



Standing Together for Public Housing

In 2025 a campaign to protect public housing was formed in response to the Victorian state government's plan to demolish all 44 of Melbourne's high-rise public housing towers.

The campaign brought together public housing residents, community housing organisations, housing workers, geographers, planners, architects, structural engineers, economists, lawyers and a Supreme Court judge. It culminated in a meeting at the Capitol Theatre in Melbourne on 23 October 2025.

Seventeen speakers outlined their opposition to the government's plan to demolish the towers. They presented a wide range of perspectives while being united in their view that the demolition plan is socially, environmentally and economically wasteful and unnecessary.

They called on the government to release detailed evaluations of the structural condition of all the towers. They argued that demolition should occur IF and ONLY IF it is demonstrated that the buildings are unsound and cannot be retrofitted at reasonable cost. If this is demonstrated, they agreed that replacement public housing should be built nearby or elsewhere on the estate FIRST, and that tenants be relocated when the new build is complete.

These are not unreasonable demands, nor are they difficult to understand. They are supported by the report from the [Inquiry by the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee into the redevelopment of Melbourne's public housing towers](#), released on 2 December 2025.

The speakers at the Standing Together forum, the submitters to the inquiry, and the authors of the inquiry report are asking now:
“What do we have to do to make this government listen to sense?”
and
“What do we have to do for this government to treat public housing residents decently?”

We say to this government, please read this document and the inquiry report carefully. Discard the ill-thought-through announcement made by Dan Andrews two and a half years ago and, with us, develop a just and sustainable response.



credit to photographer Mark Phillips

Thursday, 23 October 2025

Capitol Theatre Melbourne

Standing Together for Public Housing program

[Casey Bennetto](#) as MC

[Keiran Stewart-Assheton](#) | Renters And Housing Union | Black Peoples Union

[Margaret Kelly](#) | Public Housing Resident

[Jeannie Erceg](#) | Public Housing Resident

[Barry Berih](#) | Public Housing Resident | Young Australian People

[Clare Hanson](#) | Public Housing Resident | Save Ascot Vale Estate (SAVE)

[Kevin Bell](#) | Former Justice of the Supreme Court of Victoria

[Louisa Bassini](#) | Inner Melbourne Community Legal

[Brendon McNiven](#) | The Retrofit Lab | University of Melbourne

[Chris Jensen](#) | Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, University of Melbourne

[Isabella Fyfe](#) | Sustainability Consultant and Architectural Engineer

[Simon Robinson](#) | OFFICE architects

[Richard Cameron](#) | Convenor of Habitat 26+

[Ebony Bennett](#) | The Australia Institute

[Peter Sibly](#) | United Housing Co-operative

[Damon Poustie](#) | Stop The Demo

[Karen Fletcher](#) | Flat Out

[Kate Shaw](#) | School of Geography, University of Melbourne

Australia is in the worst housing crisis in its history. The effects of this are felt mainly and most severely by low- and moderate-income households.

The State of Victoria has the lowest level of public and community housing in Australia, at 2.8 percent. Over 58,000 people remain on the State public housing waiting list; many more remain in overpriced, substandard private rental accommodation.

In this worsening situation, the State government plans to demolish Melbourne's 44 public housing towers. No evaluations of the structural conditions of the buildings have been released. Expert proposals to retrofit the towers with minimal disruption to residents have been ignored.

The demolitions will displace more than 10,000 residents with no relocation plans other than to be pushed to the front of the waiting list, meaning households already on the list will have to wait longer. Meanwhile, other tracts of public land deemed surplus to government requirements are being sold to private companies for market-rate residential development. Just 10 percent of this housing is required to be 'affordable' (i.e., it will sell or rent at 90% of market price – NOT affordable to households earning less than \$100K per annum). Residential developers on private land are not required to build ANY below-market-rate housing.

This impoverished policy landscape in Victoria cannot be allowed to continue.

We are standing together to stop the reckless demolition of Melbourne's 44 public housing towers. We call on the Victorian Labor government to:

- **Commission and release detailed evaluations of the structural conditions of each one of the towers. If and only if a strong economic, environmental and social case is made for demolition, then build replacement public housing first, nearby or elsewhere on the estate, and relocate the tenants when complete.**
- **End all 'surplus' public land sales and use that land to build more public housing.**
- **Introduce a mandatory component of public housing in new multi-unit developments on private land.**

This document contains the text of the speakers at the Standing Together forum. The talks are in the public realm and can be drawn upon freely as long as they are properly cited and credited.

Note that some of the talks have been edited for brevity without taking from their meaning.

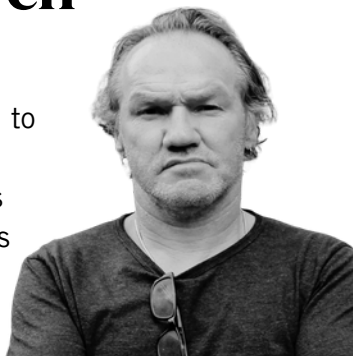
MC: Casey Bennetto



Writer, musician, performer and radio broadcaster **Casey Bennetto** stepped in heroically to MC the event on just a few hours notice and took on the task like the pro he is. We thank him warmly.

Tony Birch

Tony Birch was originally to be MC, but illness in his family caused him to withdraw at the last minute. He stands with us. Our love and thanks go to Tony, and we wish him and his family well.



Keiran Stewart-Assheton



Kieran Stewart-Assheton is a proud Waniwandian Traditional Owner from the occupied Yuin Nation. He is the First Nation's Committee Chair for the [Renters And Housing Union](#) (RAHU) and founder of the [Black People's Union](#) (BPU) - a revolutionary First Nations Trade Union and Political Organisation that represents Mob in industrial issues and supports Land Back and Self-Determination Campaigns for First Nations across the continent of so-called Australia...

Keiran is a radio show host, author and educator who uses his platform to amplify First Nations voices and connect local struggles to global movements. With a background in education, psychology, and policy, Keiran is a community leader and revolutionary theorist with over 15 years of experience as an organiser, bringing sharp analysis, strategic vision, and deep cultural knowledge to advancing decolonisation, anti-imperialism, and justice.

