

TRANSCRIPT

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the adequacy and future directions of public housing in Victoria

Melbourne — 16 February 2010

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Mr N. Arnott, Collingwood Public Housing Tenant, and

Mr J. Lenger, Atherton Gardens Residents Association.

The CHAIR — Good afternoon, and welcome. Thank you for your time to appear before this committee. I am the chair of the Family and Community Development Committee and also the member for Cranbourne. This is a bipartisan parliamentary inquiry; it is not a government inquiry. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by privilege as provided in the Constitution Act 1975 and is further subject to the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act 2003 and the Defamation Act 2005 and, where applicable, the provisions of reciprocal legislation in other states and territories. Any comments you make outside the hearing will not be afforded such privilege. We are recording the proceedings, and you will be sent a copy of the transcript, to which you will be able to make minor adjustments if necessary.

This is a 45-minute session. I invite you to make a verbal submission and ask you to please restrict it to less than 20 minutes, and that will be followed by questions from the panel. Please introduce yourselves and give your terms of reference for the Hansard record.

Mr ARNOTT — My name is Nicholas Arnott; I am a resident of the Collingwood housing estate. I have been there about 10 years now, and I am heavily involved with the neighbourhood renewal process on the public housing estate there. Along with Josip I have been heavily working on the future directions for where we go after neighbourhood renewal funding ceases in June of this year.

Mr LENGER — My name is Josip Lenger. I am a long-term tenant of Atherton Gardens, and I am the chairman of the neighbourhood advisory board. I have been the chairman of the tenants' association for 25 years, and now I am heavily involved with local future planning. We all know that neighbourhood renewal was introduced in 2002, and we are now looking at how we will replace that, to encourage more participation and decision making by the tenants. But I will give you a little bit more later on. I will now hand over to Nick to present to the inquiry.

Mr ARNOTT — We put in a submission on 20 January 2010. We have listed some points, starting with employment. One of the main issues we have about employment on or around a public housing estate is about sustainability and the need for there to be ongoing employment for public housing tenants and the need for that to be part of any directions with public housing. Existing local employment initiatives, such as the Public Tenant Employment Program, are seen by residents as political stunts as they provide training, not ongoing jobs, and the training is inadequate to gain employment in the labour market.

One example is the community contact officers, otherwise known as the CCOs. Their positions are a good example. The training for these positions is not up to industry standard for concierge jobs, and the incumbents are not able to do the job they are meant to do. We ask the committee to note that the challenging situations the CCOs have to deal with in the high-rise towers are in many ways beyond what is expected of concierges in the industry as a whole.

Meanwhile the majority of work on public housing estates is not given to public housing tenants, despite the range of skills and experience amongst the residents who are living there. We ask the committee to note the significant disincentives for employment for public housing residents relating to federal and state government policies. When a resident gains employment, the combination of rent increases and loss of concessions and health care cards can place residents under considerable and disproportionate financial stress.

We urge that in future public housing includes employment initiatives that guarantee outcomes for the residents, are supported by policies that address existing disincentives and take into account the overarching economic impacts of poverty and unemployment on communities.

The other thing that concerns us is the allocations. The current allocations create communities of disadvantage. Public housing properties need to be allocated for social mix, taking into account the positive impact of a diversity of lifestyles on a culture of 'beating the system' amongst long-term, multiple-generation unemployed tenants. Newer groups who do not have that culture do better in finding employment and moving on from public housing.

We ask the committee to address the lack of infrastructure for any influx of new cultural groups as tenants. For example, when groups from the Horn of Africa arrived locally there were insufficient services and supports. This affects the whole local community, and settlement services should be in place when new groups arrive in future.

I refer to rental conditions. The Office of Housing subletting policy is inequitable. The policy is to charge all tenants in a property 25 per cent of their income, when in private rental rent is charged at a flat rate for a property. This discrepancy means that housing residents rent under different conditions to private renters, which further distinguishes the status of public versus private rental. Inconsistency about the status of extraordinary money tenants receive, such as bonuses and the stimulus package, is confusing for tenants. Some report these were treated as income, some otherwise. Tenants report that they find housing service officers do not act in a fair and honest way on issues such as this but act in the interests of the Office of Housing at the expense of the tenants.

