

Richard CAMERON: I would suggest the maximum number of buildings in Melbourne, multistorey residential which are sitting here which have compliance with earthquakes, would be about 5 per cent.

The CHAIR: Okay. My time is up, I am afraid. I am going to hand over to Mr Galea.

Richard CAMERON: That is all right. Sorry.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thanks very much both for joining us. Mr Noonan, I understand that you were involved in the construction of the towers, and Mr Cameron, you were also involved.

Richard CAMERON: I was part of the design and architectural team, yes.

Michael GALEA: Terrific. Thank you. I just want to touch on the staircase comment, because we have been into the Elgin Street tower, and that has an extremely narrow staircase. A matchbox is not going to allow people to pass on the stairwell, and that is what the current standard is, is it not?

Richard CAMERON: The current standard says that it should be a metre wide. The standard which it is built to is 973. That is 25 or 35 millimetres, so it complies within that much.

Michael GALEA: But it does not allow people to pass in the staircase, which is a safety risk.

Richard CAMERON: The extra 1.5 metres depends on how large you are, right?

Michael GALEA: Fair enough. To a group of politicians who probably could do some work in that space. Not all of us – myself, perhaps.

The CHAIR: Michael, stop it.

Michael GALEA: Okay. Thank you. So it would not be enough to, in the Elgin Street towers –

Richard CAMERON: I do not believe so. In fact if you have a look, there are not too many people that get caught in staircases et cetera, which are to the standard which was actually throughout Australia until 1974.

Michael GALEA: But I guess that is the point, isn't it? It is the standards that might have been okay at that time, but the standards have changed and improved.

Richard CAMERON: Sorry, we have not changed that much.

Michael GALEA: Can I ask why, in your view, were the towers built without adequate heating or cooling for the residents?

Gerry NOONAN: What was the question?

Michael GALEA: Why were they built without adequate heating or cooling? I grant you we have had global warming. Things are much worse now in terms of heat.

Richard CAMERON: With respect, what do you call adequate cooling and heating?

Michael GALEA: Well, we have had numerous witnesses at this inquiry who are residents complain about how hot their apartments are for extended periods, even after the heatwave has ended, and also about the reverse in winter, that it is freezing cold, so clearly it is inadequate. There is, as you are probably aware, a cooling program being rolled out across the towers. Why was this not done at the time, in your view?

Richard CAMERON: There are two answers to that. First of all, there is heating throughout, which in fact is hydronic heating, and with regard to cooling, you turn it off, obviously. With the proposal that we are looking at with the refurbishment, we are proposing within our costings for split system air conditioning in every one of them to be retained.

Michael GALEA: Why wasn't adequate cooling put in any of the towers when they were built?

Gerry NOONAN: Mate, in 1960 we could not spell air conditioning. I mean, don't you realise this? We did not have heating. I live in a house built in 1870. It is 150-something years old, in Parkville. All the houses in Parkville and inner suburban Melbourne were built in that era. They did not know – there was no such word.

There was heating. We had open fireplaces, and that is what we built. In 100 years there will be something different to what you are talking about now. Can you see they did not do those sorts of things?

Michael GALEA: I can, but there have been a lot of difficulties in applying newer methods and newer standards into these buildings. Do you accept that?

Gerry NOONAN: But no-one had air conditioning. I have not got air conditioning in my house. I have got hydronic heating. In Melbourne you get 10 hot days a year, for God's sake. You do not need air conditioning.

Michael GALEA: I would say, based on the evidence we have heard from the tenants, I think many of them do need air conditioning.

Gerry NOONAN: Well, you do because you are a softie, but I was born in the Mallee, mate. Air conditioning was sleeping on the verandah.

Michael GALEA: I will take your comment that they do not. I might leave that there. In terms of disability access – and again, I acknowledge standards have changed, but I would say it has been a good thing what considerations, if any, were made for disability access at the time of building? Because it seems that the buildings are structurally not capable of supporting many people who have physical impediments.