Kieran acknowledged the land we were meeting on, and spoke about the paradox of fighting for retention of public housing and 'public land' on land that was stolen and has not been ceded. He went on to say that as many First Nations people rely on public housing, these campaigns for land justice are not incompatible.



Stewart-Assheton's talk - "My name is Keiran and I'm a proud traditional owner from Wandiwandian country in the Occupied Yuin Nation. I'm also here on behalf of the Renters And Housing Union and the Black Peoples Union.

I acknowledge the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nations and their elders past and present. This land, like all land across this continent, is unceded under an illegal colonial occupation. It always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

This occupation presents a contradiction when we talk about public housing and property. I firmly support the right of housing for all people, but I must acknowledge that housing rights have come at the expense of First Nations people. Our displacement, dispossession, the mission policies, our genocide and the occupation of our lands were the precursors for the modern colonial state of Australia, including the public housing Victoria claims ownership over.

This displacement continues today, First Nations people are over 8 times more likely to be homeless than non-Indigenous counterparts. Alongside world-leading incarceration and child removal rates, we suffer from some of the world's highest homelessness rates.

Prior to colonisation, our people did not suffer from homelessness. We had strong kinship and cultural ties to traditional homelands, and housing was as accessible as food, water, and air.

In an ideal world, First Nations sovereignty would be empowered, colonial occupation abolished, and we could return to a state ensuring housing for all people who call this land home. When we speak of caring for country, we mean the people too, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Until we see the fall of the colony, we must ensure the most vulnerable are looked after. This means pushing the Victorian state to stop abolishing public housing and instead invest in it, not to knock down towers, but to build more on our occupied lands. This push is especially crucial for First Nations people who are five times more likely to live in public housing.

We want housing for all. We must stand together to ensure public housing is an accessible right. That means defending residents who refuse to leave, supporting mutual aid campaigns, and lobbying, campaigning, protesting, and taking direct action to ensure the Victorian state builds more public housing and doesn't demolish towers.”



Margaret Kelly

Margaret Kelly is a public housing advocate and former resident of the Barak Beacon estate. After living there for over 25 years, she refused to leave her home when the government announced forced relocations, becoming the public face of a community campaign that exposed the human cost of redevelopment on vulnerable tenants.

Kelly's talk - "I want to talk about the devastating impact of forced relocation and top-down development at Barak Beacon Estate, not only on tenants, but on the whole community.

Forced relocation harms people. Done without warning or consultation, the damage is worse. Twelve days before Christmas, our community was told our homes would be demolished and relocation would start in three weeks. The staff went on break along with support services. People panicked. Some thought they could be evicted immediately if they didn't comply.

Out of the 14 households in our courtyard, two people were hospitalised, one with a stroke, one with kidney failure. The process was rushed and unfair. Some got consideration; others, often the most vulnerable, did not.

Two of my neighbours have died. Both cooperated but were repeatedly made unsuitable offers or told that their accepted home was no longer on the list while demolition went on around them. Both had been threatened with eviction. One died before moving, after giving in from exhaustion. The other was forced to another suburb and died after 18 months of stress. If relocation didn't kill them, it certainly stole their peace.



The government knew the risks. Their own research shows that relocation causes harm. When actions knowingly shorten lives, what do we call that?

The community believed government reassurances, even as plans were hidden until the demolition was complete. The consultation revealed four-storey blocks built boundary to boundary with 10 and 12-storey tower blocks. People protested, but little changed because it was under a state planning regulation.

Trees meant to be preserved are gone. Homes along Barrack Road, part of a heritage-listed area, now look out on concrete walls. Two homeowners in that street have sold their homes because they are just worn out with the stress.

It didn't have to be this way. There are alternatives to scorched earth development. We need planning that puts people first. Homes are about human lives, not profit."



Jeannie Erceg

Jeannie Erceg is a public housing resident, advocate and former resident of the Barak Beacon estate. A mother of seven, she lived in public housing for 24 years before being relocated to Barak Beacon, only to face demolition again just four years later.

Erceg's talk - "I have been a public housing resident for 30 years and have lived in multiple homes through forced relocations.

I was at a public housing estate at Bangs Street Prahran which was demolished to make way for community and private housing. While I was there I had six children with me and was told by Homes Victoria that I would be more likely to find a home if I could ditch a few of my children and only move with three. I was relocated to the Barak Beacon Estate which had 89 public housing units.

My daughter has autism and specific requirements. The first unit Homes Victoria offered me was unsuitable due to extended walkway. I explained this to Homes Victoria who replied "can't you train her?" and then "oh I have someone in my family with special needs so I completely understand." The next property offered to me was not suitable. Again Homes Victoria's relocation team said to me "oh we completely understand" but continued to show a disregard for my family's housing needs.

I have been moved to a private house that the department is renting. I love it here but the condition of accepting this house is that I have to move back to the Barak Beacon estate once it's rebuilt.

If Homes Victoria had a record of families' needs and accessibility requirements I wouldn't have been made to view numerous unacceptable properties. My story reflects Homes Victoria's total disregard for tenants' needs."

Barry Berih



Barry Berih is a lifelong resident of Melbourne's North Melbourne public housing towers, founder of [Young Australian People](#) and son of Eritrean migrant parents, he became the lead plaintiff in a [class action](#) challenging the state government's plan to demolish the towers. His advocacy has centred on defending his community's right to consultation and to remain in their homes.

Berih's talk - "I'm a resident at 33 Alfred Street, born and raised in North Melbourne and Flemington, in public housing.

I'm a community leader, our community needs advocacy during crisis and emergency. The neighbours know each other very well. I grew up in North Melbourne with neighbours who've known me since I was a kid. If anything happens to me, they know where I am in an emergency. That's how it is.

When it came to relocation, the first anyone heard was on TV, on the news. I got about a hundred missed calls asking, "What the hell is going on?" We were in the same situation as the COVID lockdowns.