In regard of security, security systems impact disproportionately on residents of public housing high-rise towers due to the issues arising from Office of Housing allocations policy and difficulties addressing the behaviour of some tenants. At Richmond, Collingwood and Fitzroy these issues have been addressed through CCOs, security guards and other measures. However, as residents we consider that there is considerable waste of funds due to the policies and practices implemented to address security. We are aware of some practices of some security guards which undermine the security of residents, such as allowing known visitors access despite incidents of illegal activity and destructive behaviour. Residents are in the best position to monitor these issues and could do this simply by being aware of work duties and KPIs of the security guards. When guards do not abide by regulations and their job requirements, the residents end up suffering.

With regard to renovations, while we applaud the upgrade on the Fitzroy, Collingwood and Richmond towers, we are disappointed that renovations have not included energy-saving showerheads and that light fittings are not consistent and some take only very expensive globes. New carpets are of very poor quality and different to what was selected by residents prior to the renovations. Window treatment is worse than before the renovations, and tenants' responses to consultation were ignored. For example, residents asked for toilets and bathrooms to remain separate, yet they were combined during renovations. Some residents reported that there has been an average 20 per cent increase in their power bills after the renovations and that the pre-renovated flats were more energy efficient than the renovated ones.

All renovations need to be smart, using green choices. All community consultation must be authentic and seen to be used in the finished work.

We note the high levels of tenant participation, including contributing to tenancy management in some community housing organisations, and we urge that this model be rolled out on public housing estates. The tenant input into the Collingwood and Fitzroy neighbourhood renewal committees indicates the high levels of tenants' commitment to the wellbeing of their communities. However, this participation must be authentic and meaningful. As community leaders, our experiences of tenant participation includes tokenism, misinformation and being consulted on something that has already been finalised. The use of tenants' voluntary time to give input into local projects developed by community organisations, local government and state government can be thoughtless, and the time given is exhausting and undervalued. We have experienced a situation where residents have given the okay to a project based on one set of information, which subsequently changed due to vested interests. Residents can be put under significant pressure from both sides. If we take on community leadership without the protection of working for an organisation, we are at risk of being bullied or harassed by unhappy fellow tenants.

We would like to see the Victorian Public Tenants Association taking a more proactive advocacy role on issues that impact on tenants. The VPTA is seen to be constrained by the requirements of Office of Housing funding and not able to take political positions required for advocacy for tenants.

What is the future of public housing? We call for a continuation in future of public housing managed by state housing authorities. Despite the regulatory framework for community and social housing alternatives to public housing, we are concerned as to whether housing associations and providers are resourced to do the maintenance and repairs required, and whether tenants may be forced to carry the devolved risks.

State-government owned and run housing provides the highest security and lowest risk for tenants. The future of public housing must include better maintenance inspections and control, better monitoring of work on properties, consistent processes on condition reports and the inclusion of an intermediary who can support tenants to ensure the processes comply with the Residential Tenancies Act.

In relation to dignity and respect, tenants' experience of power aspects of tenant/landlord relations is of major concern for public housing residents. The Office of Housing is a huge bureaucracy, and tenants on the whole are disempowered by the practices of their landlord. Assistance for tenants is limited by structures and policies developed within a bureaucratic framework and by what is perceived as reasonable and appropriate, without the flexibility to be responsive to alternative or cross-cultural views. An example of this is when residents put up shadecloth on their properties to deal with heatwave conditions, as recommended by a Beat the Heat advice sheet from local government — the result of a VicHealth funded project. The Office of Housing forced residents to take down the shadecloth, threatening that they would be charged for any costs incurred if the Office of Housing took it down.

Similarly, many projects for public housing residents seem to be more about skimming money, such as allocating 20 per cent of funding for administrative expenses, than delivering good outcomes for residents. Projects are affected by the widespread discriminatory attitudes to public housing residents and are not taken seriously. This has happened locally with a recycling project and a community information centre. We experience a general lack of care and respect that reinforces demeaning attitudes to us and values held about us as public housing residents. We call for all aspects of public housing to embed holistic social justice principles within an overarching economic perspective, which includes the real costs of discrimination, poverty and disenfranchisement.

Mrs POWELL — Thank you for your submission and the work that you do for public housing tenants. You talk about renovations. You were saying that there have been some renovations done in both of those areas or a couple of those areas, but there was some criticism of the work that has been done. You talk about better maintenance, inspections and control and better monitoring of work on properties. Are you suggesting that the work was substandard or was not monitored at all? What are you saying about the work that has been done?

