

## **PUBLIC HOUSING – IS IT TO BE LIMITED TO A ROLE AS THE HOUSING OF LAST RESORT?**

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*Presentation to Shelter NSW conference, 'The crisis and beyond: for a stronger and fairer housing system', Sydney, 2 July 2009*

No, it shouldn't be, but yes it could be, unless we work hard to make sure it doesn't.

### **In the past too much *us and them***

Public and community housing should never have been an '*us and them*' situation.

As I said in my 1992 Commission of Inquiry Report, it was unfortunate that, instead of fundamental organizational and policy change in the Department, the early growth of community housing was brought about through specific purpose grants and the employment of new staff in a separate part of the organization. Short term, feel good, reform, that left a long term resentment delaying for too long the reforms only now we are seeing.

The recommendations in my Report were an attempt to create in the Department local teams with many of the same attributes as community housing organizations.

In the long run this was an impossible dream as you cannot have one large State organization with the Minister responsible for every decision and expect decentralized localized decisions. Ministerial responsibility is fine but it has a high price in terms of responsiveness and the inevitable centralization of decisions, despite great human beings such as Mike Allen. The Daily Telegraph finds it too easy to use public housing stories to enliven a dull press day.

### **Planets are in line**

With the planets in line at this brief moment of history we have a wonderful opportunity for a fundamental rethink.

It must not just be a matter of transferring public housing stock to expanding community housing organisations and letting the Department wither away. We must take the time to work out how

best to make use of the physical and human assets we have (especially the many dedicated excellent staff in the Department) and to ensure that decisions we take do not have unintended consequences. The Community Housing Federation of Australia has just published a document that raises a number of such dangers.

We need a detailed agreed Vision, an assessment of advantages and disadvantages and the opportunities and dangers. With the open involvement of tenants and staff from all the relevant organizations we need to devise a range of objectives and strategies that will achieve our vision.

I would hope that included in the range of solutions would be the option for local Departmental teams opting to become local community housing organisations. I recognize the industrial issues but this is a time to solve problems, not use them as excuses for failure.

### **Taking time out**

At a time of change I have great faith in the returns that can be obtained by taking time out to get together and seek the best solutions. Working alone, organizations can be too restrictive in the options they canvas, too ready to assume 'They will never agree to that'.

I therefore propose that Shelter should organise a two or three day intensive workshop with say 30 participants drawn from all the key organizations involved and a range of tenants. The purpose of the workshop would be to draw up a detailed strategic plan for the future. The results would not be binding on the organizations but would inform them of the possibilities and build a consensus for real and productive change.

As someone who has waited decades to see real change, I consider it incumbent on us all to work together to achieve the best possible from today's opportunities.