The community started running campaigns and engaging with government and the relocation team to arrange meetings with the purpose was to tell the relocation team: this is the way we do things, this is how you show respect, and this is about not leaving our homes long-term.

People have been there for almost thirty, forty years, living in North Melbourne and 33 Alfred Street, generation after generation. This is our home."

Clare Hanson

Clare Hanson is a public housing resident and founding member of [Save Ascot Vale Estate](#), which helped prevent the demolition of the Ascot Vale Estate. A resident since 2010, her advocacy contributed to saving the estate from demolition. She describes estate life as *"inclusiveness that only comes from living amongst the same folk for years."*



Hanson's Talk (note that Clare was unwell on the night but sent us her talk later) - "I moved to my divine flat on the Ascot Vale estate in 2010 and felt secure for the first time in quite some years. Imagine the shock and confusion I felt when a leaflet appeared in my letterbox informing me that the entire estate was to be demolished.

Hundreds of us attended a meeting at our community centre to be told essentially nothing. However I met a young student activist there and we discussed a push back. I have been a foot soldier for many worthy causes over the years but never an organiser. He was invaluable in showing me the ropes. Within a month Save Ascot Vale Estate (S.A.V.E.) was born. The acronym was a gift.

We leafleted the entire estate, which was a huge effort as I believe this is the largest estate in Australia, seventy acres.

We had meetings with council, Danny Pearson and Bill Shorten. I was then approached by pro bono architects OFFICE who thankfully decided to join our fight to not only keep our public estate standing but to bring it up to modern day standards. One particular building that was slated for demolition and had been empty for years was instead renovated. Ten families now have a home.

It is frustrating, exhausting and at times feels like a lost cause doing this kind of work. But if we continue to pull together it can be done.

Although I have made it sound easy, it is anything but. At first many people come to meetings and even volunteer to take on some activities but this enthusiasm is often short lived. The numbers wane and one often finds oneself doing everything. However if you want change you simply cannot give up.

I contacted every media source I could think of: television, radio and print. It paid off and for roughly four years I found myself the 'poster girl' of the S.A.V.E. movement. A couple of interviews with the Age, the first of which scored front page; a couple of pre-recorded television interviews with the ABC and many live radio chats that are still ongoing. My point here is that despite some crushing defeats you must keep pushing back.

Ascot Vale is currently on the back burner but we are not complacent. The state and federal governments would like to wash their hands of as many public assets as they feasibly can. We must never forget that there are more of us than them, let alone the fact that they are in our employ. They work for us.

Many other estates have their own action groups and we reach out a hand to those people who came to our rescue also. There are often rallies and I have been honoured to speak at so many of them.

I realise it seems as though I am wandering off the Ascot Vale topic but everything that is happening now stems from our tiny little S.A.V.E. group. It spread from 2017 to the enormous fight we are all seeing against demolition of all but a handful of other public housing estates. In order to react in a timely manner one must stay informed. So please do and remember that this is now a huge movement that started here in Ascot Vale."

Kevin Bell AO KC

The Honourable **Kevin Bell** AO KC grew up in public housing. He is a former justice the Supreme Court of Victoria, commissioner with the [Yoorrook Justice Commission](#) and director of the [Castan Centre for Human Rights Law at Monash University](#) (where he is now an adjunct professor). He has a masters degree in international human rights law from Oxford University.

He is the Patron of Tenants Victoria and currently works an independent writer, researcher and educator in human rights. He is the author of *Housing: The Great Australian Right* (Monash University Press, 2024) and, with students at the Monash Law Human Rights Clinic, is assisting residents of the public housing towers to make a complaint against the government to the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to housing.



TO THE RESIDENTS OF THE TOWERS:

- YOU ARE NOT IN THE WAY OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PLANS, YOU ARE AT HOME
- YOU LIKE EVERYONE HAS THE HUMAN RIGHT TO HOUSING AND TO BE SECURE IN YOUR OWN HOME, AND THE GOVERNMENT MUST RESPECT THIS
- YOU ARE OUR NEIGHBOURS IN MELBOURNE AND WE STAND WITH YOU SHOULDER TO SHOULDER, HAND TO HAND, HEART TO HEART AND HOME

Bell's talk - "This is for the residents of the public housing towers which the government wants to demolish: for the 10,000 people in the 44 towers, for the old and young, for families and those alone, for people with disability or poor health, and for those who fled violence seeking refuge. And it is for those who've left their homes in the towers because they felt they had no choice.

You are not the problem. The problem is how the government treats you, without dignity, without respect, without humanity.

The government says you are in the way of its plans. But you are not in the way, you are at home. To be at home is never an obstacle. It is a basic human right.

That right belongs to all of us. Whether you own, rent privately, or live in public housing, you are equal in your home. Housing is not charity, it is a human right, recognised in law and grounded in our shared humanity.

Yet you are treated as though you do not count, as though you can simply be displaced. But a home is a castle. I grew up in public housing, and we thought our home was our castle. Isn't this true for all of us?

Think how this was done, officials knocked without warning, letters slipped into letterboxes. Imagine the shock of being told your home would be demolished, your community torn apart, your lives upended. No consultation. No consent. Just orders from above. That is not respect. That is not justice.

The government could've done things differently, as human rights requires. It could've come to you before deciding, shared information, discussed its plans, considered other options, sought your consent. It did none of these things."



Louisa Bassini



INNER
MELBOURNE
COMMUNITY
LEGAL

Louisa Bassini is the Managing Lawyer of Housing at [Inner Melbourne Community Legal](#). She has assisted public housing residents displaced during successive public housing renewal programs, including through the recent [class action](#) against the demolition of Melbourne's public housing towers



Lead plaintiff Barry Berih and supporters heading in to court



Bassini's talk - "From the outset, the Labor Government's Housing Statement has aimed to clear public housing from the inner city. We'd assisted residents in previous renewal programs, but this was different, both in the scale of destroying 44 towers and the haste.