Richard CAMERON: Sorry, I cannot hear you.

The CHAIR: He asked about what provisions were made for disability access in the building.

Gerry NOONAN: I have no idea, because that word did not exist in our vocabulary in 1960 either. Seriously. It is true.

Michael GALEA: All these things are not suitable for the modern age though. You are acknowledging that these things were not put in place.

Gerry NOONAN: Correct.

Michael GALEA: I accept that there were different standards, but that is the point, isn't it: that we need public housing that is actually up to scratch for people to live in.

Richard CAMERON: True.

Gerry NOONAN: No argument.

Michael GALEA: But the structure of these buildings is not allowing that.

Richard CAMERON: What we are basically saying is that we can refurbish the existing, we can increase the width of access for disability and we can actually provide all of the requirements under the *Disability Act* for the refurbishment, and it costs one-fifth of what it costs to build in the new ones.

Michael GALEA: And how do you increase the stairwells? Sorry, my time is up.

Richard CAMERON: With due respect, the stairwells are in fact allowable under the law. In fact if you are looking at refurbishing things, previous regulations are still valid under the legislation.

The CHAIR: I am going to go to Dr Heath now, who is going to start her line of questioning.

Renee HEATH: Thank you so much for coming in and for your presentation. Gerry, I just want to ask you around the earthquake risk. It was actually a New Zealand consultancy that was used to do this condition report. How relevant do you think that is? I am going to ask two questions in one. Also the government plans to have people in the housing towers for another six years. Given that there is this so-called earthquake risk, how would you handle that? What is your view on the earthquake risk?

Gerry NOONAN: Well, I think it was answered by my colleague here. You answered that in some earlier questions. You might care to answer, because I am not a structural engineer, I am a geotechnical engineer. I am sorry, I am not trying to escape from the question, but we were involved – and I guess I am not the right person

to have here in a way, but because I had the personal involvement, I am probably the only one still alive that was involved in the building of them. We did the foundation building. Sorry about that.

Renee HEATH: No, that is that is great. Thank you. Do you have anything?

Richard CAMERON: I think that Gerry basically covered it. But as I said, Australia has in fact one of the lowest risks for earthquakes. To believe that a New Zealand earthquake specialist, who knows the difference between extreme earthquakes in New Zealand and low here et cetera would use his professional judgement and say low risk, 50 years, 10 per cent, that is fair enough et cetera. The other thing is that, no matter where we are, even in New Zealand, they have a risk of earthquakes and they design to a risk of earthquakes – it does not guarantee that the buildings are going to stand up.

Renee HEATH: Yes. Thank you.

Richard CAMERON: It reduces the risk, and it is managing the risk which is the critical thing. That is where we believe that the work which has actually been done and the work which can be done in a refurbishment would in fact cover that particular problem.

Renee HEATH: Amazing. Thank you. You provided a quantity survey on the cost of rebuilding or refurbishing the towers. The report says that the rebuild is – what is this, square metres? It would cost around \$60 million but to make it safe for earthquake you would only need to spend 3.7 per cent of that figure.

Richard CAMERON: Yes.

Renee HEATH: Does that make sense to you or does that sound feasible to you?

Richard CAMERON: Well, it is a little bit misleading what was actually said in there or where you got that information, because the whole of the structure is designed such that you have got the columns, beams and the slabs et cetera which in fact are designed to work in tandem with each other to resist the quakes. Therefore you are up to nearly 20 per cent of the total cost of the building in the design phase to look at manipulating and managing increasing slot sizes et cetera for earthquake conditions. So it is not 3 per cent, it is getting closer to 20 per cent. It is basically a revised structural design looking at the three dimensions rather than just what is involved in putting an extra bit of this here and extra columns here et cetera. So it is far, far more than 3 per cent.

Renee HEATH: Okay. Thank you.

Richard CAMERON: It is just the definition which is in the quantity surveying. All right?

Renee HEATH: Yes. Thank you. Thanks so much, Richard.