Mr ARNOTT — It was extremely substandard. I can use my flat as an example. When moving back into my renovated flat, I put a mark on the wall. As I wiped it down, it went straight to bare plaster, so it is definitely just one coat of paint or very watered-down paint. In relation to the carpets, a lot of the residents — those who chose to come back to the original flat once it was renovated — were given swatches of carpet or tiles they wanted in there. A lot of the carpeting is not what residents chose. There have been so many breakdowns with the stoves that were installed within the first few months of taking up residency. I have four different light fittings. I have some bayonet fittings, some of which are plug fittings, and fluorescent fittings; it is just totally inconsistent.

Mrs POWELL — Have you raised that with the Office of Housing?

Mr ARNOTT — Yes, we have.

Mrs POWELL — What was their comment?

Mr ARNOTT — They were supposed to have been retrofitted. I know the retrofit has not been done. We have asked that the future towers, as they get done, have a consistent type of lighting fixture anyway, be it bayonet type or whatever, as long as it is consistent throughout. We are yet to be shown through the other tower they are working on to see whether that has actually been put into place yet.

Mr LENGER — The other thing I worry about, because my problem is different, is that the paint is very poor quality — after three years I had to paint the unit myself because the paint is not quality. They put carpet in but I am a diabetic and am not allowed to walk on synthetic carpet. There is no communication with the tenants so they can provide proper carpet. I have lung cancer and the doctor prescribed that they have to provide me with air conditioning. They renovated the units but they do not have a system to do it straightaway — drill the hole, no need to call back. The coordination is non-existent, and I believe that is the biggest problem. Communication is difficult because 30 or 40 different nationalities live there, but still we will have tenant representatives who will be representing the people to the government but communication is not there. They just go ahead and do it and then when we complain they come again and they are spending money. When Fitzroy was done for recycled water they spent \$3 million; still today they have not used one drop of water on the grass. A lot of things are being done without communication with the public. I have only one thing to say: if you have a house, you know best what has to be done. I believe this is exactly the case with tenants who live

there 24 hours a day. They know best what they need and how it can be done to save money and save arguments all around.

Mr NOONAN — Could I add my voice of thanks for your submission. We have had a lot of organisations that have provided us with views about high-rise public housing facilities. It is nice to sit in front of a couple of tenants and hear their stories firsthand, which is really my question in itself. Nicholas, you said you have lived in Collingwood for 10 years.

Mr ARNOTT — Yes.

Mr NOONAN — I wonder whether you might tell us whether you enjoy living in a high-rise facility. I have a couple in my electorate of Williamstown and there are mixed views. Some are very happy and some are less happy, but for the most part those who are happy enjoy the sense of community and like being in a situation where they have regular contact with their neighbours.

The second part of my question is about the neighbourhood renewal, which I think you said runs out at the end of the year.

Mr ARNOTT — June.

Mr NOONAN — I wonder what that has brought to the public housing towers in terms of general amenity and generally the physical environment.

Mr ARNOTT — I suppose coming here today I would have to say it is the location that I enjoy more than anything else. It is close to town. The sense of community is better now than it was when I first moved into the area. It was a real dog-eat-dog environment and even to go to the laundry you had to take a big stick to beat off the dealers. Since NR began it has engaged a lot better with the community, so it has created a lot more voices within the community who are prepared to actually stand up and speak and run with whatever programs are put in front of us and support them. So a sense of community is another good aspect of it.

Mr NOONAN — Has that been cultivated through the NR project or had that been coming naturally through other means?

Mr ARNOTT — I really do not know because it was probably about two years after I moved into the area that NR was beginning. In a lot of ways NR has helped a lot. Some of the things we have been able to change have been, for example, the walk-up area to provide better lighting. It has always been one of the complaints from residents that it is too dark in the area. We have been able to effect a fair bit of change through using the committees that have been made up since NR started on the estate.

Mr LENGER — I honestly have to say that I am not enjoying myself living there or I would not be here today. I have lived for nearly 40 years in Fitzroy because when I came to Australia I was with my wife. She got sick early on and had electric shock treatment and I had to bring the kids up myself. I am glad I got a ministry of housing property, and the kids have grown up now and bought their own units. I am on a disability pension and I am really happy to live there. If you look, there are complaints but we complain because we try to work with the ministry, with the agency to improve things and save money and save the arguments.