IMCL commenced the class action, made possible by residents like Barry, to test the lawfulness of the decision. As lawyers for residents who weren't consulted, we asked Homes Victoria for evidence that Charter rights had been considered. We also asked if a fairer approach existed.

In proceedings, we identified a Cabinet Submission behind the demolition decision. When we sought it, Homes Victoria claimed immunity, keeping it confidential. We lost in the Supreme Court and appealed; the Court of Appeal hasn't decided yet.

Meanwhile, residents face pressure to move to unsuitable homes. Sitting below a family's home while a government representative claims no suitable homes exist in their suburb, when that exact size home sits above us, is surreal. Requesting a right to return, only to be assured it's possible despite no rebuild on the estates, is staggering. This isn't about homes for people. It's about dismantling public housing."

Brendon McNiven



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THE
**RETROFIT
LAB**



Brendon McNiven is an Enterprise Professor at the [University of Melbourne](#) with over thirty years experience as a practising engineer. He oversees the Masters of Architectural Engineering at the Melbourne School of Design (MSD) and is a member of [The Retrofit Lab](#) hosted by the University.

The Case Against Demolition

- **Sustainability** – The construction sector is responsible for almost 40% of all Green House Gases we emit (1), and half of all materials we consume and dispose of (2), globally. Retaining existing buildings is a key method by which to reduce emissions and conserve resources.
- **Avoiding Displacement** – Retrofitting buildings can reduce direct costs by minimising the need for alternative accommodation, and indirect costs by avoiding additional burden to societal systems from the negative effects on mental health, education etc.
- **Architectural Outcome** – Maintaining the history of our cities provides opportunities for better overall architectural and community outcomes than new build alternatives.

[1. International Energy Agency \(2019\), 2019 Global Status Report for Buildings and Construction.](#)

[2. Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities \(2012\), Construction and Demolition Waste Guide.](#)

The Housing Towers

The 'failings' of the housing towers identified in the Government's Housing Statement are what would be expected to be found in any building of a similar age. They are not failings per se, rather a checklist of items that need to be addressed in any retrofit or upgrade that is to take place.

Plenty of precedents exist in Australia and around overseas of retrofit projects that are cheaper, quicker, and more sustainable than their 'knock down & rebuild' alternatives. Importantly many of these projects also avoid or minimise the societal (human) harm caused by tenant displacement.



Precedent Case Study: 'Cité du Grand Parc', Bordeaux, France, showing positive outcomes achieved through choosing to retrofit rather than 'knock down and rebuild'.

Conclusion

Retrofitting the housing towers is possible and may be cheaper, quicker, and more sustainable than knocking them down and rebuilding them. Importantly retrofitting allows opportunities to minimise harmful and costly impacts of tenant displacement.

Whether to retrofit or not requires in-depth analysis balancing cost and difficulty against each other. While we have been told this analysis exists it has not been forthcoming from the government.



Chris Jensen



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Chris Jensen is a lecturer in Construction Management in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the [University of Melbourne](#) with expertise in construction innovation and circular economy.

Construction Waste

Construction activities are globally one of the major generators of waste. Construction and Demolition (C&D) waste may include metal, masonry, concrete, lumber, plaster, glass, asphalt, carpet, and dirt. The Australian C&D sector generated 27 Mt (millions of tons) of C&D waste in 2018-2019. In general, C&D waste goes to landfill sites and attempts for resource recovery are limited which shows the need for a wide application of sustainable waste management solutions in the industry.

- 20.4 million tons of waste is generated by the Australian construction industry annually
- This makes up of 33% of landfill every year
- Minimising waste is a key principle of the Circular Economy
- Cement manufacturing causes ~8% of Global CO2 production
- Retrofit of a PH tower can save 36% of Embodied Carbon
- Retrofitting the Towers is a significant opportunity to demonstrate innovative solutions to a global problem

Concrete Production

The energy intensity of cement production makes it the leading single generator of CO₂ emissions (~8% of total CO₂ emissions), with estimates of concrete use at up to 1m³ per person globally. The ecological impacts of sand extraction are less well documented but are damaging to riverine ecosystems.



Public Housing tower Retrofit

Recent industry research on the Atherton Towers in Fitzroy analysed 3 scenarios including full rebuild and 2 retrofit scenarios and proved that retrofit could save up to 36% of Embodied Carbon whilst achieving all current standards and reduce operational energy requirements. In addition, the retrofit process can be structured to significantly reduce construction time and reduce community impacts through a staged reconstruction.

Isabella Fyfe

Trained in architecture and civil engineering, **Isabella Fyfe** adopts a multidisciplinary approach to design in her endeavour to shape a more sustainable world. She is an emerging leader in the adaptive reuse and retrofit of existing buildings, with a broad range of experiences.



Spanning architecture, civil engineering, sustainability strategy (ESG), and environmentally sustainable design (ESD). She is a current Green Star Accredited Professional (GSAP) and has previously worked as a sustainability consultant for UK-based Material Index and Atelier Ten Australia.

Isabella's thesis titled ["Retrofitting Melbourne's high-rise social housing buildings: improving livability and energy performance in a circular economy"](#) and [supporting thesis booklet](#) was published in 2023, just three weeks after the Victorian Government announced that Melbourne's 44 high-rise social housing buildings would be demolished. Her Thesis proposes a socio-technical systems (STS) approach to the retrofit of Melbourne's high-rise social housing buildings using a 'facade subtract and add' design intervention. This study shows that the retrofit of the buildings is possible, and that it can be done in a way that improves livability and energy performance with minimal disruption to residents.



Simon Robinson OFFICE



Simon Robinson is a Melbourne-based architect and the Managing Director of [OFFICE](#), a non-profit design and research practice dedicated to advancing social and public housing.

Retain, Repair, Reinvest (RRR) is a site-specific strategy developed by OFFICE to assess the refurbishment potential of existing public housing. Centred on housing as a basic human right, it aims to:

- Retain communities by avoiding tenant relocation,
- Repair existing buildings to reduce environmental impact, and
- Reinvest savings to improve living conditions and upgrade housing.