Richard CAMERON: That is all right.

The CHAIR: I will go to Ms Gray-Barberio now.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Thank you very much, Chair. And thank you, Richard and Gerry, for being here this morning and for your presentation. Gerry, if I may, I would like to ask you: you were recently shown around the Fitzroy Apartments; can you share with the committee your impression of the apartments and the building as a whole?

Gerry NOONAN: Yes. I only looked at one apartment, as you said, but I would be more than happy to live in it. It is smaller than the house I live in, but that is by the by, it is quite adequate and in impeccable condition. I looked for cracks and for spalls and things of that ilk, and concrete cancer. I walked along the – I think it was on about floor 17-ish or something like that, it was quite high – public ways on that floor. I then went down to about floor three or four on the lift and then walked down the stairs, looked at all the stairwells where the concrete is bare and you can see it, where it is not behind furniture and not painted. That gives you an indication of what is happening, because if there is any cracking, it is more likely to be in stairwells and stuff, because that is a smaller section appended to the building; and where the interface of the stairwell with the main building is is where you will get cracking because you have got the substantial building with the appendage, for want of a better word, discontinuity, I suppose. But there was no cracking. It was great. And I walked around the outside

of all the buildings there at that parkland in Fitzroy, what is the place called? What are the apartments called, the –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Atherton Gardens.

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Atherton Gardens, yes.

Gerry NOONAN: Atherton Gardens, sorry, and everything looked, from a naked eye, of course – because I went there deliberately. The ones I had viewed in my charity work were purely – I just sat there and had a cup of tea and a chat to the people quite often, and I did not look at them from a structural point of view, because this was 20 and 30 years ago, as you can appreciate. But they were all in good condition that I looked at then, or that I was in – had the pleasure of going in. A couple of times I walked up quite a few flights of stairs, because the lifts were not working, and that can happen anywhere, I suppose. I would have noticed any bad faulting, because if you are an engineer and you see a crack in the wall, you sort of say, ‘What’s going on here on a slab? A bit of concrete has spilt out,’ but I was not looking for that, as you can sure appreciate. But I was looking for that the other day when I was at Atherton Gardens.

Richard CAMERON: Could I add to that?

Anasina GRAY-BARBERIO: Sure.

Richard CAMERON: There are some of the towers which in fact are disastrous, and it is totally agreed they should be demolished, particularly the one down at Emerald Hill. It was one of the first ones which were built, and in fact its condition is substandard – Michael, in nearly everything which you were talking about. But once we got past the first two examples and the regulations were actually modified, and then the philosophy was made to really look after the housing needs of the people, then they complied 90 per cent of the time with all of the requirements, which in fact are required under legislation. And as Gerry said, I mean, I have got people who live in North Melbourne, and I have been in their flat and actually it is immaculate. I talk to their friends, and we have drinks et cetera around the place. When people have a place they can call home, most of them look after it. I have gone through the slums in India, and I tell you what, you walk into an Indian slum, and you then walk into one of the houses next door and they are immaculate. People want to look after their environment, and that is the critical thing. Oftentimes it is not how big it is, it is how they look after it, which is the critical thing.

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

Richard CAMERON: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I will now go to Miss Hermans.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you, and thank you so much for coming in. Based on the evidence provided in the quantity surveying report, do you believe that all the modern access and safety issues required in the building could be easily retrofitted to meet modern standards?

Richard CAMERON: Correct, except with respect to Michael’s query, I cannot add 3½ inches, or whatever it was, to a staircase. That is the only thing I believe which is a problem.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Okay, and that is about 3½ inches, you are saying.

Richard CAMERON: It is about the width of a cigarette packet, yes.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Sure, okay.

Richard CAMERON: And in fact that is less the actual handrail distance where you put your hand around, so you are talking about that much difference in reality.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Wow. Thank you. If properly maintained, like regular maintenance, and in some cases that has not been happening since the announcement in 2023, how long do you think these towers could be occupied?

