

From a talk given by Marian Harper  
at the Hands Off Public Housing  
Forum 7<sup>th</sup> September 2017 in  
Melbourne.

*A pastor in Nazi Germany once said " First they came for the socialists, and I did nothing because I wasn't a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did nothing because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did nothing because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me — and there was no one left to speak for me"*

*Martin Niemöller*

*Lets make the quote contemporary to Australia.*

First they came for the banks and we did nothing, then they came for the unions and we did nothing, then they came for the power companies and public transport and we did nothing. Now they have come for public housing, and we can't afford to do nothing. This is not just about 10 public housing estates, it is about the death by privatisation of public

housing at a time when homelessness and housing poverty is increasing rapidly. It doesn't matter where you stand politically, because both sides of politics are committed to privatisation and not committed to public housing. For too long we have allowed politicians to make unpalatable decisions which affect our lives. We know that Australia's public housing has been failing for the last 20 years. we know the system is not funded to even cover the costs of its ongoing operation, let alone growth to meet the needs of an expanding population. public housing has been on a starvation ration for decades. The whole system is effectively being run at a loss. So, from the perspective of state governments, building a new public housing dwelling is just one more way of losing money. The Federal Government is responsible for funding public housing and the State is responsible for administering it. Neither level of government is accepting that responsibility. Nor will they until we stand up and say that housing is a fundamental human right and only public housing can meet that need

.And what of the public housing tenants whose lives are so unimportant to government? Who are

these citizens who are being advised that they must move away from their homes and their communities?

Public housing tenants are not commodities like bars of soap to be moved around to suit governments. They are contributing citizens who live in homes around which, they have built their lives, they go to churches, schools, doctors kindergartens where they live and they are valuable participants in their communities.

They are citizens who simply can't afford the luxury of private ownership. That makes them the majority in our nation today. Unfortunately, governments of both sides of politics are committed to private ownership and what is worse, they regard public housing as a waste of money and having deliberately allowed it to run down and degrade, they now want to rid

themselves of it altogether through privatisation by stealth. By selling off our land to money hungry developers. Telling tenants they must leave their communities, to go where, nobody knows, when, nobody knows, for how long, nobody knows. They only know that they must leave their homes, their lives, their communities.

So, every organization, , every union, every individual has a moral responsibility to fight for the defence and extension of well built, well maintained. affordable public housing to meet the needs of the hundreds of thousand of Australians struggling with the housing crisis.

When the Housing Commission was established many years ago, it met those needs, we need to make sure it happens again.

This can happen. It takes determination, a

willingness to work together and commitment to social justice.

I hope that in our endeavours today, we will develop a plan of action that will make our leaders of both sides of politics take notice that we, the people will not tolerate the sale of public housing, that we will defend tenant rights and we will insist that politicians remember they are our servants not our masters.