



Champions of Change: Shelter NSW, Community Activism and Transforming NSW's Housing System

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BOOK REVIEW

Champions of change: shelter NSW, Community Activism and Transforming NSW's housing system, by Tony Gilmour, Sydney, Shelter NSW, 2018, 259+ x pp., \$AU 30 (pbk), ISBN: 9780646992211

The Australian, New South Wales (NSW) campaign group 'Shelter' commissioned policy consultant Tony Gilmour to write a history of their organization to mark its 44th anniversary. Drawing upon the organization's own archival sources lodged in the NSW state library and over 25 interviews with current and former staff, *Champions of Change* provides a fascinating account of housing activism from 1974 to the present day in this Australian state. *Champions of Change* begins by locating the campaigns undertaken by NSW Shelter in the broader political context. As Gilmour points out, Gough Whitlam's election victory in 1972 heralded a period of 'ground breaking change' (p. 14). The mid 1970s was a period when trade unions wielded considerable power and engaged in broad campaigns as well as industrial action to boost wages. Large scale commercial redevelopment became a significant issue within inner city Sydney and trade union activists worked alongside resident activists to safeguard working class communities from displacement (pp. 7–10).

Gilmour provides an intricate history of NSW Shelter, starting off with its origins as a voluntary organization to draw attention to poor housing conditions in Sydney. Gilmour argues that Shelter NSW was usually viewed by policymakers and the media as being at the 'respectable' end of the activist spectrum. The campaigns that Shelter have pursued are varied, ranging from protests against homelessness, drawing attention to the underfunding of public housing and advocating for tenant rights in the private rental market.

The issue of resources and funding has always been a challenge for the organization. At times it has secured funds from government but often it has had to rely on voluntary donations. One of the most difficult periods was when the Liberal Party formed government in March 1988. The new housing minister, Jo Schipp, was openly hostile towards the organization and broader housing and homelessness agenda, cutting off funds to Shelter and reducing the budget of the Housing Department. It was not until 1993 that government funds were once again made available. Another difficult period was when the Prime Minister John Howard, in 1997 withdrew funds to Shelter's national organization, on the pretext that its work overlapped with the Australian Council of Social Services (a membership organization representing welfare agencies).

Some of the organization's most successful interventions were in the late 1970s when NSW Shelter was part of a campaign that persuaded the Federal Liberal Government to reverse its policy of introducing rental vouchers for private sector tenants. And yet, as Gilmour points out, some campaigns were not effective. For example, NSW Shelter pushed hard for the introduction of a cooperative model for affordable housing during the 1970s, but this made very little headway at the time because of a lacklustre response from within the housing department.

There are many interesting aspects to this book and Gilmour has done a great service by bringing together such historically informed views on the organization. I especially enjoyed those parts where Gilmour goes beyond describing the perspectives of others to set out his own views. He is very positive about NSW Shelter's stance, believing that it has been able to draw attention to new issues and influence policymaking. Part of the

success, he argues, is that Shelter has managed to avoid being seen as a partisan political organization and its willingness to working alongside policy makers when necessary, as well as through more classic and adversarial campaigning. This judicious approach, Gilmour argues, has served the interest of tenants, homeless households and others who are at risk of exploitation. Government agencies, he notes, now acknowledge that Shelter NSW provides a valuable resource to assess new policies and their likely impact.

Champions of Change considers the type of questions that confront all political activists; for example, whether to be openly critical of government or adopt a low profile by working behind the scenes. Shelter NSW have been adept at pursuing tactics on a case-by-case basis, but this noted, Gilmour detects some longer-term trends. In its early days, Shelter positioned itself as an outsider but from the late 1990s it purposefully sought a more collaborative engagement with government by focusing on the detail of policy to initiate reform. As he notes, this has proved effective because ‘however problematic a housing policy might seem, the devil was in the implementation detail. Often policies sound punitive, perhaps to give the right tone for a ministerial press release. However, the Housing Department might choose to implement in a more relaxed way’ (p. 216). Gilmour cites the example of the NSW government’s ‘Reshaping Public Housing Policy Strategy’ published in 2005 that set out arguments to impose fixed term tenancies. Though they are now in place ‘few if any tenants have not had their lease renewed on expiry’ (p. 216).

One of the take home messages from *Champions of Change* is that housing campaigning organizations can exert influence through constructive engagement. As Gilmour explains, Shelter’s approach is often pragmatic, and ‘where direct opposition had not been successful they would work with government, the housing sector and tenants to smooth implementation of initiatives with which they might not agree in principle’ (p. 200). Gilmour argues that one of the biggest challenges for campaigners is to make effective use of new technologies that are a feature of today’s media landscape. There are also pressing policy issues that require attention. Much of the policy interventions currently being pursued in New South Wales are short-term, he argues, and it is imperative that pressure is placed on government to use more instruments to achieve better housing outcomes. Gilmour particular highlights the importance of inclusionary zoning and the setting of annual targets for new social housing developments in the Australian context.

Campaign organizations such as NSW Shelter, as this book shows, have been instrumental in drawing attention to homeless and housing affordability problems and yet effective reforms for the housing system have proved to be elusive because so many well-off households and investors are happy to see the value of their asset increase in value despite the social consequences. In my view it is clear, that politicians, particularly at the federal level, continue to pay too much heed to the demands of powerful vested interests such as banks, developers and the real estate industries, all of who make profits from the increasing commodification of housing. Whilst Gilmour does not dwell on the role performed by these interest groupings,¹ he does show how activist organizations, such as NSW Shelter, perform a vital role in speaking truth to power and making the case for long-term housing policies that can deliver more equitable outcomes.

Note

1. For a discussion see Jacobs and Pawson ‘Introduction to the special edition: ‘the politics of housing policy’ *Housing Studies* 30(5) p.651–655. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2015.1082273>.

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