

Public housing residents speak with Patrick O'Connor

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party's candidate in the Melbourne by-election, Patrick O'Connor, recently spoke with public housing tenants at a high-rise estate in the suburb of Flemington.

Successive Labor and Liberal governments, at both the state and federal level, have deliberately engineered an enormous crisis in the public housing system throughout Australia. There are now about 230,000 people on public housing waiting lists across the country, with nearly 40,000 in Victoria.

The real level of need is far greater than even these figures indicate—thousands of people drop off the waiting list every year after giving up hope of ever receiving accommodation. Official figures show that people who pass the strict eligibility criteria wait as long as 18 years before being housed. Even people in emergency situations who receive “priority” status wait an average of eight months.

The already inadequate public housing stock is being privatised by stealth. Privately owned housing associations are running “social housing” projects that combine privately sold apartments with public housing places in the one building. These allocated places, however, are not properly subsidised. Housing associations can charge rents as high as 80 percent of exorbitant inner city market rates. The ultimate agenda of both the Labor and Liberal parties is to deliver the remaining public housing stock, worth an estimated \$18 billion in Victoria alone, into the hands of the private property developers and the banks.

On the Flemington estate, constructed in the 1960s, almost every resident who spoke with O'Connor and SEP campaigners expressed concern over unconfirmed rumours that the government would soon privatise the high-rise towers.

Roksanda, originally from Yugoslavia, was previously a factory worker and childcare worker. “I don't agree

with privatisation for the reason that I can't afford anything else,” she said. “I've lived here since 1970—this place is my home. I heard that they are trying to privatise these flats, which I think is wrong, very wrong, because if it is in private hands, where am I going to live? We have a right to live here. This is the only affordable place I can live in. My income is only around \$500 every two weeks from Centrelink, after the housing ministry takes out the rent. How can I survive with \$500 for two weeks? It's hard. [The price of] food is increasing, everything is increasing but the pension is reducing.... I don't know which of the governments is doing this, but it's not right.”

O'Connor explained that the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard was picking up where her predecessors left off, starving the public housing sector of the necessary funding and encouraging the drive by state governments to privatise existing stock. “In my campaign I am demanding that decent and affordable housing must be recognised as a fundamental social right for all,” the SEP candidate said. “Billions of dollars must be poured into the public housing sector. A living wage needs to be provided to every worker, as well as the retired, unemployed, disabled, and others not able to work.”

Roksanda said: “I think everybody should have an income increase that supports them for the rise in food prices. If food is getting dearer, how can people live? It means I will have to die, before it's my time to die, or be put in an old people's home to die. I should have an increase in my income so that I can afford food, instead of searching for discounted food in supermarkets that is almost rotten.”

Many Flemington estate residents are originally from Africa. **Noreldin**, who came to Australia from Sudan as a refugee when he was 15-years-old, lives with his wife and drives a taxi for a living. “It is very hard to support a family just from driving a taxi,” he explained. “It's hard

work for not much money, but it's very hard to find any other job. I can't afford a mortgage and would never be approved for one anyway, because I never know how much money I am going to earn from day to day."

Noreldin said young people in the area "have nothing to do." After they finish school, he explained: "There is no advice for African young people here. They're not given the tools you need to look for a job or continue with study. I was unemployed, doing nothing, for about six years after I finished my VCE [Year 12 school certificate]. I have heard that these flats are going to be sold off. If that happens, where are they going to put all these thousands of people? The young guys here with no work, they won't be able to pay for private housing anywhere around here. I'd expect to see more crime, violence, as well as homelessness."

Another resident, originally from Sudan, told O'Connor: "Rents are now being increased every three or six months for some people. Utility bills and other costs of living are going up. The Labor government boasts about its small increases to the pension and some welfare payments, but here any increase is immediately taken away by higher rents... There are also serious maintenance problems in many of the apartments. The aluminium window frames cause a lot of condensation to build up, causing dampness and mould. The frames need to be replaced, but when we contact the Department of Housing they refuse to do anything and tell people to contact the contractors who are supposed to do this work."

Sandi, originally from South Africa and now enrolled in an aged-care course, said: "I think the privatisation of these flats will have a great impact on elderly people. Most of them have lived their whole life here, and if they are evicted and have to move to a new place, it is going to disorient them and be very hard for them... I think that as a society, how we take care of our senior citizens defines who we are. And looking at the enormous contribution that senior citizens have made to society, when it comes time for them to retire I think we all have the moral and social responsibility to give them the care, the respect and the dignity they deserve."

Sandi also noted the police harassment of African youth in the area: "When people are stopped and searched on the basis of the colour of your skin, I think citizens' rights have been violated. The African community is concerned with this. Most people in the African community have experienced it."

There have been several clashes between police and youth on the Flemington estate in recent years. Most

young people were reluctant to discuss the problem of police violence and harassment. One young man told O'Connor that he would not say anything because he had previously made statements to the mainstream media about the issues involved, but his comments were selectively edited to distort their meaning.

Gemeh, a Monash University student, told an SEP campaigner that he had arrived in Australia as a refugee when he was 20-years-old, only to find himself homeless because he could not access public housing. "I was sleeping in my car or sleeping at my friends' places on the floor, thinking, 'why did I even come here?'... Housing is unaffordable if you are poor. You can't even get the money together to allow you to get a place to stay. There are enormous implications about the way people are expected to live on the Newstart [unemployment] allowance, which is only \$245 a week for rent, bills, food and everything. Just recently the Gillard government's budget gave Newstart an increase of \$4—that is nothing.

"They are not looking at the solution of these issues like homelessness and unemployment. Instead, it is all put on the individual as a failure. That is what the Gillard government is saying—that they are for employment, not welfare payments! Then why are people unemployed? The government says people are lazy, that they rely on the Newstart allowance. But where are the jobs? It is a social problem, but instead of addressing that, they put the blame on the individual. They say you are lazy, you need counselling, you need a psychologist."

Gemeh concluded: "The problems people are facing are caused by the system, not the individual."

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