Developed in response to Homes Victoria's renewal programs—which rely on tenant eviction, demolition, and rebuild—RRR challenges the assumption that refurbishment is unviable. It demonstrates that retaining and upgrading existing housing can deliver greater social and environmental benefits.

At Flemington Estate, RRR identifies hidden costs in the government's High-Rise Redevelopment Program, such as relocation, community disruption, and demolition, and redirects these savings into refurbishment and new infill housing. The feasibility study shows refurbishment and infill can be delivered for \$519 million (\$400k per unit), compared to \$883 million (\$680k per unit) for demolition and rebuild, saving \$364 million overall.

- [Retain, Repair, Reinvest: Flemington Estate Full Report](#)
- [Retain, Repair, Reinvest: Ascot Vale Estate Full Report](#)
- [Retain, Repair, Reinvest: An International Catalogue of Precast Panel Refurbishment Projects](#)

Richard Cameron

Richard Cameron is the Convenor of Habitat 26+, a body of 70 architects and construction specialists with over 3500 combined years of expertise, concerned about our architectural legacy and the advancement of our communal resources.



Cameron's talk - "Habitat 26+, a fully inclusive non-political group, was recently invited to a parliamentary inquiry concerning the cost and rationale of the tower demolition.

We used actual figures prepared for our Elgin Street preservation exercise, as well as published declarations by government and industry standards, to arrive at our assessments.

Estimates of cost are based on the Institute of Quantity Surveyors' methodology and are expressed as a rate per square metre.

We have also established an average number of units per tower as 150 by dividing 6600 existing units by 44, and the average floor area per unit is 88 square metres.

The Elgin Street area per unit is comparable at 90.6 square metres. To totally retrofit Elgin Street to 2025 standards—including total repainting, new carpets, upgraded kitchens and bathrooms, and air conditioning—is estimated at \$25.4 million.

To demolish and rebuild these towers was estimated to be \$120 million.

A \$94,693,098 cost for nothing gained.

Multiply this by 44, and the total is \$4.3 billion. Then add the 44 demolition contracts recently declared at \$25 million per tower, and the total increases to \$5.3 billion to get back to square one!

This sum would house 35,000 homeless residents, including destitute rough sleepers, domestic violence survivors, and families evicted due to financial hardship.

In their own 2022 Victorian Public Housing Resident Survey by Homes Victoria, over 80% stated that they were totally happy with the size and ambience of their home. This sentiment was also endorsed by the two-year community and government consultation study ending in 2023.

Why, therefore, are our towers deemed substandard accommodation and in need of demolition?

In 2021, the bureaucrats increased minimum room size regulations and even mandated the location of furniture, thereby decreeing 90% of all of Melbourne's apartments, including Elgin Street, substandard.

This decree was made despite, at the same time, mandating granny flats at a maximum of 60 square metres, requiring no planning permit and being totally non-compliant.

What a total contradiction.

Colleagues, if this assessment is proven to be wrong, all to the good, and we can be assured that the housing portfolio is in good hands. But without full and frank public disclosure of our hypothesis, we can only assume it is correct, and the government should be ashamed. Is \$5.3 billion of landfill the answer, and is this how the world's most liveable city treats its homeless?

Can you understand the rationale?

We certainly cannot."



Ebony Bennett

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Ebony Bennett is deputy director of [The Australia Institute](#) and host of its popular webinar series and the [Follow the Money](#) podcast.

Beginning her career as a journalist in the Canberra press gallery for the Sydney Morning Herald and Australian Financial Review, Ebony has worked in federal politics in a variety of roles for two decades and has published research on climate change and energy, gender and street harassment and contributed chapters to the books Morrison's Miracle: The 2019 Australian Federal Election (ANU Press 2020) and The Nordic Edge: Policy Possibilities for Australia (MUP 2021).

Ebony is a regular commentator and contributor across broadcast and print media, she appears regularly as a commentator on ABC and Sky News and has a fortnightly column in The Canberra Times.

Bennett's talk - "I'm here to talk about the big picture. Public housing plays a hugely important role in keeping housing affordable, not just for tenants, but for everybody. Yet governments are abandoning their role in ensuring citizens can afford a roof over their head.

Australia Institute research shows that in 1983, around 14 public housing buildings were approved for every 100 private buildings. Nowadays, that number has dropped to closer to two approvals in every 100.

The Victorian Government's plan to demolish these 44 towers while providing inadequate relocation plans, with no new public housing built before evicting tenants, is unconscionable. For these 10,000 people, they are making the housing crisis even more acute. Public housing rents are capped at 25 percent of household income. If pushed into community housing, rents are capped at 30 percent. That's a 20 percent increase. Enormous.

For governments to make the housing crisis worse for these people is unacceptable, particularly when we've heard how many alternatives exist that would allow residents to remain in their homes.

The government says demolition makes more sense than retrofitting, but there's little evidence to back that up. You can bet your arse that if their cost-benefit analysis showed what they claim, they'd publicly release it. They wouldn't try to bury it.

But we don't need a cost-benefit analysis because common sense tells us retrofitting costs less than building new. And governments should play a role in directly building public housing like they used to.

Public housing used to be for everyone: low and middle income earners, older people, teachers, public servants, nurses. At the federal level, they do still build and invest in housing. We know it works because that's what they do for the Defence Force.

The Defence Housing Authority is a 100 percent government-owned agency that buys land, builds housing, and rents it to soldiers, and still makes a profit. Housing is a fantastic investment in Australia. Apparently governments want us to believe the only people it's not a good investment for is the Australian public.

We could have a Nurses' Housing Authority, a Teachers' Housing Authority, or just a Housing Authority that builds where needed and rents to people who need it. If we can afford to build public housing for US soldiers and their pets as part of AUKUS in Western Australia, we can afford it for Australian citizens.

The federal government used to build public housing for everyone and can do so again, and so can the state government.

Everybody's Home reports that as governments have left housing to the private market, it has only become less affordable. Australia now has more dwellings per adult than ever, yet affordability is the lowest it's ever been.