Richard CAMERON: How long will they last? Well, what we are proposing is to refurbish into brand new under our costings et cetera, which can be done for about a quarter of the price. So if it gets to brand new, it is exactly the same as building a brand new one, and I am suggesting that they will last for 50 years.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Another 50 years. All right, thank you. From what you have heard and seen, and I think I put this to Gerry as well, because obviously he has been to see the towers: do you believe that the total demolition and rebuild is the best cost benefit for Victorian public housing tenants and for the taxpayers?

Richard CAMERON: Could you –

Ann-Marie HERMANS: In terms of what you have heard and seen, do you think it is more cost beneficial not to demolish? Actually, let us put it this way: if they are demolished and rebuilt, is that the best use of our taxpayers –

Richard CAMERON: No, that is the worst thing.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: That is the worst.

Gerry NOONAN: If you do a carbon analysis, and it has been done in the report by this, whatever they call themselves –

Richard CAMERON: OFFICE.

Gerry NOONAN: OFFICE – it is frightening. We get continuously from all governments – and appropriately so; I am not knocking it – that we have to be conscious of climate change. Of course we do, and we have got to cut our emissions. And to go and say they are going to do this, it is absolutely sinful. If you read the numbers, it is frightening, and it is quite ludicrous in fact. You have probably read in that report of OFFICE that they had four cases: one in Glasgow, one in Switzerland, one in London and one in Germany of refurbished towers very similar to these, almost identical to these, which have been done incredibly successfully in relatively recent – have you read that? It is in that report.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Yes. Thank you for that. I guess then the question is in terms of the Elgin Towers. They were relocated due to problems with the mains water supply in 2021, and then 18 months later it was decided to demolish the buildings. But with your knowledge of the industry – and this could go to Richard as well – could the Elgin Towers and the other 42 public housing towers have their water pipes and sewerage systems repaired for a lot less than emptying and demolishing the buildings?

Gerry NOONAN: Absolutely. It would be a shame if our industry –

Richard CAMERON: Absolutely. Consider the Elgin Towers. Because the whole of the inside is all brickwork, we would just take the services shaft off the brickwork, we would then re-lay all of the pipes in that and we would fill it up again. That has been allowed for in all our cost estimates.

The CHAIR: We are going to have to move on to the next question.

Ann-Marie HERMANS: Thank you. I am out of time.

The CHAIR: It is Ms Ermacora, who is online. Ms Ermacora, I will hand over to you.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Hi. I am a Member for Western Victoria Region. Thanks, Gerry and Richard. The history is very interesting. My father was born and raised in Collingwood and saw the towers going up, so it is very interesting. There are just some basic high-level questions that I am interested in. Would you say that geotechnical knowledge has advanced since those towers were built?

Gerry NOONAN: Well, of course everything has advanced every day. Even if you read this morning's paper, football coaching has improved too, but I do not think the coach of Melbourne would agree with you. Of course, but it is minute –

Jacinta ERMACORA: And architectural knowledge as well, Richard – there have also been advancements in architectural knowledge since the towers were built as well?

Richard CAMERON: I am sorry, I could not understand.

The CHAIR: Ms Ermacora was asking you if you would agree that there have been advancements in architectural knowledge – sorry for paraphrasing, but I think that was about it –

Jacinta ERMACORA: Since they were built.

The CHAIR: since the towers were built.

Richard CAMERON: Has there been much advance in architectural knowledge?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Richard CAMERON: Technology obviously has changed, people have changed, et cetera, so therefore we have adapted. With regard to actually understanding the environment that people want to live in and their requirements for their comfortable accommodation, it is exactly the same as it was 50 years ago. We in fact now use technology to gently massage it better.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Yes, I think that is –

Richard CAMERON: As I said, with regard to public housing, we are looking at shelter, sustenance and safety, and they are the fundamental things we have to look after. Look after the domestic violence people – look after those people. This does not do that.