A lot of things have been done like, as you said, the neighbourhood renewal. Yes, when neighbourhood renewal was introduced in 2002 a lot of work and a lot of effort was put in, I will say. I have been chairman since the neighbourhood renewal started and I am still chairman of the neighbourhood advisory board. I cannot say anything but speak highly of my respect for neighbourhood renewal. When it came neighbourhood renewal operated in a different way. It introduced the regional tenants council. I have been a member of the regional tenants council for four years, and I can honestly say that the ministry will act on what is recommended by the regional tenants council. Everybody has been happy because they have learnt a lot of things like how they can save money from the tenants, because at the end of the day when you live in a ministry of housing property for 24 hours a day the biggest problem that people complain about is that the drug issue is normal and safety and security. Safety is recommended — every single citizen should live in a safe environment. That is where we have our one problem because when these drugs are all around there are places where people can hide, deal the drugs and use the drugs. But you have to understand it is not just a problem in the ministry of housing estate, it is all around Australia. We have to learn to live with that but we will try to minimise it as much as we can.

Mr NOONAN — Thank you.

Mr SCHEFFER — Thank you for your submission. I want to ask you a couple of questions. You say under the heading ‘Rental conditions’ that the Office of Housing’s subletting policy is inequitable. You refer to the fact that it is set at 25 per cent of residents’ income and you feel that that is not right because there is a discrepancy between that and private rental. You are the first people who have made that observation, and I would have thought that generally the view was that that was a good thing because it meant that people were not paying more than that proportion of their income whereas in the private tenant market, as you know, the proportion is a lot greater so people are at a disadvantage. I would ask you to talk about that.

Mr ARNOTT — That point probably does need a little bit of clarification. What we mean by the subletting policy is that if everyone living within that flat is working or is on a benefit, it is 25 per cent of their benefit; that is everyone in there. Whoever is on that lease is paying 25 per cent of their income. That really does not make sense. To us that is really inconsistent. Okay, people on a lease in private rental are all paying a flat rate. You are paying the value of whatever that property is. It just seems very inconsistent.

Mr SCHEFFER — Yes, but inconsistency does not mean that it is unjust.

Mr ARNOTT — To a lot of residents it seems unjust. As soon as a child starts to get their Centrelink payments — bang. Even though they may be on the lease as being a kid, they are charged. As soon as they are earning income they are then charged 25 per cent of their income.

Ms KAIROUZ — Are you saying, if four people live in a house — —

Mr ARNOTT — That is right.

Ms KAIROUZ — Four people pay 25 per cent of their income.

Mr ARNOTT — That is correct.

Ms KAIROUZ — No, I do not think so. It is the first time I have heard that.

Mr LENGER — No. The house income is put under one-house income.

Mr SCHEFFER — One tenancy.

Mr LENGER — Exactly, and from that they charge 25 per cent. That, I do not believe is the problem, but the problem is when the government gave the stimulus payments some people were charged right away with that and some were not. The difficulty is with a couple of tenants who have a child and when the child gets some subsidised money, the ministry straightaway includes that in their income.

I, for example, am a senior pensioner and I have lung cancer. When I get lung cancer I call my son to live with me because when I go to bed I do not know whether I will wake up in the morning or not. Straightaway I have to pay full market rent. Yes, he is working but today’s kids do not support the tenants who pay the money. That is the policy. I cannot argue with that but there is some difficulty when people have a child or someone else in the house.

The problem is revealed specifically whenever the African or Sudanese community arrive. They live with 20 or 30 people in a one or two-bedroom unit and the ministry has never made controls to find out how many people live there so that they can be charged. They pay rebate rent but they are earning 10 times more than me and my son earn and I pay full rent because I am an honest man. Those are the sort of things that cause arguments, but at the end of the day policy is policy and I have to respect that.

Mr SCHEFFER — I want to ask one other question not related to that. You say on the same page that the residents’ power bills were increased 20 per cent after the renovations had been done. In that sense it was cheaper for people to live there before and there are some issues there. You state:

All renovations need to be smart, using green choices.

I do not think any of us would disagree with that. The implication from this is that after the renovations something happened which necessitated a greater draw on energy.