We cannot afford to leave this to the private market. Government must play a role. Yet that's what the Victorian government is proposing. It will push people into less secure, less suitable housing. It's completely unacceptable and needs to be stopped."



Peter Sibly is a dedicated specialist in the community housing sector with over 24 years of experience, most recently serving as CEO of Rental Housing Co-operatives in Melbourne's South East and Inner West.



During his tenure, he played a pivotal role in facilitating the mergers of several small, struggling co-operatives, ensuring the ongoing survival and strength of Australia's original rental housing co-operative model. He is a staunch advocate for this model, championing its capacity to provide tenants with genuine control over governance, a strong collective voice, and the maintenance of high-standard public housing rentals alongside rigorous property and tenancy management.

Prior to his focus on housing, Peter held a variety of roles that have informed his holistic approach to community development. He spent six years in Local Government on the Mornington Peninsula, where he was directly involved in three community housing projects. His career also includes 18 months working in international development in Timor Leste, seven years as a secondary teacher in the public system, and six years as a small business owner alongside his partner. Now recently retired, Peter remains deeply engaged with the sector.

In a landmark achievement, Peter led the successful application by the United Housing Co-operative for a Big Social Housing Build grant in 2021, resulting in a 50-unit development in West Footscray. As Project Director for this development, he gained invaluable first-hand knowledge of the State Government's social housing growth strategy and policy framework, cementing his expertise in delivering tangible housing solutions.

Sibly's talk - "Based on 24 years working in the community housing sector and first-hand experience of the State Government's Big Social Housing Build grants program and its current funding model for social housing I wish to make three main points.

1. The essential role of public housing

It is essential that we have a strong public housing sector to ensure we meet the housing requirements of all Australians. While community housing has an important role as an adjunct to the not-for-profit housing system, it does not have the capacity or expertise to take over the role of public housing, nor should it be expected to.

The private sector will never provide for lower income earners, the aged and the disadvantaged under Australia's taxation system, which treats housing as a commodity for investors. We only need look at private 'affordable' housing options being spruiked, with weekly rents starting at \$600, as proof of market failure.

2. The flawed Big Social Housing Build model

While the State Labor Government's \$5.3 billion Big Social Housing Build launched in 2021 was welcomed after years of neglect, it was a mere drop in the ocean. That funding model focused solely on the community housing sector and was fundamentally flawed, yet it is being heralded as the panacea for future growth.

Under the Big Build, community housing organisations carried all the risk of property development, including contracting architects and builders, as well as managing cost blowouts and debt, under complex legal agreements with government departments involving reporting obligations over many years.

In my experience as Project Director of a 50-apartment development, we saw construction cost escalation in excess of 50 per cent. Our organisation had to sell three existing properties, borrow heavily and seek help from philanthropic organisations.

While this project has provided good quality co-operative housing for 65-plus priority applicants, it has also left my former organisation with a heavy debt burden, limiting proper asset management of its existing stock and future redevelopment of older government-owned stock.

3. The risk of privatisation and corporatisation

Both federal and state government policy now transfers responsibility for social housing to the community sector. For large developments like the tower redevelopments, it forces them to partner with private developers in an inequitable partnership where the private sector controls the agenda and seeks substantial profits.

This will lead to reduced social housing outcomes, higher rents, reduced quality, loss of tenancy rights, and neglect of chronically disadvantaged community members.

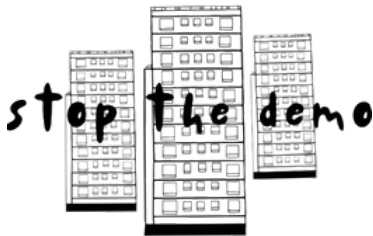
Added to this is the threat of large corporatised community housing organisations losing sight of their social justice origins, prioritising debt management over service quality, and contributing to the demise of public housing and small community housing organisations.

As Doug Cameron argued, the federal Labor government must prioritise a fair society by building much more public housing, over excessive defence spending and the unhealthy alliance with the USA and its arms industry.

The decision to demolish public housing towers should be halted immediately. What we need is a federal-state recurrent funding program for public housing, with a component for co-operative and community housing, funded through taxation reform.”



Damon Poustie



Damon Poustie of [Stop The Demo](#) is a Victorian community services worker advocating for young people in the youth justice system. His mission is to empower young minds, champion their rights, and support their rehabilitation and growth.

Damon is dedicated to creating safe, inclusive environments for LGBTQIA+ young people. He believes in collaboration with like-minded services to address the complex challenges facing young people.

Housing workers say: Don't demolish public housing. Retain, renovate, and expand.

DAMON POUSTIE (HE/THEY) HOUSING WORKER, STOP THE DEMO COLLECTIVE

Why does it matter, what is the difference between public, social and community housing?

SOCIAL HOUSING: AN UMBRELLA TERM

PUBLIC HOUSING: GOVERNMENT OPERATED

- ✓ PRIORITISED BY WAITLIST & URGENCY
- ✓ NO LIMIT TO TENANT'S 'COMPLEXITY'
- ✓ NO DISCRIMINATION IN TENANT SELECTION
- ✓ 25% OF TENANT'S INCOME

COMMUNITY HOUSING: PRIVATELY OPERATED

- ✗ CAN PICK AND CHOOSE FROM WAITLIST
- ✗ 'COMPLEX' CASELOAD LIMITS
- ✗ EXPERIENCES OF DISCRIMINATION AROUND HISTORY OF FV, MH, AOD AND/OR JUSTICE INVOLVEMENT
- ✗ 30% OF TENANT'S INCOME + 100% RENT ASSISTANCE

Poustie's talk - "I'm here as a representative from Stop the Demo, which was formed on the unceded land of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. I'm a housing worker, but I must begin this speech by saying these views do not represent my employer.

Stop the Demo is a grassroots collective of housing and community workers, coming together in our opposition to the Victorian Government's shameful proposal to demolish all of the public housing high-rise towers. Our intention is to educate the community and put pressure on our workplaces to stand up for the communities they claim to represent, and to join the campaign to stop this outrageous demolition.

