

# Australia: Parliamentary inquiry no obstacle to demolition of Victorian public housing towers

**Karen Maxwell**  
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On December 2, the Legal and Social Issues Committee of the Victorian Legislative Council (LSIC) tabled the final report of its inquiry into the state Labor government's plan to demolish 44 public housing towers in inner Melbourne.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, all along this inquiry has been "a thinly disguised exercise in defending the Labor government's decision to smash up the tower residents' homes and communities."

It has been a political deception in which the Greens, who called for the inquiry initially, have played a critical role. Their aim has been to channel mounting opposition to the demolition of the towers among the residents, and the broader working class, into futile hopes that parliamentary manoeuvres, or court cases, could pressure the Labor government into changing its mind.

The first finding of the report condemn the government for its ongoing refusal to release for public scrutiny the documents in its possession reporting on the physical conditions of each tower, the feasibility reports on alternatives to demolition, and cost benefit analysis to prove the government's claim that demolition was the only possible course of action.

Finding no. 2 of the report declares that because the Victorian government refuses to produce all evidence supporting the demolition of 44 public housing towers, it is impossible for the government to justify that decision. Recommendation no. 7 of the report calls on the Labor government to halt all further work on the demolition project until it releases the requested documents.

These are damning words, but the committee has no legal power to compel the government to obey its recommendations. Moreover, by parliamentary convention the government has six months to respond to the recommendations. In practice, the demolition of the Tranche 1 towers can proceed imminently, because most of the former residents have by now already been relocated.

The government repeatedly denied the inquiry access to the requested documents by invoking "executive privilege." This is a legal pretext for governments to keep confidential the documents on which they base their policy decisions. This is

supposedly because their publication would "not be in the public interest" due to necessary secrecy provisions for government deliberative processes.

Two motives explain the government's secrecy. First, public release of the feasibility and structural reports would allow independent experts to challenge the claim that demolition was the only option; an independent analysis from OFFICE architects, cited often during the inquiry, concluded the towers could be retrofitted and residents returned at far lower cost. Second, the demolition serves a class purpose: to clear prime inner city land for developers and financiers by displacing low income residents and breaking up longstanding communities.

The inquiry's procedural loopholes underline the point. Its recommendation (no. 6) that withheld documents be submitted to an "independent arbiter" for verification that executive privilege legitimately applies begs the question of who, within the state apparatus, could be truly independent. The courts, parliament and state bureaucracies exist to defend capitalist property relations; they cannot be relied upon to deliver working class justice.

The demolition of the public housing towers is a social crime.

The report itself gave some insight into the nature and magnitude of this crime. In Finding No. 30, the report states: "The Victorian government and Homes Victoria relocation process engaged in significant and coercive and misleading practices to relocate residents within an arbitrary deadline, causing deep harm to social, emotional and physical wellbeing of the residents."

The report contains multiple references to the testimony of residents, their advocates and academics about the anguish and grief that the forced relocations have already caused many residents, and the anxiety of impending relocation for others.

One resident told the hearing: "Public housing has been a cornerstone of my community, supporting people from diverse backgrounds, including low income families, migrants, and individuals with disabilities. It has fostered a sense of solidarity and mutual support that is difficult to replicate elsewhere... My community is enriched by its diversity—neighbours looking out for one another, children playing together, and shared

experiences creating bonds that go beyond housing.”

Sarah Arden, another resident, told the inquiry: “My community is a community who have been living together for a long time. We help each other. We know each other. We have been looking after each other for a long time. Our children play together. Our older people visit each other. We look after our elderly people. We look after young women who have no relatives or extended family here. We support each other. We have our own cultural activities in this high rise, which are free for us.”

According to Dr David Kelly, a researcher at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), more than half of the families living in the towers have been living in public housing for over 10 years, indicating the long standing, extensive connections that exist between residents and within the locality.

The report quotes Lauren Alberico, who said at one of the hearings: “Forced relocation will have severe mental and physical health impacts on residents. Being uprooted from one’s home causes stress, anxiety, and disruption to daily life, particularly for vulnerable groups like seniors, people with chronic illnesses, and children.”

Kerry Byrne, a public housing resident told the committee about the devastating impact of forced relocation on the elderly and on chronically unwell residents that she had witnessed:

“One older woman ended up in hospital following her relocation as she was so traumatised by having to sever the ties with her home of many years. Another older woman died due to health complications, most likely brought on by the sudden announcement and then the relocation stress.”

Another person made a submission describing how a relative’s dementia symptoms had worsened after going through the trauma of relocating.

The advocacy group Somali Community Inc reported to the inquiry that residents felt forced to fill out confusing relocation papers for fear of otherwise becoming homeless.

Sarah, a former resident of the Flemington towers, whose family remains at the site, referenced the traumatic memory of the lockdown of the towers imposed by the Andrews State Labor government in 2020. While presented at the time as a public health measure against COVID, the lockdown was enforced with no prior notice in a military style operation by police.

She told the inquiry: “I thought the government would have learnt their lesson after the hard lockdowns of North Melbourne and Flemington during COVID. I didn’t think they would put this community through something like this again. It really feels like they don’t care about this community.”

All of this deeply moving testimony is being utilised by Laborites, Liberals and Greens alike within the cynical context of an official inquiry to disarm the working class by peddling illusions in parliament.

Above all, the inquiry is designed to conceal from the

working class the bitter reality that under capitalism all human needs, including the basic right to a place to live, are subordinated to the drive for profit.

This was spelled out in the courts as well when in April 2025 the Supreme Court dismissed a class action launched by Barry Berih on behalf of himself and other residents in the Flemington towers. The judge ruled that residents did not have any right to be heard before Homes Victoria made its decision. Although it was conceded that Homes Victoria had made a decision which limited residents’ human rights, this limitation was justified because the right to a home is not an absolute right under international human rights law.

Worldwide, public housing is being eviscerated as capitalist governments everywhere move to impose austerity measures on the working class to pay for militarism and never ending wealth accumulation for the corporate elite.

Defeating the destruction of the 44 towers and other attacks on public housing, will require a political struggle against the Labor government, uniting residents and workers. In the first instance, residents should make a powerful appeal to rank-and-file building workers, without whose labour the demolition plans cannot proceed, as well as to broader layers of the working class, who all face attacks on their living and working conditions.

This will require the building of new organisations of struggle, neighbourhood and workplace rank-and-file committees, independent of Labor, the corporatised union bureaucracy, the Greens and all other groups that seek to divert the class struggle behind appeals to capitalist governments.

Residents have already voted to form a Neighbourhood Action Committee, which will be meeting at 2.30 p.m. on Saturday, January 10 at Flemington Djerring Hub, 25 Mount Alexander Rd, Flemington. All residents and supporters are welcome.

Above all, what is needed is a fight for workers to take political power and reorganise society on the basis of socialist policies. This includes placing the banks, superannuation funds and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control and ensuring the social right of all to decent, secure housing.



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