Mr ARNOTT — Yes.

Mr SCHEFFER — Have you gathered evidence on that?

Mr ARNOTT — I know from my own bill, which is up. Initially I just thought it was price increases with the power and I thought I was just using a lot more power than normal but in chatting to other residents they have noticed it as well. As far as gathering the evidence, or taking the time to actually sit down with a whole group of residents and go through their power bills, the answer is no, we have not done that. All we have got is just what residents are saying, that they have noticed the increase in their power bills.

Some residents feel that is because of the way they have renovated the flats. In the lounge-dining room area there are two globes where beforehand there used to just be one but now you cannot turn on just one globe, and that is because there was not enough space in which to fit the wires. Because it is a new modern stove, the stove seems to actually draw a lot more power. Those are probably just some of the issues.

Mr LENGER — It is, but I believe the biggest issue, for me and a lot of people who have come to me with information within their knowledge, is when you are indoors in the summertime you cannot open anything to have a breeze when evening comes. Before the renovations the window would open fully, but now it will only open 20 degrees and the wind just hits the glass and then goes away — it does not go underneath it. I find that a problem and a lot of people are in the same position as me and have the same problem. That is why, 100 per cent more often, I have to use a fan, air conditioner or whatever there is, and that uses much more power.

Mr SCHEFFER — I understand, thank you.

Ms KAIROUZ — I have one question. In your submission you spoke about the Victorian Public Tenants Association not taking a more proactive role and there is a perception that they are constrained, that they are not able to say what they want to, they are afraid to take a political position. They were here last week and I felt that they gave a very strong submission and actually spoke their minds. They spoke about their experiences, which was good and was exactly what the committee wanted. Where did you get this information from? Did the association say something to you or is it a perception out where you live?

Mr ARNOTT — I was doing a presentation once at the VPTA and that was actually a comment that came from their chair at the time — that it is not part of what they are capable of doing. More to the point, picking individual cases and doing that advocacy for individual cases is a lot more difficult for them, as I understand it. On the whole, a lot of the time they are still, as far as residents are concerned, very ineffective. There is that perception amongst residents that they are also very ineffective in that way. Josip may have more input for that aspect.

Mr LENGER — Too many people have too many different opinions. In 2004–05 I was the chairman of the VPTA and some people accept things, some do not. If you look at Collingwood, Richmond or Fitzroy, it will reveal that no-one is representing the estate as a member of the VPTA, only myself.

Because the association is now being run by one Chinese man who is elected by the old Chinese people onto the tenants association, at the end of the day the estate does not have any representative. I do not believe that the VPTA can do anything, but they could give more support and maybe more public meetings to inform the public of their decision making and a lot of the things they are involved in. Do they have a meeting — I believe it is every second month or every month — with the Minister for Housing? Information is not being passed on to the public tenants.

Ms KAIROUZ — Are you saying that they have information but they are not passing it on to the tenants?

Mr LENGER — That is my personal opinion, yes.

Mrs POWELL — We have had mixed evidence about whether high-rise buildings are good for public housing or not, and Wade has some public housing in his area. You mentioned that, probably in the old days, you used to have to — I will try to use your words — beat off drug dealers with a stick.

Mr ARNOTT — You used to have to take it with you, yes.

Mrs POWELL — But now there are some changes. Was that because of neighbourhood renewal, the security guards or is it because the mix of tenants or people who come into the area are being screened more? Am I right that there are not the drug dealers and so forth in there?

Mr LENGER — I would say, firstly, because the law is very soft on drugs, and that is what I think. The other thing is that it depends on how many drugs are in the market. It is not always the same situation.

I am a member of NJC for the Department of Justice in Collingwood, and I can honestly say from my point of view because I grew up in the Communist regime, I grew up with a lot of discipline and not what you have here, you have to respect the law as it is. The drugs issue includes people who are earning \$10 000 a day from selling drugs. I know a lot of them. They go to court and get a month or two months of voluntary work that they have to do. They get a slap on the hands and then go ahead. While he is doing that voluntary work, his wife takes over and does exactly the same job. They earn money and money. If you go to the casino or whatever, the Tabaret, you will see them throwing their money. They never work for one day in Australia.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much for your presentation. We really appreciate it.

Witnesses withdrew.