Stop the Demo's biggest concern is the Victorian Government's decision to privatise social housing, moving towards a model that will be most, if not all, community housing rather than public housing, which better protects the rights and income of tenants.

From our experience in the sector, working with clients to find housing, community housing providers don't have to pick from the top of the social housing waitlist. They can choose just the applicants who they believe match their "organisational mission" rather than those who have been waiting the longest, or have the most urgent or compounding needs. These private organisations get to decide who, and importantly who does not, deserve social housing.

I wanted to share some quotes from the experiences of members of the Stop the Demo Collective when referring our clients to a community housing vacancy:

"My client was rejected due to their AOD use, even though it was at a lower level, and not a risk to their tenancy."

"I have seen women of migrant backgrounds, who had been on partner visas and had to leave their relationship due to family violence, be rejected. Community housing providers prioritised renting out their property to someone receiving a higher government income."

"A community housing provider will say no to a jobseeker applicant, whose only option for housing security is social housing."

"A referral was declined for a community housing vacancy due to having the words 'Youth Justice' in my work email signature. The housing provider reported they had met their quota of 'complex' clients."

None of the conditions from the quotes I just read are placed on private renters like myself, nor on public housing applicants. The most vulnerable people in our community can't afford to be at the mercy of the arbitrary and discriminatory conditions of private community housing. We need more public housing, not less.

We don't know what the future looks like for public housing. But if these plans for demolition in Victoria continue, not only is the public housing waiting list projected to extend, but we are extremely worried we will see even more people experiencing longer-term homelessness as community housing providers may continually reject their applications.

We, at Stop the Demo, hate to think what the community will look like if we take away the safety net of public housing. But our experiences tell us it won't be good. We will continue to pressure housing and homelessness organisations to speak up for the most vulnerable members of our communities.

Don't demolish public housing. Retain, renovate, and expand."

Karen Fletcher



Karen Fletcher is the Executive Officer of [Flat Out](#), a Victorian organisation supporting women, trans and gender diverse people to get out and stay out of prison. With over 35 years of experience across public health, prisons and human rights law, she brings a deep understanding of the systems that criminalise marginalised communities.

Karen leads an organisation grounded in abolitionist principles, guiding its frontline outreach programs, peer-led initiatives like Beyond Bricks & Bars, and systemic advocacy challenging state violence and over-incarceration.

Flat Out is an independent, not for profit, community-based organisation that supports and advocates for women, trans and gender diverse people to get out and stay out of prison. Our assertive outreach programs specialise in securing and coordinating post-release supports including in housing, material aid, alcohol and other drug issues, family violence, child protection, mental health, and disability. We partner with specialist community legal centres to provide integrated legal and social work support in criminal, family law, family violence and child protection matters.

Fletcher's talk - "Flat Out is a community organisation. We've heard that word 'community' used a lot tonight, and I'll be talking about it more.

Our organisation has been going for 37 years. It started in the heyday of feminist activism. We support women, trans and gender diverse people, and their kids, when they get out of prison.

We still have the same number of workers we had 37 years ago when we first got funded. That number is 2.6 full-time equivalent. Over time, we've had a little money here and there from the odd philanthropic grant. But as a community organisation, we are infinitesimally small.

At the same time, the prison system in Victoria has expanded beyond all expectation. We reached a peak of 600 women in the women's prison a few years ago. It went down over COVID, but at the moment we have 400 women there, and it's on its way back up with these regressive changes to the bail laws.

The state government, whilst cutting expenditure on public housing and becoming the lowest provider in the country, has been massively expanding the prison system. In the two financial years from 2018 to 2020, they spent \$3 billion building the Western Plains Prison, the prison for children at Cherry Creek, plus expansions of all prisons including the women's.

This massive expenditure comes at the same time as all this concern about not wanting to spend public money on public housing.

Every speaker has been asking "why?" From our perspective, what we see is that this is about privatisation. The word 'community' has been taken up by community housing. Look, community is a great word: community legal centre, community radio, community football.

But this 'community' in community housing? They are using words we used to use, like unity and housing first. Yet these are massive pro-development real estate conglomerates, private equity firms, and banks. I saw recently there was a vote for the Homelessness Australia Board. One of the candidates was from the ANZ Bank.

This is what's happening. We're community organisations with 2.6 workers trying to get women and children housed. But we're expected to compete with banks and private equity firms. We have to do tenders. We have to do return on investment calculations. I wouldn't know a return on investment calculation if I fell over it.

But that's the only way to get this money. That's why these organisations have conglomerated and conglomerated. What used to be great things – community organisations and co-operatives – have conglomerated into these massive corporations. They're coming from overseas now when they can see that this land is available. The land these 44 public housing towers are on. Prime inner-city land.

They can do what they did at Walker Street. The public housing walk-up in my neighbourhood is now called Merri. Now it has luxury housing on the river, a tiny strip of public housing along the edge, and so-called affordable housing in between. Those luxury apartments break my heart every time I pass them. That used to be public housing. That used to be a real community.

I wanted to talk about community. Community is the thing that keeps us safe. Not prisons. Not police. It's community. And these communities are being destroyed, and it's unsafe. It has to stop.

Together for public housing, we need to talk to each other. How do we get the unions involved? How do we get ourselves organised?

If we want to be safe, if we truly want a safe and good community, we have to build actual communities, not let the banks take us over."



Dr Kate Shaw



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MELBOURNE

Dr **Kate Shaw** is a critical urban geographer in the School of Geography at the [University of Melbourne](#), with a focus on the cultures of cities and the political-economic and social processes shaping them.

She led a research team that evaluated the first public housing estate redevelopment in Kensington in 2013. This report was blocked from release by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services for five years until a parliamentary inquiry into the government's public housing renewal program required its release.