Jacinta ERMACORA: I also want to ask: just in terms of the current condition in relation to the sewerage, do you acknowledge that the sewerage systems are failing at the moment?

Richard CAMERON: The answer to that is they are not maintained.

Jacinta ERMACORA: With the staircase differences in standards from the past to today, what are the reasons for those differences?

Richard CAMERON: With regard to the sewerage et cetera, the differences do not exist, because it is exactly the same. It is still a 4-inch –

Jacinta ERMACORA: And the stairwells?

Richard CAMERON: With regard to the stairwell, as I said, we in fact have an allowance in our legislation that if you do less than 25 per cent of a building's restoration, you are allowed to use the old regulations to do it, which therefore endorses the fact that the old regulations are sufficient to look after the escape. Our law says it: it is okay.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Community values and the definition of what is adequate housing to meet human rights have changed as well since the 1960s, along with the technological knowledge around heating, cooling and the basic functionality of multidwellings. So do you acknowledge that new information and new knowledge are expected?

Richard CAMERON: Yes, correct. However, whether in fact it is necessary – if they are guidelines, most of these things, right, they are not mandatory. They are guidelines to determine or say that if you want a better existence, you want a better this, that and the other, fine. However, I have some friends who in fact are part and parcel of a group who go and look after the homeless, and I am sure that Jojo, the little lady who lives under Princes Bridge, is not really worried about an extra 2 metres in her bedroom because she in fact sleeps in the front foyer of an office building outside and has done for two years.

The CHAIR: I am going to have to throw to Mr Puglielli now. I am sorry, Ms Ermacora. Your time is up, I am afraid. Apologies about that. Mr Puglielli, over to you.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Gerry, I will begin with you for my first question: when you were inspecting some of the public housing that still stands in Melbourne, did you observe anything like condensation in stairways, bubbling or peeling paint, corroding pipes, anything like that?

Gerry NOONAN: No, I did not see any corroding pipes. The only thing I did see was some of the electrical conduits in the stairwell, there was some corrosion on them. That is easily fixed.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. I might come to that in a second. Did you see –

Gerry NOONAN: Pipe work, no, there was no – I think from what I was reading of the sewage problems, I think they were in the Elgin Street ones, generally. I will stand correction on that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: We have heard quite a bit about those particular issues, yes. But can I ask –

Gerry NOONAN: But we did not inspect them because they are under demolition, as you know, at the moment.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Yes, that is right. Did you see anything that caused you concern that the buildings that you were visiting are in any way no longer in a habitable condition?

Gerry NOONAN: Not at all. Quite the contrary.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. And some of those issues that I mentioned, how would you recommend resolving these? You mentioned the switchboard, for example. How would we resolve that?

Gerry NOONAN: Not the switchboard, the conduits.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: The conduits. Pardon me.

Gerry NOONAN: Oh, it is very simple. I mean, they are doing that all the time. I live in a house that was built 155 years ago, as do a lot of people in Melbourne – probably even longer than that. You get the odd problem, but it is not a big deal. We certainly have not got air –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Not to knock down the whole building over it.

Gerry NOONAN: I am sorry?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Not to knock down the whole building over it, I would say.

Gerry NOONAN: I cannot hear you, sorry.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: You would not knock down the entire building over those issues though, right?

Gerry NOONAN: I certainly would not knock down – it would be sinful to knock those buildings down. They are icons. I mean, I put in the foundations. I drove the piles for those buildings. I did not do the buildings; I only did the foundations. I am sorry if I did not make that clear.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No, that is all right.

Gerry NOONAN: We only did the geotech work, which is in the ground. I was involved in designing the footings, the piling or the spread footings or whatever the ground conditions were for those 44 blocks. The one in Williamstown, which would have to be the best real estate in Australia – have you been there and had a look at that one?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No. I have not personally, no.

Gerry NOONAN: God almighty, if that went on the open market, you would be paying \$10 million for the apartments. It has got the best view. Do you know the one I am talking about, on The Strand in Willy?

Renee HEATH: I do not, sorry.