Selection of Dr Kate Shaws Publications:

Shaw, K. (2025) Foreword, Retain Repair Reinvest: Ascot Vale Estate Volume 1, *OFFICE*, Melbourne

Shaw, K. (2024) [Victoria's 'affordable' housing scheme is an insult to people's intelligence, The Age, 18 August](#)

Lara-Hamilton, E., Crawford, R., Bell, S., Shaw, K., Stanley, J., Hill, D., Pert, A., McGarry, M., Robinson, S., Mintern, S., Moore, T., Horne, R., Dorignon, L..(2024) [Life-cycle impacts of public housing in Victoria: a review of the evidence of housing renewal impacts on climate resilience and the health and wellbeing of communities, Retrofit Lab, University of Melbourne](#)

Shaw, K. (2024) [Recent coverage of public housing misses the mark, Crikey, 7 February](#)

Shaw, K. (2023) [The case for rent controls, *The Saturday Paper*, 9 September](#)

Shaw, K. (2023) Carlton public housing estate, Carlton (AU) 17 March 2019, in OFFICE and Muratore T. (eds) *The Politics of Public Space*, OFFICE, Melbourne

Shaw, K. (2022) [Why we need to fight for inclusionary zoning in Victoria, *Overland*, 9 May](#)

Kelly, D., Shaw, K. and Porter, L. (2021) [Vulture landlords and the justice washing of housing struggle, *Overland*, 13 December](#)

Kelly, D., Shaw, K. and Porter, L. (2019) [Shh! Don't mention the public housing shortage. But no serious action on homelessness can ignore it, *The Conversation*, 10 Oct](#)

Shaw, K. (2018) Murky waters: the politics of Melbourne's waterfront regeneration projects, in K. Ruming (ed) *Urban regeneration in Australia: policies, processes and projects of contemporary urban change*, New York: Routledge.



Shaw's talk - "We've heard the arguments, expressed very clearly here tonight, on why demolition of the towers is such a bad idea on so many counts.

We know these arguments. The research has been done. The data is in. The analyses have been made and the conclusions drawn.

The government knows this too. It has ignored, stonewalled, obfuscated, refused to listen for too long.

I'm standing here because the time for further research is over. The time for arguing the case is over. This government is not listening, not because it doesn't understand, but because it doesn't care to.

These arguments don't matter to the government because its housing policy is not driven by logic or reasoning or compassion. It is driven by ideology that says individuals don't matter, that the role of government is not to protect those that the market does not, but to protect the market. This ideology says that the state shouldn't be in the business of providing housing, or aged care, or childcare, or education, or health care, or public transport, or power, or water, or every other public service that was once deemed the duty of government.

This government's ideology is to privatise at any cost, no matter what that cost. And this government is behind the times because other governments around the world are starting to realise that the neoliberal project is very bad for most people.

But we can't wait for this government to cotton on to that. Because in the meantime, public housing is being lost, the waiting lists are getting longer, the already marginalised are becoming more marginalised, and public land, still uncaded land, is ending up in wealthy private hands and will never be returned to anyone, let alone the original custodians.

So I'm standing here with all of you because I'm simply not prepared to let that happen.

We must stand together to require the Victorian Labor government to:

- Commission and release detailed evaluations of the structural conditions of all the towers. If and only if a strong case is made for demolition, build replacement public housing nearby or elsewhere on the estate first, and relocate the tenants when this is complete.
- End all 'surplus' public land sales and use that land to build more public housing.
- Introduce a mandatory component of public housing in new multi-unit developments on private land.

There is an absence here tonight. The peak bodies in the social justice and housing sector are absent from this campaign: the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), the Community Housing Industry Association (CHIA), the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP), Tenants Victoria (TV), and the Victorian Public Tenants Association (VPTA). Even though many of their members are here, not one of these peak bodies would endorse the statement behind me.

These bodies are creatures of Labor governments, we understand that, and they are funded by government. They don't want to bite the hand that feeds them. We understand that.

But what happens when the hand that is feeding you to advocate for and protect low-income communities is the same hand that's perpetrating violence against those communities?

The peak bodies have long been fellow travellers with Labor governments, we understand that. But what happens when your fellow traveller becomes a monster? Nothing, it would appear. So an important voice, a voice that for decades has mediated between government and frontline social justice work, that could once be relied upon to speak quiet reason to governments, has fallen silent. Rather than standing strong, the peak bodies have vacated this space.

That is why I'm here. There is no-one speaking for justice in housing anymore, which means we, people who care, from academia to the justice system to grassroots activist collectives, have to do it ourselves.

We will speak. And we will say enough! Enough of this social, environmental and economic vandalism. We will not let this government continue to destroy our communities and public assets before our eyes.

The next part of this meeting is the most important, where we hear from you. Let's hear strategies for action. Let's coordinate our actions and work on as many layers as we can, joined up, moving forward together, in a mass, with no gaps where our resolve can be broken.

There are tables in the salon on the second level after this meeting, where you can sign up to whatever existing groups take your fancy, and come behind any actions that work for you.

We will do this, by *standing together!*"

Event endorsements

- Kevin Bell, retired supreme court judge
- Dr David Hayward, Emeritus Professor RMIT
- Peter McIntyre, architect
- Sue Bolton, Merri-bek city councillor
- The Rev Tim Costello, Director of Ethical Voice
- Dr Deborah Glass, former Victorian Ombudsman
- Jordan van den Lamb AKA Purple Pingers
- Prof Nigel Bertram, Monash University
- Patrick Fensham, Principal and partner, SGS Economics and Planning



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SOCIALIST ALLIANCE



STUDENT LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE BODY



Williamstown Rental Housing Co-op



OFFICE



Save Public Housing Collective



Friends of the Earth Melbourne



The colony of "Australia" is an imperialist occupation of over 250
Sovereign, Independent, Black Nations.
ALWAYS WAS, ALWAYS WILL BE, ABORIGINAL LAND!



We would like to thank 3CR Community Radio for their tireless and voluntary efforts covering issues of housing equity and justice, including recording this forum.

Tune in on 855AM, 3CR Digital, and online: search “housing justice” on www.3cr.org.au for more information