Gerry NOONAN: Go and have a look at it.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you for your point.

Gerry NOONAN: That is on basalt. It is just sitting on spread footings, there is no –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I might go to my next question, if that is all right. The committee has heard a bit about concrete cancer through the course of the inquiry –

Gerry NOONAN: Well, I did not see any concrete cancer. I looked only in the –

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is right.

Gerry NOONAN: one building, though.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I ask though, is concrete cancer an insurmountable barrier to refurbishment?

Gerry NOONAN: Not at all.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Gerry NOONAN: Not at all. It can be fixed. There are easy methods of fixing it.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: How would we go about fixing it? Can you share with us how we would fix or mitigate against concrete cancer?

Gerry NOONAN: They are doing it every day; they just break all the concrete away. Do you know what concrete cancer is?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: No. You can give us a quick explainer if you would like.

Gerry NOONAN: I think I should.

Renee HEATH: Yes, please.

Gerry NOONAN: Because when you build a building with concrete, you put in steel reinforcement. And sure, they were precast panels – I will just talk about general concrete and do pilings and construction of bridges and God knows what. If the builder is a bit careless in putting the reo – it has to be spaced with 50 ml concrete cover. So the reo goes there, and the edge of the concrete goes there so water does not get in. But sometimes when the builders are careless the reo gets displaced and it is bordering on the edge. Water touches it, gets into the reo, rusts it. The steel rusts, it expands and splits the concrete. So it is pretty simple. All you have to do is get in a bloke with an angle grinder and a jackhammer, break out that section, put in new reo and put in high-strength epoxy concretes, and it is a piece of cake.

Richard CAMERON: Very simple.

Gerry NOONAN: It is happening continuously.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: I have got just one further question, and Richard, I might bring you in for this one: with some of the logic we have been hearing from the government through this process around things like changes in standards over time, over the years, if we applied that logic to other buildings of similar or older age, roughly to your estimate what proportion of buildings would need to be demolished across Melbourne?

Gerry NOONAN: Oh, probably 90 per cent.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can you give some examples – like, what about the building we are in now or Flinders Street Station?

Gerry NOONAN: Well, my house that I am happily living in would not meet the standards, obviously, and that would account for probably 20 or 30 per cent of the buildings in Melbourne.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: And yet these buildings we do not knock down.

Richard CAMERON: Yes, I would totally agree with Gerry.

Gerry NOONAN: My house will stand for another 150 years; it is perfect.

Renee HEATH: Just to confirm, did you say 90 per cent?

Gerry NOONAN: Of that order, yes. It is a high percentage.

Richard CAMERON: I mean, the interesting thing is that the size of various rooms and various things in Europe are far, far smaller than here, yet they are not complaining about the fact that it is substandard living. Australia has an enormous appetite for grandeur, and that is the problem.

Gerry NOONAN: But we have got the space to do it.

Richard CAMERON: And we have got the space.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Can I ask: in that case then why do you think the government would choose to demolish any of the towers, let alone all of them, prior to their expected end of life?

Gerry NOONAN: You tell me. We should be asking you that question. How would we know?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Fair enough. Thank you. That is my time.

The CHAIR: We are out of time, I am afraid.

Richard CAMERON: I think this is one of the things which we really do believe: we believe an inquiry should be held into this; we believe that a business case should be made and all of the assumptions which have been prepared by the government at the present time tested by independent people, because at the moment we have grave difficulties in understanding the logic and the rationale as to why this particular course is being done. We are looking at, over the next 10 years, increasing the actual debt of the public housing over \$6 billion because of inflation as well.

The CHAIR: Gentlemen, I have got to finish it up there, I am afraid, because we are out of time. I want to thank you very much for your appearance today. We really appreciate your evidence.

Richard CAMERON: You can see we are a bit impassioned.

The CHAIR: I can see you very passionate. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript as well in case there are any very minor errors you want to fix up, but it will go up online. Thanks very much, gentlemen – appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.